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Critical Hope: Radical Citizenship in Reactionary Times

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After a recent antiwar talk in which I sharply criticized U.S. foreign policy, a student asked me, "Don't you find it hard to live being so cynical?" When I responded that I thought my comments were critical but not cynical, he looked at me funny and said, "But how can being so critical not make you cynical?"

The student was equating any critique of injustice produced by institutions and systems of power with cynicism about people. His question made me realize how easy is cynicism and how difficult is sustained critique in this culture, which shouldn't surprise us. People with power are perfectly happy for the population to be cynical, because that tends to paralyze people and leads to passivity. Those same powerful people also do their best to derail critique -- the process of working to understand the nature of things around us and offering judgments about them -- because that tends to energize people and leads to resistance.

Understanding the difference between critique and cynicism -- and the difference between hope and optimism -- is crucial to the future of any struggle against injustice. At this moment in history, those struggles must not only be about trying to win changes in policies but also about the reinvigoration of public life -- a call for participation, for politics, for radical citizenship in reactionary times.

I don't use radical and reactionary in this case to describe specific political positions, left versus right. I am talking instead about an approach not just to politics, narrowly defined, but to the central questions of what it means to be a human being in connection with others. I think the world we live in is reactionary because it is trying to squeeze those important human dimensions out of us in the political sphere and constrict the range of discussion so much that politics does seem to many to be useless. I want to argue that our only hope is to be radical, to be political, and to be radical in public politically.

To do that, I will talk about my own journey from cynicism to hope, my own struggle both for greater understanding of my self and an understanding of something greater than me. I am going to talk about love and justice. I am going to risk being seen as naive or self-indulgent or just plain silly.

That's OK; I'm just a good-natured hick from North Dakota. We're generally plodding and slow and often don't realize we're being naive, or when people are making fun of us for it.

Let me start the story when I was younger, in my teens and 20s. I saw that the world was in pretty awful shape. When I looked around at the world, I saw a whole lot of pain. The United States had just ended its terrorist campaign in Southeast Asia -- what we commonly call the Vietnam War -- and was pursuing another by proxy in Central America; rich people seemed unconcerned that their luxury was built on the backs of the suffering of literally billions of poor people around the world; people all over the place were still getting kicked around simply because they were women or non-white or gay or different in some fashion; and many people seemed not to care that the ecosystem that sustained our lives was in collapse.

I looked around at all this, and I got cynical. Human beings, it seemed to me, were pretty unpleasant creatures. Human nature, I assumed, had to be pretty rotten for all this suffering to go on and on, generation after generation. Even with the advances in social justice -- and there have been advances, such as the end of slavery, greater recognition of the basic rights of women, etc. -- it is hard to be upbeat moving out of the 20th century, one of the most brutal and bloody in human history, into the 21st century, which promises to be just as, if not more, brutal.

Being cynical appeared to have some advantages. I could step back from all the chaos and be hip. I could make jokes about how stupid people were. I could pretend not to care. I could turn away from the suffering of others because I, one of the hip and cynical, understood just how pathetic a species we were. I thought I was the one who saw it all so clearly.

I stayed cynical, and disengaged, for some time. The fact that I was working at newspapers didn't help; for journalists, cynicism is an occupational hazard that takes great intelligence and maturity to resist, and I didn't possess either quality in adequate amounts. So cynical I stayed, until I went to graduate school and was given the luxury of time to read, think, and study. Lots of people go to graduate school and become cynics, or their cynicism deepens; universities can do that to people. But I got lucky and met some exceptional people -- many of them outside the university -- who helped me see another way.

For me, that way began with feminism. I read a lot and listened to women. I started to not only learn about gender and sexism, but I also picked up a new way to understand the world, a new method of inquiry for examining the ideas and institutions that shape our world. I learned to look at how systems and structures of power operate. I learned to see past the surface to the core elements of those systems and structures. When I did that, I

realized that things were far worse than I had thought -- the world was in more trouble than I had ever imagined. I learned about new levels of suffering and oppression.

That's when I stopped being cynical and began to feel full of hope.

That may seem counterintuitive. How did a deepening sense of the scale and scope of injustice and suffering make me hopeful? The answer is simple. For all those years, I was cynical for two basic reasons: I had the wrong view of human nature, and I didn't understand how the world worked. I thought the evil and stupidity all around me were the product of an inherently evil and stupid human nature, and therefore I didn't see any way to fight against injustice. It all seemed beyond our control.

Once I started to understand the nature of illegitimate structures of authority, I realized that in fact people (including me) were not inherently evil or stupid, and that human nature (including mine) was complex and sometimes maddening, but not inherently aimed at the destruction of the world. I came to realize that the authority structures that so bent our lives were powerful and deeply entrenched.

I also realized that most of the channels that the dominant culture offered us for working to make the world a better place were themselves deeply embedded in those authority structures, so that often the solutions were part of the problem. I realized that the analysis and action that could save us had to be more radical than I ever could have imagined. I also realized that at the moment in history in which I lived, there were relatively few people who would agree with any of this: People had begun to talk about a "postfeminist" age; the attacks on affirmative action and ethnic studies were emerging; the fall of the Berlin Wall "proved" that capitalism was the only possible economic system; and the United States was celebrating the slaughter of the Gulf War.

So, at the moment I realized the depth of the problem and the forces stacked against justice, I got hopeful. The hope comes not from some delusional state, but from what I would argue is a sensible assessment of the situation. Cynicism might be an appropriate reaction to injustice that can't be changed. Hope is an appropriate response to a task that, while difficult, is imaginable. And once I could understand the structural forces that produced injustice, I could imagine what a world without those forces -- and hence without the injustice -- might look like. And I could imagine what activities and actions and ideas it would take to get us there. And I could look around, and look back into history, and realize that lots of people have understood this and that I hadn't stumbled onto a new idea.

In other words, I finally figured out that I should get to work.

So hope emerged out of cynicism. I began to see the power of radical analysis and the importance of collective action. I began to take the long view, to see that we face a struggle, but that it is not a pointless struggle. The exact choices we should make as we struggle are not always clear, but the framework for making choices is there.

Hope and optimism

I have hope, but that does not mean I am optimistic. Just as we have to distinguish between critique and cynicism, we have to realize that hope is not synonymous with optimism. I am hopeful, but I am not necessarily always optimistic, at least not about the short-term possibilities. These systems and structures of power, these illegitimate structures of authority, are deeply entrenched. They will not be dislodged easily or quickly. Optimism and pessimism should hang on questions of fact -- we should be optimistic when the facts argue for optimism.

For example, I am against the illegitimate structure of authority called the corporation. I want to see different forms of economic organization emerge. I am hopeful about the possibilities but not optimistic that in my lifetime I will see the demise of capitalism, corporations, and wage slavery. Still, I will do certain things to work toward that.

The same can be said of the problem of U.S. aggression against innocent people in the rest of the world, particularly these days in Afghanistan, where the aggression is most intense. Given the bloody record of the United States in the past 50 years and the seemingly limitless capacity of U.S. officials to kill without conscience, I must confess I am not optimistic that such aggression will stop anytime soon, in large part because those corporate structures that drive the killing are still around. But I will do certain things to work against it.

Or take the large state research university. I am concerned about how the needs of students are systematically ignored and the needs of corporate funders are privileged, how critical thinking is squashed not by accident but by design. I am concerned about the illegitimate structures of authority that I work in and that compel me to act in ways against the interests of students. I am not optimistic that the structure of big research universities is going to change anytime soon. But I will do certain things to work against the structures.

So, why would I do any of those things if my expectations of short-term success are so low? One reason is that I could be wrong about my assessment of the likelihood of change. I've been wrong about a lot of things in my life; the list grows every day. For all I know, corporate capitalism is on the verge of collapse, and if we just keep the pressure on it will start to

unravel tomorrow. Or perhaps public discontent with murderous U.S. foreign policy is just about ready to crystallize and mobilize people. Or perhaps the contradictions of these behemoth universities are becoming so apparent that the illegitimate structures of authority are about to give way to something that deserves the label "higher education."

History is too complex and contingent for any of us to make predictions. We simply don't have the intellectual tools to understand with much precision how and why people and societies change. History is a rough guide, but it offers no social-change equation. Still, there's really no reasonable alternative except to keep plugging away. Basically, there are two choices, which are common sense but that I didn't figure out until I heard them articulated by Noam Chomsky: We can either predict the worst -- that no change is possible -- and not act, in which case we guarantee there will be no change. Or we can understand that change always is possible, even in the face of great odds, and act on that assumption, which creates the possibility of progress. (See Chomsky's interview with Michael Albert at <http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/interviews/9301-albchomsky-2.html>)

Every great struggle for justice in human history began as a lost cause. When Gabriel Prosser made plans to take Richmond, Virginia, in 1800, the first large-scale organized slave revolt, he was fighting a lost cause, for which he was hanged. When eight Quakers got together in 1814 in Jonesboro, Tennessee, to form the first white anti-slavery society in the United States (the Tennessee Society for the Manumission of Slaves) they were fighting a lost cause. A lost cause that eventually won.

But that can't be the only answer to the question "why should I be politically active." We are human beings, not machines, and we all have needs. It is hard to sustain yourself in difficult work if the only reward is the possibility that somewhere down the line your work may have some positive effect, though you may be long dead. That's a lot to ask of people. We all want more than that out of life. We want joy and love. At least every now and then, we want to have a good time, including a good time while engaged in our work. No political movement can sustain itself indefinitely without understanding that, not just because people need -- and have a right -- to be happy, but because if there is no joy in it, then movements are more likely to be dangerous. The joy -- the celebration of being human and being alive in connection with others -- is what must fuel the drive for change.

People find joy in many different ways. As many people over the years have pointed out, one source of joy is in the struggle. I have spent a lot of time in the past few years doing political work, and some of that work isn't terribly fun. Collating photocopies for a meeting for a progressive political cause isn't any more fun than collating photocopies for a meeting

at a marketing company. But it is different in some ways: It puts you in contact with like-minded people. It sparks conversation. It creates space in which you can think and feel your way through difficult questions. It's a great place to laugh as you staple. It provides the context for connections that go beyond superficial acquaintanceships.

The joy is in the struggle, but not just because in struggle one connects to decent people. The joy is also in the pain of struggle. Joy is multilayered -- one key aspect of it is discovery, and one way we discover things about ourselves and others is through pain. Struggle confronts pain, and confronting pain is part of joy. The pain is there, in all our lives; there is no human life without pain. Pain can become part of joy when it is confronted. Struggle confronts pain. Struggle produces joy.

The joy is in the struggle. The struggle is not just the struggle against illegitimate structures of authority in the abstract. The struggles are in each of us -- struggles to find the facts, to analyze clearly, to imagine solutions, to join with others in collective action for justice, and struggles to understand ourselves in relation to each other and ourselves as we engage in all these activities.

I realize that this struggle doesn't seem appealing to many. I have heard lots of people lately say that they can't cope with the complexity of politics. It seems too much, too big, too confusing. All they can handle, they say, is to focus on their individual lives and do the best to fix their lives. I think these folks misunderstand not just their moral obligation but the nature of progress, individual and collective. We don't fix ourselves in isolation. We don't build decent lives by cutting ourselves off from problems just because they are complex. Yes, there are times when difficult situations force us to turn inward and deal with pressing problems in our lives. I have done that, and I see no need to apologize for it. But I am arguing against the permanent division of our lives into these artificial categories. Our problems are never wholly individual, and hence they can't be fixed in individual ways. Part of the solution is always to be found in the bigger struggle, in which we all have a part.

I have learned that there is great joy in that bigger struggle. And that leads us back to the abandonment of cynicism and the embrace of hope. Cynicism is a sophomoric and self-indulgent retreat from the world and all its problems. Hope is a mature and loving embrace of the world and all its promise. That does not mean one should have unfounded or naive hope. Wendell Berry reminds us that history shows that "massive human failure" is possible, but:

"[H]ope is one of our duties. A part of our obligation to our own being and to our descendants is to study our life and our condition, searching always for the authentic underpinnings of hope. And if we look, these underpinnings

can still be found." [Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p. 11.]

Hope is one of our duties. But that does not mean it is always easy. There are many times, especially since September 11, that I have had to struggle to hold onto hope. The combination of seeing the World Trade Center towers fall in an instance and then watching the unfolding of an illegal and immoral war on Afghanistan has tested my own sense of hope. I managed to hold on for a couple of months, but in the few days before I sat down to write this I could feel my sense of hope fading. At the same time that I have been writing and thinking about the war, I also have been continuing my work on sexual violence and pornography. Both spark the same feeling in my gut -- despair over how cruel people, especially men, can be. When I have to face humans' willingness to inflict pain -- and ability to find pleasure in inflicting pain -- whether in the realm of the global or the intimate, some part of me wants to die; I can't bear it. Maybe some part of me does die.

In the few days before I wrote this, I especially was having trouble in the mornings; lying awake in bed in the dark; trying to reclaim that sense of hope so that getting out of bed would make sense; trying not to think about the war but realizing that not thinking about it would be even worse; dying a little bit inside every morning, in the dark.

But those authentic underpinnings of hope remain. On the day I wrote this, I had a meeting with a student on my campus who had read something I had written about the war and wanted to talk. She said she didn't have anything in particular to ask me. She just wanted to talk to someone who didn't think she was crazy. All around her at work and school, people -- pro, con or neutral -- were refusing to talk about the war, she said. So we talked for a bit. We did politics, in a small way, the way politics is most often done. We talked about how she might organize a political group on campus. But maybe more important, we shored up each other's sense of hope. We could talk about the pain and craziness of the war without turning away.

Real hope -- the belief in the authentic underpinnings of hope -- is radical. A belief that people are not evil and stupid, not consigned merely to live out pre-determined roles in illegitimate structures of authority, is radical. The willingness to act publicly on that hope and that belief is radical.

We all live in a society that would prefer that we not be radical, that we not understand any of this. We live in a society that prefers productive but passive people. I work at a university that is part of that society, and has many of the same problems. Many classes at the university are either explicitly or implicitly designed to convince students that everything I have argued here is fundamentally loony. The same goes for much of what

comes to us through the commercial mass media. Some of what I say indeed may be misguided; as I said, I understand that I could be, and often am, wrong.

But, even if I'm wrong in some ways, I'd rather be wrong with hope than cynicism. I'd rather be naive than hip. I'd rather work for a just and sustainable world and fail than abandon the hope. I understand that this position is not wholly logical; it is based on a sense of how we can best make good on the gifts that come with being part of the human community. It is based on a faith in something common to us all, a capacity that is difficult to name, but which is perhaps best summed up by a phrase once used by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Our task simply put, Freire said, is "to change some conditions that appear to me as obviously against the beauty of being human." [Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 131.]

In the end, that is the central hope: We can join together to help build not a utopia but a world in which we can struggle -- individually and collectively, through the pain and with joy -- to get as close as we can to the beauty of being human.

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