

Earning Solidarity

On reflection, however, I realized that these two impulses are not so far apart. Solidarity, at least in its most useful form, has to be earned; it cannot simply be declared, assumed, or adopted, and surely its weakest renderings—often labelled as virtue-signaling—come in the form of tweeting, or adding one's name to a circulating letter or petition. Engaged writers, artists and intellectuals are routinely faced with this challenge, because we are in a position to amplify the voices of people who do not enjoy the same level of access to the oxygen of publicity. We may choose to take up the cause of the unheard, and become committed, even trusted, advocates of their cause, but, unless we have “skin in the game,” we typically do so with the understanding that we can always walk away. Guilt may leave a residual scar for writers of conscience who abandon a cause in this way, but there are also moral rewards on offer for those who do so. Why? Because the true strength of the open, liberal mind is supposed to lie in its principled capacity to “re-think” a commitment.

In this regard, it is worth distinguishing that kind of risk-free, or optional, advocacy from a deeper and more durable involvement in a cause. Consider the much-cited advisory, attributed to Lilla Watson, an Aboriginal activist from Queensland: “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” This kind of caveat is most often issued to well-intentioned “white saviors,” and it can have positive results—investigations of White privilege, for example, that are not merely self-indulgent but which lead to new kinds of relationships with those struggling for their rights and livelihoods. But the transformational spirit of the challenge—which is worth adopting as a general rule—is applicable to anyone who does political work and art.

Over the last decade, I have tried to respond to that challenge by writing several books that break from the paradigm of optional advocacy that is sometimes characterized as parachute

research. I think of these as “movement books” based on “militant research” with various groups (like the *Gulf Labor Artists Coalition* and *Strike Debt*) that I co-founded and have been active within. Writing of this kind carries risks and responsibilities that do not apply to the task of producing propaganda-style articles or communiqués intended to promote movement goals. In documenting and analyzing a movement from a personal stance, accountability to fellow activists is key, as is discretion around details of organizing. But this genre also encourages critiques of internal decision-making and strategy, and these can rub colleagues the wrong way or fray relationships. Even if the goal is to help push the movement further down the road, a point of view that is not collectively endorsed can always expose the author to allegations of breaking ranks or other species of bad faith. But as long as the risk is worth taking, the responsibility to submit movement work to analysis is most authentic when undertaken by an active member.

Writing in this vein has been a way for me to try to live up to the long enduring challenge of integrating theory with practice. Every movement of action needs a movement of ideas to give it shape and political momentum. But they operate at different speeds. For intellectuals, the germination of ideas occurs more slowly and in a different continuum from that of activists who must always make demands on the unfolding present. The trick is to try to synchronize the two, and also to find a voice that is responsive and persuasive to both theory and practice.

Intellectuals and artists who want to be an integral part of a movement also face choices about where to invest our creative energies. It is one thing to stoke an insurgency by generating graphics or text for organizers and agitators; it is quite another to help imagine how the protest phase of a rebellion can be carried over into a revolutionary reorganization of society. Breakthroughs of the latter kind are rare, and often depend on the elusive element of *good timing*. Detroit legend Grace Lee Boggs, whose dialectical politics spoke to the interdependency of evolution and revolution, urged us to be conscious of our

historical moment while ushering in a new one. As a prompt, she insisted on posing the question, “what time is it on the clock of the world?” All too often, she warned, the challenge of correcting injustices is met by re-treading old ideas about resistance and change, and the results are all too easily incorporated into structures of power. Because the takeover of power has often resulted in flawed versions of existing states, Boggs reasoned that the more genuinely revolutionary task is to try to live now as we would want to in a future society rather than waiting for it to be realized.¹

Boggs’ lesson has resonated most with anarchists who create *prefigurative spaces* or communities for modelling the liberatory world they desire—in which care, mutuality, and consensus will be golden rules. Naturally, young people are usually better suited to this experimental life. They fear their future is already foreclosed—by student debt, environmental ruination, or total surveillance—and so are more inclined to rise to the challenge of living as they would want. As a result, these spaces tend not to be very transgenerational. As an educator and an ageing activist, I spend a lot of time with people much younger than myself, and so there are moments of Yeatsian wistfulness: “that is no country for old men, the young/ In one another’s arms ...” But to be a radical for life (rather than one who ages in place) means that we must always listen closely to young voices and ideas, and so my better guide in these moments is the poet Muriel Rukeyser, who once described young radicals as “exiles from the future.”

The promise of national liberation has soured so often that I hesitate to reference it in the same breath, but, as a lifelong loyalist to the cause of Scottish independence, I feel obliged to cite Glaswegian writer Alasdair Gray’s kindred maxim, “Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation.” It is inscribed on the Scottish Parliament’s Canongate Wall, both as an injunction to members of the political class who toil within the building but also to all who want to live the dream now. As a native Scot, I am aware that this recommendation for taking control

of one's historical destiny is steeped in a recognizably national sensibility about the virtues of labor and common sense. After all, hard work, in the Calvinist tradition, is a sign, though by no means a guarantee, of future salvation. Unable to wholly purge the Presbyterian mentalities of my childhood, I find it hard, as a result, to conceive of any program of emancipation that does not involve sustained toil and industry.

What Time Is It?

The most alluring propositions about the timeliness of our actions are less forthright, like the one I will now consider—we make history, but not under conditions of our choosing. Marx is the source of this insight, and it has had a busy career, especially when abstracted from the context in which he first offered it. For example, many people, myself included, have used some version of his maxim as a reassurance to those who see no way out of an oppressive circumstance. Though things are bad, comrades, consider how other people, throughout time, have transformed their hardship into a feat of liberation. But Marx presented the thought as a warning and not as an inspirational dictum. When it appears, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, it is the opening chord of a cautionary lesson about how authoritarians, like the last monarch of France, employ the theatrical exploitation of the past to seize state power:

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to