

America's War, Failure of Democracy: What Happened to "There are No Innocents"?

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*Many say Trump is not the real problem. Democrats lied through murderous wars, bombing poor people, women included. Few marched as Hillary destroyed Libya. The real problem, some argue, is false values. **Failure of democracy** is one issue but unwillingness to see it is worse.*

The anti-war movement of the sixties and seventies had a slogan: There are no innocents. ¹ It meant that a comfortable white life was collusion in massacres. Lifestyles fueled carnage in Vietnam by generating the values that justified it. Quietly offering daily consent, we're responsible for the results.

We're responsible for imperialism. That movement proclaimed that by not opposing fundamental institutions, we support them. You can't be neutral on a moving train, Howard Zinn said. ²

Another idea was around then: renunciation. It means we sometimes have to *lose or give away* things to access truth, to see better. It existed in the drop-out movement. Counter-cultural communities weren't part of a "plan" for success, as happens today. Members were transformed, *losing* who they were.

It was in the drug culture. Students at "good schools" knew key social values informed their identity. ³ So they didn't trust their identity. Some didn't trust their thinking. Mind-altering drugs made sense, as a way to see the world differently. Renunciation (of one's mind) was motivational.

It was in popular culture. In *Star Trek*, called an American icon, Spock represented reason. Spock's distinctive skill is mind melds. He gives up his identity to become one with another being, often alien. The idea runs counter to assumptions about reason. It involves risk. Spock loses, and discovers.

Renunciation is in religions: we lose life to gain it. But it is also in Marx. Marx's naturalistic, realist view of knowing (consistent with recent philosophy of science) says knowing is dialectical. The world acts *upon* us and we receive back. It changes us. We gain perspective.

The process is transformative, sometimes unexpectedly. Lenin described discovery as a passage through dark waters. It's risky. There is loss, including to identity.

We don't teach Marx now. This witty, intelligent 19th century philosopher disappeared when the Soviet Union collapsed. Anyone who knows Marx knows his philosophy was not involved. Lenin knew before he died the USSR would not be Marxist.

No one argued that Marx's insights into human nature, knowledge and freedom were suddenly irrelevant. His academic death reflected "abject prostration".⁴

Publishers and editors complied. The editor of a cultural journal at my university invited me to write on Cuba after normalization began. He insisted I write "like a prof" which meant leaving out Fidel Castro. I complied, making the same points differently. He said he liked it but it never appeared.

One result of shameful prostration is that philosophical liberalism seems the only option. Students accept uncritically liberals' negative view of freedom. It says we're free when we do what we want. It gets dressed up but basically I'm free if no one, including government, gets in my way.

It assumes there are innocents. There aren't.

In the early two thousands I attended an annual conference on development in Havana, Cuba.⁵ It drew Nobel laureates (including from the US), members of the IMF and World Bank, national leaders, heads of unions and social movements, as well as ordinary folk from around the world representing student delegations, Indigenous movements and women's organizations.

Fidel Castro attended but wasn't on the program. At each event, for four days, he listened, taking notes. When it was over, he'd speak, starting, say, at 10.30pm and concluding at 3.30am. A convention hall full of people listened, some standing in order not to nod off. Few left.

A colleague asked why I listened since he said similar things. It was because he was saying them. Few world leaders were, or are: that the poor matter, that the poor remember, that the march of humanity (against imperialism) exists. It cannot fail, he'd say, because "people think and feel".

People think and feel. It's not trivial. It reflects a now urgently needed perspective. It was urgent then and the audience knew it. It recognizes a radical form of knowledge gained when we receive back from others, and lose: Human connection as access to otherwise elusive truths.

It is how we know we're lied to, even about who we are. Truths about imperialism are costly because the lies are expressed in how we live. There are no innocents. Truth isn't automatic. It has costs.

Some hope Trump will inspire radical change to political organization. Let's hope it inspires philosophical change: thorough rejection of liberalism's negative freedom.

Ignorance is not just lack of knowledge. It is the position from which we interpret it. The late Honduran activist, Barta Cáceres said North Americans' big problem is love of comfort. It is a deeper point than may at first appear. We need Marx and those who've followed him.

Academics' sorry prostration has done damage.

Notes

- 1, E.g. Sam Green, Bill Siegel, directors, *Weather Underground* (documentary 2002)
2. Howard Zinn in Ellis, Deb, & Mueller, Denis. (Directors). (2004). *Howard Zinn: You can't be neutral on a moving train* (Documentary)
3. Mark Kitchell, dir *Berkeley in the sixties* (documentary 1990)
4. Ali, Tariq, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of hope* (New York, NY: Verso Press, 2006) p. 5
5. Encuentro Hemisférico de Lucha Contra el ALCA, Palacio de las Convenciones, Havana 2001-2005
Encuentro Hemisférico de Lucha Contra el ALCA, Palacio de las Convenciones, Havana 2001-2005

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