

RECALL TO LIFE

When we forget, what we forget loses its present, absent a remembered presence it also loses its future. But very little is ever completely forgotten and lost, bits and pieces continue to exist in our understandings, behaviors, fears, longings, it is these fragments which can be recaptured by the imagination, imagination defined as recasting the old into something new and different, something which, even if partly thought of, has never been perceived in reality. But what is imagined can become sterile, can drift into illusion, unless that reality is brought into being so it can be experienced experience that may transform the thought but still keep faith with the desire behind the original idea. For such a transformation to happen, however, the physical, material, spiritual capability must exist to make the dream real along with the effort to bring the requisite changes into effect. Which last just so happens to be one of the definitions of power.

Therefore power need be given to the imagination if the dreams of what could be are ever to become what is; it is this to which the slogan, “all power to the imagination,” so identified with movements of 1968, speaks. It is a concept that ought to be recaptured from the margins of triviality in which it has been imprisoned in order to better challenge the resigned realism that lies within the alternative notion that what is always will be, the commonplace “truisms” that we live in a world bred of inequality, that no matter how much wealth abounds, some, many, will be born in hunger to lives of poverty; a world similarly bred in violence in which war is inevitable, peace at best an intermittent luxury. It is but a short step from these assertions of human society’s incapacities to the often-present if unstated conviction that genuine democracy—defined by popular participation in the direction and administration of government, of the economy—is a pipe dream, a recipe for inefficiency, totalitarianism, or both.

Assumptions by which we tell ourselves to settle for what is and give up dreaming, cousin to the belief that love is a childhood fairytale not to be taken seriously if one wants to avoid inevitable disappointment, they serve only to make the intolerable, tolerable. Excuses that close off what could be beautiful in life by running away to the comfort of familiar prisons paradoxically also serve as shields to block the sight of our world’s tragedies. Floating through time willfully ignoring the danger of drowning in the ever-rising sea of tears and blood our own as well as that of others is to give up or give in because it becomes easier, safer to accept the unpleasant rather than to challenge and change, to risk the price that might have to be paid when suppressed dreams are allowed to live. Restricting the imagination to a tiny corner of nearly forgotten hopes due to the illusion of a pessimistic realism restricts us in both intimate and social relationships, making our imagination subject to the limits imposed by existing power.

Most of us do, most of the time, nonetheless, get by, living life as fully as possible within those allowed limits, but can’t eliminate a lingering dissatisfaction, the quiet desperation Thoreau once noted, of those only waiting for the opportunity to allow their hopes to shed the skin of resignation, spread wings and fly. But when social pessimism becomes personal and that transformation ceases to exist even in the imagination, then hope may become despair; emotions denied expression turned within, accommodation to inequity swallowed, can only be taken so far before exploding upon itself or others.

Certainly this is an aspect of what lay behind the motivations of the intolerant cruelty in the acts of those who attacked New York City and Washington, DC on September 11 unable or unwilling to see the humanity of those killed for reasons of misplaced symbolism, those actions can

also be seen as a triumph of the denial of imagination, bespeaking an inability to conceive a life of freedom in contrast to the oppression in which our post-Cold War “New World Order” locks the vast majority. Unable to envision a world of social justice and equality, the only answer to the veiled authoritarianism of neo-liberal economics and one-sided armed might exercised from afar becomes to those blinded by their hatreds the adoption of a visible authoritarianism that is no alternative at all—accommodating the lack of democratic and personal rights at the heart of our world’s despair by denying them even more blatantly. All that results: an intensification of what is rather than the creation of anything new. A powerlessness despite its violent explosions, nothing is thereby done to bind bleeding wounds or dry tearful eyes; such destructiveness only helps serve those who seek to legitimate the use of greater force to hold meaningful change at bay.

The greater use of force has been much in evidence, the wanton attack on the World Trade Center is, after all, but a small-scale replica of our government’s armed might which destroys buildings and kills people on a much grander scale. Current administration policy also demonstrates a similar, if greater, lack of imagination, unwilling to concede any way of living or other principle of organizing society or international relations other than those which currently prevail and lock into place divisions of rulers and ruled, haves and have-nots, victors and vanquished. The bombs our government has ordered dropped since September 11 are similar as well with the attacks on that day in their essential powerlessness—all the weapons in the world can’t disguise the failure of this any more than any of our other recent wars, to solve anything at all.

To avoid dealing with the hopelessness implied by the nature of its current policies, the administration hides a philosophy of unfeeling thoughtlessness in a denial of individuality; the faceless and nameless of Afghanistan (or Iraq), whether seen as objects to be killed or to be given charity, are paralleled by the rapid shift in treating the lives lost on September 11 away from the personal sorrow felt to empty national symbol (or marketing opportunity). Contesting this reduction of life as lived to slogans means challenging the aforementioned realism of what is by restoring the possibilities upon which dreams live, the realism of what can be imagined and brought into being.

Doing this it may be helpful to look at and try to recapture some of those aforementioned fragments of the past, not as myth the way 12th century Islam or 19th century rural America are misappropriated with flags of religion and nationalism draped over the complexity of the conflicts that defined those eras, but rather to look to see how people have at other times sought to overcome the limitations that social structures appeared to make permanent. Examining previous attempts to bring into being alternative ways in which we might live can help us today picture how we might wage such a struggle for tomorrow.

A beginning to that end may be taken by looking at a time shortly before September 11, but not that date in 2001 but rather in 1973. Many have noted the sad coincidence between last year’s terror and the terror of not-so-long-ago which marked the U.S.-backed military coup in Chile. If, however, all we remember about those who died is the manner of their deaths and not the content of the lives they led, we give into the destructiveness of violence if all we remember about the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende is the brutality used to overthrow it we concede too much to its opponents. Thus what we ought to ask, what was it that was overthrown?

To answer simply, it represented an attempt to overcome injustice and poverty by a movement dedicated to expanding democracy in all aspects of life, building a socialism based on constitutional means relying on the participation and solidarity of Chile’s working people (and of

people abroad). But a simple answer is not sufficient, fraught with the difficulty of reducing the years 1970 to 1973 to one image, for to draw from that experience one lesson is to deny the reality of what was being built. Especially insofar as Popular Unity, the Chilean left in and out of government, spoke with a multiplicity of voices, understanding the scope, pace, and means of bringing about proposed changes in different terms. But then again, that is essential to what should be recalled, for in their diversity those supporting Allende were true to the goal of democratizing society and the economy, relying not on one leader, one organization, one “line,” but many. In consequence the impact of individual involvement in social activity became all the more important, public debate, discussion, political engagement, vital in practice, not just rhetoric.

Such involvement depended on people feeling free to speak their minds, act on their convictions, and have what they do make a difference in practice (this last all too lacking in our society) attributes of democracy which rely on civil liberties being respected. This Allende’s government did, promoting openness, refusing to coerce dissident voices within Popular Unity nor to suppress the speech, press, assembly of opponents seeking his ouster. Refusing to be drawn into a policy of general repression, he also refused to draw a line to repress some and not others—a line easy to draw in the abstract, impossible to maintain in practice, a process which once begun is hard to undo, a process which stifles creativity and individual expression, reducing activism into ever narrower tests of loyalty.

Many anguished by the coup, recalling the tortured bodies alongside the crushed dreams, understandably wonder if the unwillingness to repress those who used public liberties to prepare a climate for the destruction of all liberty was a weakness, a factor in Popular Unity’s fall. Impossible to know for certain of course, though it does seem unlikely, that such a path would have prevented the military action. More relevantly, it clearly would have been an admission that Allende’s foes were right, that fundamental change cannot be brought into being democratically, that social transformation which empowers those who have been without cannot also be a means to protect and extend individual rights. It would have been then—and would remain now—a sign of helplessness, a giving up of the possibility of giving power to the imagination, of recasting the old as something new, different, free.

The attempt to create a democratic, peaceful path to socialism in Chile was an attempt to give power to the imagination, to picture a world in which human values preceded those of property, and then taking steps to achieve it by building the solidarity and the individual participation of all members of society that pre-figured as means the ends sought. The Popular Unity government and the movement which gave birth to and sustained it never abandoned extra-parliamentary forms of mass activism, yet also never wavered from a commitment to work within existing structures—a combination which meant that commitment didn’t serve as an excuse to cease pressing for fundamental change and transformation of them. Devolving power to those long excluded is to make democracy real in daily life, and the belief that people can shape public institutions was at the core of what was fought for, to reassert popular sovereignty over the country’s natural resources on behalf of the goals of justice and equity.

The path taken was one which we should recall today because it stands in contrast to the current political void which leads to the all-too-evident hopelessness and the militarization of politics which comes when privatization makes politics appear irrelevant to the quality of life. By fighting for change through participatory democratic means, the movement in Chile was forced to become always more expansive, more outward-looking, reaching out to people throughout the world, but by encouraging individual participation in the midst of social and cultural upheavals that

accompanied the challenge to inequality in society at large, it also allowed people to become more inward-looking, opened up the question of personal relationships, of how each chooses to live. All this in practice was more successful than our memory generally allows, Allende's support deepened and grew despite the violence, dislocations, disruptions, caused by those inside and outside Chile who sought to defeat him and so in the end the plotters knew that he could never be defeated by votes or by an appeal to the public but only by what came: the tanks, guns, prison, exile, death of people, of dreams.

History can be read as a path of defeat for the hopes of the world's poor, but such a reading is as one-sided as views which picture the path of humanity proceeding in a straight line of unimpeded progress. As to Popular Unity in Chile, what it accomplished was as real as its subsequent defeat, what its meaning over time becomes is more a matter of what is made of its legacy. The fact of its short-lived success should be testament to the notion that longer more sustaining success on that road can be built in the future. This not by blind copying, nor by romanticizing what was. The Chilean people, the activists in the movement, were real people with all the usual faults found everywhere, experiencing the normal tension in life with the added tension that accompanied that time of conflict and struggle. The failures, divisions, mistakes, and illusions that they suffered should also be remembered.

The legacy is what is contested today, the coup was aimed at destroying the material gains the Chilean people had made over the three years of Allende's tenure in office, the decades of painfully won gains which preceded it and the dreams of the future which had inspired such efforts to wipe out at one blow past, present, and future. Though far more subtly done, there is a way in which the years of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan did the same ushering in our current climate where what cannot be created is all too visible, and attempts at democratic change too easily accepting of self-abnegating compromise, leaving current inequalities untouched, trying too little, accomplishing less.

Witnessing this, many may give up in withdrawal to private life, others, like alchemists of old, seeking an elusive short cut to freedom that is all but guaranteed to fail. Lacking a voice which works for freedom through a struggle of solidarity and participation, other voices rise that can speak and act only through the anger of a few, becoming culpable in maintaining the system as is for the repression that follows in the wake of selfish violence cuts a wide swath, hitting most heavily on working people organizing and students questioning.

Peace, justice, work that is meaningful, leisure that is restful, a voice that is heard in deciding what happens close to home and far away, all goals we can imagine, but goals too many despair of ever finding. Our current president who treats the earth's environment as cavalierly as he treats foreign lives, domestic liberties, or, for that matter, election results, is the embodiment of the result of such despair and it is what needs to be challenged if we are to find a way free out of our world's current sorrows.

As in the Chile of 1970, this will mean, above all else, the participation of people in building their own alternative, in patient organizing on little issues, the immediate problems that fill the life of each of us, without ever allowing such concerns to become separated from the more fundamental challenge to how our society is structured, from how our deeper needs and aspirations can be met. In this there is only one means, a solidarity that extends from my neighbor with whom I may bicker to those across the sea whom I may never see. Therein lies the popular power able to

withstand the custom, the divisions, the pressures, and the violence upon which the power of privilege and property rely. Uniting means and ends, we can give power to our imagination and bring back to life all our visions of how we might act to bring us closer to what should be, what can be.