

Nope to Hope

False capital & the spectacle triumphant

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

2009

ANNOUNCER: The leader's coming. He approaches. He's bending. He's unbending. He's jumping. He's crossed the river. They're shaking his hand. He sticks out his thumb.

Can you hear? They're laughing... Ah ... ! he's signing autographs. The leader is stroking a hedgehog, a superb hedgehog! The crowd applauds. He's dancing with the hedgehog in his hand. He's embracing his dancer. Hurrah! Hurrah! He's being photographed, with his dancer on one hand and the hedgehog on the other... He greets the crowd ... He spits a tremendous distance.

—from *The Leader*, Eugene Ionesco (1953)

ALL: Long live production! Long live the white race! Keep it up! Keep it up!

—from *The Future is in Eggs*, Eugene Ionesco (1957)

There is almost some pleasure in witnessing the structures of capitalism unravel. It's hard not to express some delight as the usual self-confident and arrogant countenances normally displayed on the faces of the captains of industry and finance disappear as their stocks sell at less than the cost of a gallon of gas.

The house of cards that capitalism has always been, with its wealth now recognized as a phantom by almost everyone, is quickly tumbling. But, any joy at the plutocrats' predicament is quickly erased when it is realized that the system's wreckage does the most damage to the common person, who, filled with a childlike trust in their betters, was along for the ride.

Time seems to be moving at a quickening pace as the presidency of Barack Obama hit the streets with a boy-with-finger-in-the-dike like urgency realizing that the system was in a state of collapse that could conceivably be close to terminal. The state, capital's perennial partner, is rushing to the rescue, hoping that cranking out infusions of more fake wealth, Weimar Republic-style, will staunch the downward spiral.

Just as the White Rabbit in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland mutters, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!", with Alice following him down the rabbit hole into Wonderland, one gets the feeling of entering not only a newly constructed political and economic fantasy landscape, but also a sense of the immediate where history is measured in weeks.

Doesn't George W Bush's hideous criminal regime seem suddenly far away?

Similarly, the January 20 inauguration of Barack Obama as president of the United States on the steps of the Capitol seems equally distant although this is being written only eight weeks hence.

The two million spectators spread across the National Mall that day, with most in attendance witnessing the event on Jumbotron giant TV screens, had the look of those who gather on New Year's Eve in New York's Time Square, and seemed just as celebratory. To them, and the hundreds of millions watching around the world, it was a new beginning, a new world with a new leader. A giddy hope was palpable.

It was a planetary spectacle that reached people assembled on city streets, in village squares, in classrooms, in workplaces, and living rooms from Colorado to Iraq, from Times Square to Kenya, watching the man they hoped can alter a world dizzily going out of control. Untold millions stopped what they were doing and watched the event on television, united by the sensation that something of historic importance was occurring; an experience they felt might stay with them for a lifetime.

In a way not easily explained, Barack Obama and his election represented to many people across the globe the best impulses of humanity—a desire for peace, economic, social, and racial justice, tolerance, a sense of coherence, community, and even love. Sentiments that move us away from the hatred, wars, inequality, and scarcity that has marked human existence for so long; a world without the political, social, and environmental practices that so many realize are unsustainable.

The joy and tears, the rapt attention, and hope, the word that appears so optimistically alongside change, speaks to the desperation felt by billions when contemplating the future. Now, Barack Obama, the multitude thought, will change everything.

But, regardless of what the new president represents to people, he embodies very little of what they seek. Regardless of how audacious Obama contends the emotion of hope is, it has very little actual power to it. You hope that your medical test comes back negative, or that it doesn't rain the day of an outdoor concert, but ultimately it is an attitude that cedes power to circumstances beyond one's control. All of our fates throughout the world are now in the hands of one man, and people hope he can.

However, much of what the new president will achieve in the midst of another downturn in capitalism is yet unwritten. But already some of the gloss is off even among Obama's liberal supporters who are critical of his centrist policies, his old-guard appointments, and his plans for an expanded war in Afghanistan. Certainly, Obama's departure from the worst of the Bush atrocities is welcome, but there is nothing in his economic policies that move beyond an attempt to resuscitate a gasping capitalism, ones predicated on returning the system and the empire to what it was.

People hearken back to the Depression-era for a Roosevelt analogy to define Obama's bailout of the corporate criminals who created the current mess for capitalism. The dreadful Bush is portrayed as the Hoover of the equation for presiding over the cascading collapse following 1929 with little or no response. But, the Depression didn't reach its depth until 1932, several years after it commenced, when the Dow had plunged 89 percent. The Obama "rescue" policies involve submitting to the blackmail of the banks, auto companies, and financial institutions—"Bail us out or we'll take the whole system down"—with increased debt and money supply, but so far little has changed other than the disappearance of taxpayer money into a black hole.

The world is in an extremely precarious position. Worst-case scenarios paint a picture of the collapse of entire economies and national structures which may be what the primitivists hope for, but there is no reason to think that the result would be anything other than a generalized Kosovo, with civil war, ethnic strife, and famine being the result. Right now, maybe we better hope that Obama can stop the downward slide until a viable alternative can be created. If his policies don't bring us back from the brink, it's very possible that the new president will be the Hoover of this crisis, and what follows him won't be pretty.

USA! USA!

Although it shouldn't be ignored that a black man could be elected president of a nation so steeped in racism, scenes of children singing praises of Dear Leader, or tens of thousands of African-Americans chanting, "USA! USA!" as they did on the National Mall in the manner of right-wing sports crowds, only testifies to how even a once-despised ethnic minority can be enveloped within the spectacle.

Also, others, some anarchists included, who should know better, reacted with similar enthusiasm to Obama's election. But are there those among us who really would have had no reaction if the horrid Republicans had won the election which would have constituted an affirmation of eight years of Bush crimes?

Will anything really change? No, not if the emphasis is on really. Obama's task is to repair an out-of-control capitalist system. The train we're on is speeding 120 miles an hour toward a chasm and the bridge is out, to rework a Camus analogy. But unlike the oblivious rail passengers, by now most people realize what the danger is; but have no idea what to do nor possess the self-confidence that even if they did know could they stop the train or repair the bridge. They hope Barack Obama can fix it.

But fixing it means the “hope” that the system can return to what it was, albeit with a few more controls on the worst excesses inherent in the Reaganomics that created the problems. However, re-creating a system of stock market speculation based on false wealth, labyrinthine financial instruments, and restored insane levels of production and consumption simply sets the stage for another collapse in the future.

Increased production of large ticket items, such as automobiles like the recently introduced \$2,000 Indian Tata, may mean more jobs and sales, but it also guarantees massive industrial waste, polluted skies, and probably more wars for oil. Capitalism requires incessant expansion or it dies. Stasis is not an option. If capitalism recovers and expands, the planet will continue perishing, drowning in its own detritus.

The old revolutionary model of workers overthrowing the capitalist bosses and installing anarchism or communism based upon the production apparatus they operate is no longer viable. Workers now manufacture mountains of worthless doodads absolutely unnecessary to daily life such as an iron with one’s initials to brand barbequed steaks, bug vacuum cleaners, or a “continuously freshening feline drinking fountain.” It is this junk that is as necessary to consume and quickly discard as cars and refrigerators.

Creating a workable vision of a different way of life has never been more challenging and so few are envisioning anything other than the “hope” that what we have now doesn’t all go down the drain soon.

Either we continue as the objects of history, subject to forces beyond our control, or, enter history as its subject, actors who intervene in determining our future.

Screw hope; let’s act.

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