

Disobedience and Social Sciences

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Disobedience and Social Sciences

One way of expressing solidarity with the tens of thousands of Iraqis who have suffered in this war is to reject offers of collaboration and support in research in the social sciences and humanities from governments that do not know the meaning of accountability.

KALPANA KANNABIRAN

The war against Iraq is over, rather the bombing is over, troops remain in the region indefinitely, and peace refers at this point only to suspension of active destruction. But for millions of people across the world (including within the US) this was a war that demonstrated America's utter disregard for questions of sovereignty, human rights or public opinion. While there were protests across the world and widespread anger against the US, this anger and resistance must translate into concrete and concerted action over a long term – clearly the most difficult part of dissent, because amnesia sets in too soon.

With the US and its history of creating and perpetuating illusory worlds and phantasies, this amnesia begins to set in even while wars are being waged, with the 'terrifying beauty' of guided missiles, screaming airplanes and smoke clouds over cities taking precedence over the wanton destruction of a land and its people; with barbarism and robbery becoming attributes of what remains of a destroyed people and 'restoration of order' the prerogative of those whose barbarism remains unsurpassed. There are other levels of amnesia as well, of which we must constantly remind ourselves, if only for our own sanity.

Emmanuel Ortiz who works with the Minnesota Alliance for the Indigenous Zapatistas (MAIZ) and Estación Libre reminds us of the millions of people who must enter the account before we even begin to acknowledge those who perished at the World Trade Centre:

A full day of silence
for the tens of thousands of Palestinians
...
Six months of silence
for the million and-a-half Iraqi people,

mostly children, who have died
...
as a result of an 11-year US embargo
against the country.

...
A year of silence
for the millions of dead
in Vietnam – a people, not a war –
...
Two months of silence
for the decades of dead
in Colombia, whose names,
like the corpses they once represented,
have piled up and slipped off
our tongues.

...
An hour of silence
for El Salvador ...

...
25 years of silence
for the hundred million Africans
who found their graves
far deeper in the ocean
than any building could
poke into the sky.

...
100 years of silence...
For the hundreds of millions of
indigenous peoples
from this half of right here,
Whose land and lives were stolen,
....

This is a poem
for every date that falls
to the ground in ashes
This is a poem for the 110 stories
that were never told

...
Here is your silence.
Take it.

But take it all
Don't cut in line.
Let your silence begin
at the beginning of crime.

But we,
Tonight we will keep right on singing
For our dead.

[Excerpts from 'A Moment of Silence']

What Ortiz imprints is the refusal to forget, the resistance to the erasure of

memories of injustice – because that is an erasure of history. The world has in the past witnessed extreme injustice – but it has also seen concerted action by the international community against that injustice. Although this action has been minuscule when set against the magnitude of violation, it is a critical part of our collective memory. We must remind ourselves of those ways of acting politically and internationally to restore credibility in the socio-political fabric.

The third way in which amnesia worms its way into our consciousness is by creating fissures in our worlds, so that protest and professional work remain separated – so that even while protesting, we unthinkingly bind ourselves to that same unjust system, disabling ourselves without even realising it. The announcement of the Fulbright awards last week is a case in point. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the US department of state, which sponsors the awards declares that it "fosters mutual understanding between the United States and other countries" and promotes "personal, professional, and institutional ties" and presents "US history, society, art and culture in all of its diversity to overseas audiences"! The opening paragraph on the awards web site reads, "In this time of crisis *we...rededicate ourselves to our mission of Opening Minds to the World. The mutual understanding and lasting ties that our programmes promote are as important in times of conflict as in times of peace, as our history makes clear. We will continue to work to provide opportunities for study and international academic exchange that will contribute to a safer and more secure world*" [emphasis added].

Since in this view, scholarship and the pursuit of knowledge must be based on 'mutual understanding' and cannot be tainted by politics, the awards will be announced and applications solicited on grounds of 'mutual understanding' even while the US wages an unpardonable war. Ironically however, this echoes Bush's broadcast to the Iraqi people after the subjugation of Baghdad: "The government of Iraq and the future of your country will soon belong to you.... We will respect your great religious traditions, whose principles of equality and compassion are essential to Iraq's future. We will help you build a peaceful and representative government that protects the rights of all citizens. And then our military forces will leave."

War and scholarship are not unconnected after all, and the plea for pristine scholarship, in quintessentially American fashion, masks the realities of war and perpetuates the lie of the noble American intent. The left hand does not know what the right hand does.

The politics of scholarship is then an urgent issue today. In a very preliminary way, two questions may be raised – the first to do with science, the second with the social sciences and humanities.

With respect to science, Daniel Amit's recent exchange with Martin Blume, editor in chief of the *American Physical Society* says it all. On Amit's refusal to correspond with any American organisation having lived through 1939, Blume writes, "We regard science as an international enterprise and we do our best to put aside political disagreements in the interest of furthering the pursuit of scientific matters. We have never used other than scientific criteria in judging the acceptability of a paper for publication, without regard to the country of origin of the author. We have done this even in cases where some of us have disagreed strongly with the policies of that country and we will continue this practice. We believe it is essential that all parties involved make every effort to separate social and political differences from their participation in scientific research and publication. The pursuit of scientific knowledge needs to transcend such issues." To which, Amit replies that after 40 years of activity and collaboration, he finds very little reason for any optimism in the future role of science and the scientific community. "What we are watching today," says Amit, "is a culmination of 10-15 years of mounting barbarism of the American culture the world over, crowned by the achievements of science and technology as a major weapon of mass destruction. We are witnessing man hunt and wanton killing of the type and scale not seen since the raids on American Indian populations, by a superior technological power of inferior culture and values. We see no corrective force to restore the insanity, the self-righteousness and the lack of respect for human life (civilian and military) of another race. Science cannot stay neutral, especially after it has been so cynically used in the hands of the inspectors to disarm a country and prepare it for decimation by laser-guided cluster bombs...I, personally, cannot see myself anymore sharing a common human

community with American science. In desperation I cannot but turn my attention to other tragic periods in which major societies, some with claims to fundamental contributions to culture and science, have deviated so far as to be relegated to ostracism and quarantine. At this point I think American society should be considered in this category."

This brings me to the social sciences and humanities. The structure and logic of funding for these areas has been very different from that of the sciences, as also the habits of collaboration. Being a superior technological power with inferior culture and values, as Amit puts it, while scientific achievement and funding has been centred in the US, social science scholarship has increasingly moved towards bringing 'non-western' societies centre stage within the US. So while the funding might come from the US, the knowledge, scholarship and expertise is firmly rooted outside. The social science academy in India for instance, does not derive its legitimacy from the US. Nor do 'new fields' like human rights or clinical legal education (primarily legal aid to the poor). All of these have existed and functioned in radical ways long before they

became focus areas of the US government. Nor has this work depended on the dollar – the rupee has been more than adequate to support research interests, committed academic-activist endeavours, and reviews of research in India for several decades now, making Rohini Hensman's plea for disobedience through the rejection of the US dollar a viable plan in this context.

A refusal to be engaged by the US establishment for research that we have already managed to do, and a refusal to be sponsored by the US government to lecture (and this is today a moral question) in a country that refuses to learn, and yet depends on our participation for its own credibility, might in these circumstances, be an effective form of disobedience available to committed practitioners of the social sciences and humanities. One way then of expressing solidarity with the tens of thousands of Iraqis who have suffered in this war and the millions of others that Emmanuel Ortiz names so poignantly, is to reject offers of collaboration and support in these troubled times from governments like these that do not know the meaning of accountability and that have made impunity a habit. [17]

Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG) will hold a 4-day **Creative Writers' Workshop on Forced Displacement of Population** from 6 to 10 December 2003 in Darjeeling, West Bengal. The workshop is intended for young academics, media activists, and those working in the area of forced displacement. The workshop will deliberate on patterns of media coverage of forced displacement, creative writing in response to conditions of displacement, and experimental media methods reflecting on conditions of forced displacement. Applications on plain paper are invited from interested candidates who (a) have 5 years experience in the field of media or creative writing, or engaged in protection of the victims of forced displacement, or hold postgraduate degree in Social Sciences or Liberal Arts, and (b) have proficiency in English. Women, victims of displacement, media activists, and creative writers are particularly encouraged to apply. An application must contain (a) all necessary particulars, (b) best specimen of his/her creative writing, (c) a 500 to 1000 word write-up on how the workshop is relevant to applicant's work and may benefit the applicant, and (d) a letter of recommendation. Incomplete application will not be accepted. Selected candidates will be offered accommodation, travel assistance, and workshop material, and will have to pay registration fee of Rs. 1000/-. Application can be sent by e-mail or hard copy (computer-set) and must reach the following address by **31 July 2003** - The Co-ordinator, Creative Media Workshop, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 5B, Mahanirban Road, Kolkata - 700 029, Email: mcrg@cal.vsnl.net.in