Seattle Journal for Social Justice

Volume 1 | Issue 1 Article 4

10-5-2012

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Recommended Citation

Zinn, Howard (2002) "Artists and Citizens in a Time of War," *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/sjsj/vol1/iss1/4

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Artists and Citizens in a Time of War

Howard Zinn[1]

When I think of the relationship between artists, citizens, and society, I always ask what this relationship should be, rather than what it actually is.

Transcendent. It is a word I never use in public forums, but it is the only word I can come up with to describe what I think about the role of artists. By transcendent, I mean that the artist transcends the immediate. The artist transcends the madness of the world. The artist transcends terrorism and war. The artist transcends conventional wisdom, the word of the establishment, and the orthodoxy to go beyond and escape what is handed down by the government and said in the media.

How does the artist transcend? The artist thinks, acts, performs, and writes outside the framework that society has created. The artist may do no more than give us beauty, laughter, passion, surprise, and drama. The artist need not apologize because the artist is able to tell us what the world should be like, even if it is not that way now. By doing this, the artist takes us away from the moments of horror that we experience every day.

The artist shows us what is possible. But the artist must do more than that because the artist is also a citizen and a human being. Those who are not artists face the problem of transcendence in different ways. Whatever profession one is in, whatever work one does, one must face Rousseau's challenge: "We have physicists, geometricians, chemists, astronomers, poets, musicians and painters in plenty, but we have no longer a citizen among us."[2] Rousseau was writing in revolutionary times, just as we are in now. Rousseau asked the question that we all must ask of ourselves now: *What are we doing to further the necessary revolution?*

How does the citizen transcend? All citizens, and not just artists, can think transcendentally. The trick in thinking transcendentally is to think about

what questions the voices of authority are not asking. What do the voices of authority assume that we accept?

I am a historian, or so society classifies me. That scares me. I do not want to be just a historian, but society puts each of us into a discipline. You are a historian; you are a businessperson; you are an engineer. You are this or you are that. Because society classifies us, we begin to think that the category society places us in is all that we are. The first thing someone asks you at a party is, *what do you do?* Then, one is categorized as a professional in something. Whenever I hear the word professional, I get a little scared because that limits human beings to working within the confines set by that profession.

I faced this kind of categorization during the Vietnam War as historians met to discuss the war raging in Southeast Asia. We asked ourselves whether, as a group, historians should take a stand on the war. Some of us introduced a resolution saying that we, the historians, think the United States should get out of Vietnam. Others agreed that perhaps the United States should get out, but that, as historians, this is not our business.

Not our business? Then whose business is it? The historian says, *it is not my business*. The lawyer says, *it is not my business*. The businessperson says, *it is not my business*. And the artist says, *it is not my business*. Who is left? Does that mean that we are going to leave the business of the most important issues in the world to the people who run the country? How stupid can we be? Have we not had enough experience historically with leaving the important decisions to the people in the White House, Congress, the Supreme Court, and those who dominate the economy?

The important issues in the world *are* the citizens' business. But the citizen does not know that he or she is a citizen, and considers him or herself only a doctor, a lawyer, an artist, an engineer, a waiter, a truck driver, a businessperson, or a scientist.

One of the things we learned about during the Vietnam War was the problem of experts. When the war started, people would ask, *why are we there?* Experts would come on television and tell us why. Many individuals spoke

out against the war in Vietnam. Others responded, *You? You are not an expert*. While there may be experts in little things and facts, there are no experts in big things, and there are no moral experts. "When the world is destroyed, it will be destroyed not by its madmen but by the sanity of its experts and the superior ignorance of its bureaucrats."[3]

It is important to remember that point. All of us, no matter what we do for a living, have the right to make moral decisions about the world. We must be undeterred by the cries of people who say, *you do not know—you are not an expert—the people up there—they know*. It takes only a bit of knowledge of history to realize how dangerous it is to think that the people who run the country know what they are doing.

There are certain historical moments when learning is more compressed and intense than others. The time after September 11 is one of those moments. At such a time of crisis, it becomes more important than ever to transcend the orthodox, the dominant, and the demands of authority.

Since September 11, I have read countless times in the press: *We must be united*. What do they mean by that? I would like us to be united. But united around what? When people say we must be united, they state explicitly or implicitly that we must be united around whatever the president tells us to do.

To criticize the government is the highest act of patriotism. But those who go outside traditional boundaries and criticize official policy are called unpatriotic and disloyal. People who accuse dissenters of being unpatriotic and disloyal, however, have forgotten the meaning of loyalty and patriotism. Patriotism does not mean unconditional support for our government. As Mark Twain said, "My country, right or wrong, my country. How absolutely absurd is such an idea. How absolutely absurd to teach this idea to the youth of this country."[4] The feminist anarchist Emma Goldman echoed this sentiment saying that she loved the country, not the government.[5] This is a crucial idea for current world issues because, in the present discussion, boundaries have been set, and lines have been drawn.

When someone accuses you of not being patriotic, remind him or her of the Declaration of Independence. Of course, everyone praises the Declara-

tion when it is hung up on a classroom wall but not after people actually read it and understand it. During the Vietnam War, a soldier was disciplined for putting it up on his barrack wall. The Declaration of Independence says that governments are artificial creations. It says that governments are set up by the people of the country to achieve certain objectives such as the equality of all people and the right to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."[6] And "whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute [a] new Government."[7] That is democratic doctrine. That is the idea of democracy. There are, therefore, times when it becomes absolutely patriotic to point a finger at the government and say that it is not doing what it should be doing to safeguard peoples' rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Today, people speak of globalization and suggest that we are all part of the same planet, living in the same world. Do people really mean this? We should test their claims. We should remind them that the words of the Declaration apply to people all over the world and not only to people in this country. People everywhere have the same right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. When the government destroys those rights, it is patriotic to dissent and criticize—to do what we always praise as heroism in dissenters and critics of totalitarian regimes. It is patriotic to speak out.

When I talk about thinking outside the boundaries that are set for us, I am referring to the idea of our national power and our national goodness. Our fellow citizens tell us that we are the superpower in the world; we deserve to be the superpower because we are the best; we have the most democracy and freedom; and we have had terrible things are done to us because we are the best. That is kind of arrogant, really. It is also a sign of a loss of history. We need to be taken down a peg—down to the level of other nations in the world. We need to come down to earth and recognize that the United States has behaved in the world the way that other imperialist nations have behaved.

We have to be honest about our country. If we are going to be anything—if there is anything that an artist should be—if there is anything that a citizen should be—it is honest. We must be able to look at ourselves and at our

country honestly and clearly. Just as we can examine the terrible things that people do elsewhere, we have to be willing to examine the terrible things that are done here by our government.

It is important to remember that wars look good to many people in the beginning because something terrible has been done, and people feel that something must be done in retaliation. Only later does the thinking and questioning begin.

As we bomb Afghanistan, it is unpopular to speak about these ideas. All these voices of authority around us are telling us that bombing is the only thing we can do. The voices are rushing from one undeniable truth to a false conclusion. The undeniable truth is that some fanatical group killed nearly 4,000 people in New York and Washington. The voices leap from that to—*therefore, we must bomb*.

We have always met violence with violence. But if we knew some history when this happened, we would instead ask: *What was the result*? And the answer would be: *the death of innocent people*.

It would help to redefine the word terrorism. What happened on September 11 was an act of terrorism. But to isolate it from the history of terrorism is dangerously misleading. This act of terrorism exploded in our faces because it was right next door. But there have been acts of terrorism going on throughout the world for a long time. I bring that up not to minimize or diminish the terror of what happened in New York and Washington but to enlarge our compassion beyond that. Otherwise, we will never understand what happened or what we must do about it.

When we enlarge the question and define terrorism as the killing of innocent people for some presumed political purpose, we find that, along with individual and group terrorism, there is state terrorism. And States have far greater means for killing people at their disposal than do individuals or groups.

The United States has been responsible for acts of terrorism. Because I say this, people might accuse me of trying to minimize what was done. No, I am not doing that at all. I am trying to enlarge our understanding. The United States and Britain have been responsible for the deaths of large num-

bers of innocent people in the world. It does not take much knowledge of history to see that. Think of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, where the United States pursued its interest in "the rubber, tin and other commodities" of the region.[8] Think of Central America. Think of the 100,000 dead in Guatemala as a result of a government that the United States armed and supported.[9] Think of all the wars supported by the United States.

I know that all of this may be unsettling for some. We do not want to hear criticism of the United States government when we have been the victims of a terrorist act. But we have to think carefully about what is required to end terrorism. We have to think about whether bombing Afghanistan is going to stop terrorism, or whether *further terrorism* is going to stop terrorism. Because terrorism *is* war.

War in our time inevitably involves the killing of innocent people. The strong, by extending their strength to every corner of the world, become more vulnerable and, as a result, weaker.[10] This should make us think again about how we define strength and how we define weakness.

The number of innocent civilians killed by our bombing in Afghanistan is not far from the number who lost their lives on September 11.[11] There are perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have died as a result of the Gulf War and the sanctions we have imposed and enforced.[12] It is not a matter of measuring—they killed more than us or we killed more than them. We have to see all these things as terrorist acts in the world and figure out what to do about it. We cannot respond to one terrorist act with war because then we are engaging in the same kind of actions in which terrorists engage. The argument is that, although innocent people died, any killing was done for an important purpose; the victims were collateral damage, and we must accept collateral damage when we are doing something important. That is how *terrorists* justify what they do. And that is how *nations* justify what they do.

I am asking all of us to think carefully and clearly. For if we are herded into actions that will make the world even more dangerous than it is now, we will later regret that we went along silently without raising our voices, *as*

citizens, to ask how we can get at the roots of this problem. This will require transcendence.

Artists can be sly. They can point to things that take us outside traditional thinking because people say that art is just fiction. But remember what Picasso said. "Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth . . . ."[13] Art moves away from reality. Yet art invents something that may be more accurate about the world than a photographic picture.

To transcend, *citizens* must think. All of us can do something. We can ask questions. We must speak up.

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[1] This article is based on an address given at the Massachusetts College of Art on October 10, 2001.
[2] JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, *in* THE ESSENTIAL ROUSSEAU 205, 223 (1983).
[3] JOHN LE CARRE, THE RUSSIA HOUSE 209 (1989).
[4] MARK TWAIN, MARK TWAIN'S WEAPONS OF SATIRE 188 (Jim Zwick ed., 1992).
[5] EMMA GOLDMAN, ANARCHISM AND OTHER ESSAYS 127 (Dover Publications 1969) (1911).
[6] THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE para. 2 (U.S. 1776).
[7] *Id*.
[8] 1 THE PENTAGON PAPERS: THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT HISTORY OF UNITED STATES DECISION-MAKING ON VIETNAM 8 (Sen. Gravel ed. 1971).
[9] *See generally* WILLIAM BLUM, THE CIA: A FORGOTTEN HISTORY (1986).
[10] For a discussion about this idea, see JOSEPH HELLER, CATCH 22 (1961). In this novel, Heller moves beyond traditional thought and points to the idea that World War II was not necessarily a "good war."
[11] Professor Marc Herold, *A Dossier on Civilian Victims of United States' Aerial Bombing of Afghanistan: A Comprehensive Accounting* (2001) (unpublished manuscript, Department of Economics and Women's Studies, University of New Hampshire), excerpt *available at* http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mwherold/AfghanDailyCount.xls.
[12] *See* ALI ABUNIMAH, IRAQ UNDER SIEGE: THE DEADLY IMPACT OF SANCTIONS AND WAR (Anthony Arnove ed., 2000).
[13] ALFRED H. BARR, JR., PICASSO: FIFTY YEARS OF HIS ART 270 (Reprint ed., Arno Press 1966) (1946).