Radical Thinking Must Fall Like a Gentle Mist, Not a Heavy Downpour: The Fifteenth Newsletter (2019).

Extract from Dossier no. 15, The Art of the Revolution Will be International.
For Julian Assange.
Dear Friends,
Greetings from the desk of the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research.
When I was a young boy in Kolkata (India), a group of people from Progress Publishers (USSR) came to my school. They set up a table and laid out a variety of books for us to look at and – perhaps – buy. There were children’s books and the works of Karl Marx, as well as a range of novels by Russian authors, certainly, but also writers from Africa and the rest of Asia. For whatever reason, that day – in 1981 – I bought Leo Tolstoy’s Resurrection (1899). Later, I would reflect on the fact that the Soviets would publish writers – such as Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev – who held a range of political opinions quite far from socialism. But at that time I dug into Tolstoy’s book, which I had bought for almost nothing.

A Russian aristocrat, Count Dmitri Ivanovich Nekhlyudov, has an affair with a maid, Katerina Mikhaelovna Maslova, in the home of his aunts. Nekhlyudov, who moves on with his life, is oblivious to Maslova’s fate. Ten years later, he is on a jury which has before it Maslova, now a sex worker who is charged with murder. Maslova poisoned a client who had beaten her. The Count wants to save her, begging her to marry him. She is not interested. ‘You had your pleasure from me in this world’, she says of his Christian charity, ‘and now you want to get your salvation through me in the world to come’.

Maslova is sent to Siberia. Nekhlyudov follows her. He hears about the terrors of the prison system. Tolstoy spares no detail. It is difficult reading. The prisons in the novel describe the prisons today. These are nasty places, which take away the humanity of people. Count Nekhlyudov opens a discussion with his brother-in-law, Rogozhinsky, about courts and prisons. Rogozhinsky says that the courts and the prisons are needed for justice. ‘As if justice were the aim of the law’, says the Count. ‘What then? ’, asks his brother-in-law. ‘The upholding of class interests! I think the law is only an instrument for upholding the existing order of things beneficial to our class’. His verdict is total. But what can he do? Nothing.

Nekhlyudov cannot save Maslova. Nor can he save the line of emaciated prisoners who march out of their frozen prisons and die on the streets. ‘Man owes no humanity to man’, said the Count. Tolstoy could only end the novel with the hope of a Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, with quotes from the Bible swirling through the Count’s head.

Tolstoy’s novel could not solve the problem for Maslova. But the novel brought inhumanity to the surface. That is, in broad terms, the purpose of art. Art does not change the world by itself. Reading a novel or looking at a design can draw our attention to problems and can even provide an understanding of them. But it cannot by itself change the world. Art and literature alert us to the contradictions in our world, show us how these contradictions – such as of Maslova’s imprisonment – cannot be overcome by good, liberal feelings. Struggles are needed. Nekhlyudov knows that. The prisons uphold ‘class interests’, he says, referring to the interests of the class of the aristocracy and the industrialists. The interests of other classes – of the workers, such as Maslova – were suppressed. Art revealed the suppression. Struggle would take that revelation further.

Our homage this week is to our friends in Cuba, in this case to Casa de la Américas, which was led – for many years – by Haydée Santamaria. La Casa, as it was called, was founded on 28 April 1959 to promote the arts and to widen the imagination. It is a core cultural institution not only for Cuba, but for all of Latin America.

That old saw reasserts itself: they are not ready for democracy. The West and the Gulf Arabs back the old general Khalifa Hafter, as his forces slowly take control of all of Libya (see my column). He sees himself as the mirror image of Egypt’s strongman, Abdel Fatteh al-Sisi. Morocco’s courts sent the rebels of the Rif’s Hirak movement into the king’s dungeons. Algeria changed one leader for another, keeping the Pouvoir unchanged. This name – Pouvoir or Power – is an elegant one for what it describes. It suggests that these countries need strong, authoritarian leadership and not democracy. Here is the deep cultural conceit, the view that democracy cannot thrive everywhere. It is one more of those ideas that needs to be confronted ideologically and practically. This shallow view must be confronted with the long history of struggle in North Africa for full emancipation – a struggle that takes place in the Rif War of Morocco in the 1920s and extends to the cascading strikes in the textile factories of Egypt’s el-Mahalla el-Kubra. Each of these expressions of democracy are crushed – often with the full support of the people who say that North Africans are not ready for democracy. And yet, in Sudan, massive public protest forced the military to eject Omar Bashir. The status of the politics of Sudan remains unclear.

Such ugliness that denies people basic rights begs the question: is revolutionary art possible in these times, when art itself has become property and the means to sell products? In one of his landmark essays, John Berger wrote that artists should ‘continue, regardless of the immediate treatment of their work; that they should address themselves to the future… to replace contingency with necessity’. Things are not as is, neither in Sudan nor in the world of Katerina Mikhailovna Maslova and her class. They want the ‘gentle breeze and mild rain’ to carry away the toxic soil of centuries and create a landscape fertile enough for a world that for which we yearn.

Warmly, Vijay.

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