

Dear Julie

Circling the Spectrum

Image Warehouse, Athens, TX, December, 2004

Dear Julie,

I was not kidding yesterday when I said that talking to people "on the Left" about politics made me want to vomit. I swear to God, if I hear one more person use the word "revolucion" with that starry eye in their voice, I will upchuck on the floor.

I must confess, I certainly agree far more with those "on the Left" than those "on the Right" or "in the Middle," but as I stated, I hope to someday personally represent the point on the political spectrum that closes the circle. As long as we conceive of ourselves as "on the Left" or "on the Right," we will never get together.

Any manner of thinking, you see, that separates one person from another appeals to what is base in us, not what makes us most human. As Bertrand Russell said:

"Within the herd, we are more friendly to each other than are many species of animals, but in our attitudes towards those outside of the herd, in spite of all that has been done by moralists and religious teachers, our emotions are as ferocious as those of any animal, and our intelligence enables us to give them a scope which is denied to even the most savage beast."

As long as we conceive of ourselves as part of a political movement or as existing somewhere along the political spectrum, we cannot be free of this very herd mentality.

Felix Varela, the great 19th century Cuban priest stated: "Good people fear all political parties." God knows I do; I find, personally, that when I think of myself in terms of being "on the Left," I immediately despise everything – and even everyone – "on the Right." I pass a sweet and easy judgment on them as people and completely discount their every idea, and even their person. All this while claiming to view the world through the "moral lens of the Left!"

I have to imagine that if I am so susceptible to this "fascism of belonging," than so are many others – and honest discussion and a mix of ideas becomes impossible. The public conversation turns into little more than a rugby scrum, with one side eventually winning and the other losing.

It is quite possible that everyone on the Left is wholly right and those on the Right are wholly wrong. It is just as possible, I suppose, that those on the Right are entirely correct while those of us on the Left are wrong, wrong, wrong.

I think of your mother, Margaret. Look, when I meet people like her, I feel as if a piece of myself has been resuscitated, brought back from a certain type of suspended animation. Margaret is 85 now and still, I imagine, an avowed Communist; she lived through the McCarthy era as a Communist and twice saw her husband visited by the FBI to discuss his "un-American activities." She herself went before the House Un-American Activities Committee. To me, hers was a noble fight of the little person against her oppressive government; she is, in my mind, a hero, driven only by her compunction to do what was right, even at the grave risk of personal danger.

But let's just say that she had won, Julie – let's just say that America had "fallen" to the communists and joined the delicious Soviet Union as the ultimate in egalitarian societies. I think that we can both agree that that society – and the other communist societies – were little more than the same oligarchies that spring up everywhere: Here in the United States we have the so called "corporatocracy;" there they had the rule by the few for the few. Granted, all the rest lived in an equal world, a drab, lower middle class existence where the restaurants were shorn of proper names and the artists hewed to the damned party line, or else.

No. No, no, no.

Talking to someone on the Left makes me sick because they have bought into a "system;" and, ultimately, the "system" itself is ill. Systemization, while necessary, leads to a collective illness; it leads to general impotence and apathy; it leads to oligarchy, either of one form or another.

Hey, listen, Thomas Jefferson, about whom the "Left" is not entirely sure how to think (father of this imperialist country; passionate human rights advocate, slave owner, adulterer), had this to say about political parties:

"Men have differed in opinion and been divided into parties by these opinions from the first origin of societies, and in all governments where they have been permitted freely to think and to speak. The same political parties that now agitate the United States have existed through all time. Whether the power of the people or that of the [aristocracy] should prevail were questions which kept the states of Greece and Rome in eternal convulsions, as they now schismatize every people whose minds and mouths are not shut up by the gag of a despot." (Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1813)

Is Thomas correct? Have we no choice but to divide ourselves into two sides, and then fight it out through various surrogates, ranging from harshly depressing advertising to gun-battles?

Revolucion, in the sense that the "Left" speaks of it, is absurd and impossible. Revolucion at the end of a gun is nothing more than murder. You do not change minds with bullets. Your hero Che Guevara notwithstanding, the only successful revolucion of the 20th century was the television. For you see, true revolucion infiltrates, it enters like an odorless gas, quietly, surely and irrevocably changing the conversation until a past way of seeing is impossible – and a new one has replaced it.

Only the advent of television truly fills this definition; only television has completely changed the way in which we see the world, either for good or for bad. It is television – and that which the screen (now including the computer, of course) brings into our lives that defines our way of seeing the world. Not Che; not the Communists and not the continuing succession of uprisings of the oppressed against the oppressors.

After all, a successful revolucion of the oppressed does little more than shuffle the cards, with a new set of despicable pigs holding the aces and the old crew splayed out on the ground with the boot on their neck.

Viva la revolucion! Now lets drink French wine!

I am no nihilist, Julie.

There is a social revolution that is slowly taking place around the world; one that began in the last century yet continues to unfold itself unsurely like the diaphanous wings of a 17-year cicada. It is trite, though – and oft quoted; but we must never mistake the messenger for the message, and therefore we should not damn this quiet revolucion for those hoary lips that have recently been uttering its name.

It's that damned democracy, Julie – that horrible thing that breeds indifference and capitalism and fetid industry. It's all we have, though – and if we're at all lucky, we're going to get even more of it.

John Rawls had this to say in an essay that he wrote for the book, *The Politics of Human Rights*:

"Although democratic societies have been as often involved in wars as non-democratic states, and have often vigorously defended their institutions, since 1800, firmly established liberal societies have not gone to war with one another. And in wars in which a number of major powers were engaged, such as the two World Wars, democratic states have fought as allies on the same side. Indeed, the absence of war between two democratic states is as close as anything we know to an empirical law in relations between societies."

This is also known as the "McDonald's Rule," as in that multinational corporation and purveyor of slow death in the form of cheap hamburgers. After all, "no two states who have had MacDonald's restaurants established within their borders have ever gone to war (with each other)."

So if democracy is the answer – though *not* at the point of a gun, as believed both Che and George W. Bush (revolucionaries, both?), and a two-party political system is built into this social system, as Jefferson holds, and I say that defining oneself by political parties ultimately leads to a fascism of ideology, then is there *an* "answer?" A "way out?" Or are we left with just the necessary scrum of money, politics and an operating oligarchy that will (hopefully) disenfranchise the fewest number of people.

Simone Weil noted:

"If our present suffering ever leads to a revival, this will not be brought about by slogans (or imposition), but in silence and moral loneliness, through pain, misery and terror, in the profoundest depths of each person's spirit."

And so it is with the theory of an individualist's democracy, a revolucion that takes place *not* only within "society" or between social classes, but also most importantly within the heads of each individual human being. After all, this is the only true revolution that will ever have success – and may perhaps supplant television as the most recent successful upheaval in human society.

The destruction of the political spectrum is truly an important move that must be made, by members of both the Left and the Right. It is the political spectrum that locks us into its choke-hold; it is the limiting ideology of top-down political thinking that constrains us, separates us, turns democracies into oligarchies, money into votes, voters into ciphers.

Unsheathe the chains! People of the world, dis-unite! As long as "Human Rights" is a "Lefty cause" and "personal responsibility" is a code word for racial oppression, our democracies will only loosely operate as such. We will still be chained by the lust of a few for power – and the damning of democracy to sound bites and corporate overseers.

In a sense, we must have the anti-television revolucion, one which causes people to think and ponder; one which does not anesthetize (like the television), but invigorates; one which drags even those that are "plugged-in" to their ideologies, correct or not, into the arena of personal thought and individual ownership of a basket of ideas that are neither Left nor Right, but caring and moral.

Is this possible? Probably not – I'm no nihilist, but I'm no idiot, either. Nonetheless, ours is not to achieve goals, but to shoot for the stars. As Che himself said, after all: "We are realists; we attempt to achieve the impossible."

Even in failure, we may well reach above our heads.

Sincerely,

Tom