

## MUSINGS

*Editor's note: this is the second essay in Hypatia's series of musings. We welcome reflections on the state of the profession, the life of the independent scholar, political activism, teaching, publishing, or other topics of interest to feminist philosophers. We particularly invite submissions that pick up conversational threads begun by earlier contributions to the column, so that Musings becomes a forum for talking to one another. If you have an idea for the column, please tell us about it.*

## Philosophical Sisters, Incite!

CHRIS CUOMO

*We want to dedicate our music tonight  
to the great opportunity that we all have,  
to begin to truly understand the events of the past few days,  
and to act upon them with courage and with compassion,  
as we make our plans to live in a completely new world.*

—Laurie Anderson, Live at Town Hall  
New York City, September 19, 2001

Feminists of a philosophical sort, lovers of women and wisdom, political critics and witnesses! What unusual and important opportunities we face as we bring the lessons of the last few years to bear on complex theorizing, multi-issue praxis, and the work of twenty-first century democracy. We've been on the streets, in the classroom, and on the Internet, opposing war and occupation, protesting police brutality, demanding global peace and justice. We've helped organize teach-ins and lectures, meetings and potlucks, concerts and art exhibitions. From the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan to New Yorkers Say No to War, from *Women in Black* to *Code Pink*, feminists were some of the first vocal opponents of the Bush rush to war. In February 2003 we helped create the greatest global protest for peace in human history, proclaiming "The World Says No to War" under banners of the swirling blue earth, cracking open the hegemony of you're-either-with-us-or-you're-with-the-terrorists, and activating a phenomenal range of new coalitions.

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Yet we were unable to prevent a wicked war, and at times it has seemed like democracy is crumbling around us. Since 9/11 the American government has revived some of the most monstrous aspects of superpower militarism, and revised fundamental democratic norms and laws concerning basic rights, due process, the separation of church and state, international rule of law, and the unacceptability of torture. In Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine, human suffering is rampant, extreme, and funded by our tax dollars. America's already ambiguous reputation has been severely and perhaps irreparably damaged, and democracy itself suffers nearly everywhere, due in part to the strength of Washington's bad example.

Years have passed, but we are still reeling from the *coup d'état* of 2000, the 9/11 attacks, and that administration's war on Iraq. It seems that epidemic levels of fear and violence allowed jingoistic politicians to found a new age of imperialism under the cover of security. But the severe political disempowerment and religious fundamentalism that allowed Bush and his cronies to slip into office in the first place cannot be blamed on terrorism. When such a blatant and thorough power grab elicited barely a national grumble, the limits of American institutions, including our universities and systems of education, as well as our electoral process, became painfully clear.

Could there be a more important time to incite criticism and positive change, to strengthen our commitment to praxis, to secure useful formations and speak truth to power? We do not live in a "completely new world," but the geopolitical landscape, including the realm of the unthinkable, continues to shift very rapidly, and in ways that are difficult to predict or understand. Which aspects of democracy are most resilient under these conditions? Which are most endangered?

And more broadly, how will the knowledge generated through the new movements for peace and global justice be channeled into theoretical and common understandings? How can the activist successes of these last few years help us to reimagine democratic possibilities worldwide?

If I were queen for a day, I'd call upon wise and compassionate feminists—a diverse, international, and queer-friendly mob—to investigate our best philosophical and practical questions about democracy, to map the landscape and the relevant histories, and to figure out how we should proceed. Certainly there are people working on such questions, but few of them are likely to begin from the premise that multi-issue feminism—including feminist activism and scholarship—is the best starting place for engaging the realities and possibilities of democracy now.

Recall a scene from the movie *Apollo 13*. The astronauts are stuck in space because of a technical problem, and in the midst of the crisis, their spaceship's air filtration system breaks down. It's only a matter of hours before they'll be killed by the high concentrations of their own urine in the air they're breathing

(apparently a standard hazard on a spaceship), so the NASA scientists back on earth have to scramble to find a way to get them a new air filter, fast.

What does NASA do? The guys in charge call a group of experts (more guys) into a seminar room, and they dump a pile of stuff on a table in the middle of the room—duct tape, wire, pieces of foam and aluminum, toothbrushes, combs, and such—exactly the materials the astronauts have available on the spaceship. In just a couple of hours, the scientists down here have to figure out how the astronauts up there can use that pile of stuff to build a new air filter. Pressure is building and the clock is ticking away, but miraculously, the scientists succeed. In a perfect Hollywood moment, patriotic optimism, brilliant cooperation, and generous federal funding save the day.

Think *we* could work a miracle to save democracy? The fact is that racist, capitalist, military patriarchy (or whatever you want to call it) is functioning about as well as that spaceship's air filter—and we're clearly on the verge of being poisoned by our own shit. But imagine a brilliant feminist circle with the power to confront that problem head on!

Is that a fantasy or a real possibility? Although we rarely wield such huge budgets, feminists have never needed invitations to assess and address the most important questions. We are quite accustomed to creating our own expert networks and roundtables, our own conversations and innovations. And certainly our areas of expertise are matters that are central to understanding contemporary democracy (*masculinity, violence, capitalism, power, racism, women's oppression, education, cross-cultural exchange, norms of gender, norms of knowledge, poverty, public health, grassroots organizing, justice, children's interests, militarization, homophobia, the prison-industrial complex, religious fundamentalism, ecological interdependence, technocracy, literacy, hegemony, globalization, sexuality, psychological development, abuse and mistreatment, and the importance of care*, just to name a few). While we sometimes enjoy comfortable funding, feminists know how to stimulate and circulate knowledge and activism on shoestring budgets. Some of us are even masters at using institutional power to foment minor revolutions.

But from among you I hear an academic riposte: *Democracy has always been a fantasy, the U.S. a racist imperial power, rule of law an illusion of privilege. Yes things are awful, but that's nothing new. There is no use trying to change the world, I only want to understand the things I'm interested in. And besides, why should I invest energy into developing great ideas when no one's going to implement them?*

Daughters of educated men, recipients of scholarships and affirmative action opportunities, radical teachers and scholars! We are the embodiment of change. If we see the illusions, we can help find some practical truths. Feminist philosophers! Shimmering in your hands are the elements and alchemies, the complex concepts and analyses we need in these strange and sobering times. How could you be so certain it would not be rewarding to move your own understanding and experience into action, or even policy?

Perhaps you don't want new responsibilities. You are already working as hard as you can, teaching your classes, writing your essays, reading and tending your family and home. You feel guilty for not doing more—you always imagined you'd be a wily revolutionary under totalitarianism—but you're exhausted with no time to spare. You're appalled by the state of the nation, but it's much more rewarding to focus elsewhere. In the past when you worked with the Democrats, or the local activists, or some society for the good, you only ended up disappointed.

But somehow it doesn't seem like you—you who are so logical, you whose personal is so political—to give up that easily with so much at stake. *Because I've seen you—fighting for sex rights, fighting technological disaster, fighting for fair wages and benefits, fighting homophobia, struggling against racism, struggling to be good parents, good lovers, working for peace, working for the man, working for the good of the institution, making ends meet, making meetings, teaching disciplines, teaching politics, beating odds.* If the Democrats are clueless, teach them a lesson. The locals entrenched? Then give them a kick. If the society's got problems, then start your own caucus, or vigil or party or book club or gang.

But I do know how tired everyone is, how much apathy we face, how difficult it can be to devise new tactics in the face of such relentless and powerful adversaries. That is why if I were queen, and hoping to resolve the terrible hijacking of democracy, I wouldn't gather you around a seminar table, or call you to a conference. We don't need another conference. We need rejuvenation!

And so I would call you to a circle of fire. I'd invite you to bring your own pile of stuff: maps and books and memories and records, magic markers, statistics, stories, and gear. We would work for days and late into the night, with great snacks and rowdy dancing breaks. We'd find ways to cooperate. We'd navigate, and deviate. We'd pass a sacred pipe, and if enthusiasm warranted, we'd promise to rededicate, investigate, and infiltrate. And then the circle of democratic wisdom would broaden, through our organizing and involvement, our teaching and writing, our societies, connections, and e-mail lists.

Along the way we'd leave a trail of ashes—for the great-grandchildren who will want to know how women generated hope and justice during the strange years at the beginning of the century. With any luck, our ashes would arouse their admiration.