Book Review

Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities

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Solnit, R. (2016). *Hope in the dark: Untold histories, wild possibilities*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

We live in bewildering times; truth is elastic, privacy is a fiction, right-wing populism is spreading, climate change is looming, and inequality and human suffering seem to be immutable features of our present-day existence (see Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2014). As a student in Brock University's PhD in Educational Studies program, my readings have offered up critical pedagogy as the most potent vehicle for tackling neoliberalism, overturning market-driven educational policies, and inspiring young learners to hold the powerful accountable and enact social change. I am struck by the absurdity of those expectations. Although I consider myself a social justice educator, I admit to having trouble comprehending how a few devoted teachers committed to sparking students' critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) can transform our learners and the multitude of problems that confront the world around us.

Then I found Rebecca Solnit. She has forced me to re-think my cynicism, re-boot my activist heart, and dare to feel a small flicker of hope. Solnit's slim volume, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (3rd ed.), elegantly makes the case for hope and optimism in an uncertain, unknowable world. Solnit claims it is in the space of uncertainty that hope, and the belief in possibilities, can flourish. Her volume was first published in 2004, in response to the wave of despair that followed the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. The book takes a narrative approach to the study of hope, drawing from a broad reading of environmental, political and cultural history, to argue that the record for transformative victories has long been overlooked. The author's aim is to shine a light on forgotten stories of success, to demonstrate how those histories are connected to the impressive achievements of present-day movements for change.

Solnit is an American journalist, activist, and author. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, presents a new reading of history, illustrating how change happens and is unfolding in the present. This third edition of the book contains 21 short chapters, plus three essays. Her work is intended for a general audience, and while academics may be less than satisfied with the lack of depth in her historical analysis, Solnit's voice is exuberant and her stories are engaging, making the readability of the text one of its strengths.

The book charts worldwide events over several decades and the rise of movements for climate, racial and economic justice. Chapter 7 is devoted to the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas Mexico, which rejects violent military confrontation and critiques the dynamics of

power, previous revolutions, capitalism, colonialism, and traditional Marxism. Solnit argues the Zapatistas have articulated a new form of political discourse that has caught the imaginations of activists globally, and whose legacy is still being written.

Solnit asserts that we are living in an extraordinary time of transformative movements, heroes and shifts in consciousness, as evidenced by Black Lives Matter, the climate justice movement, and resurgent feminism. The author explains that change is rarely straightforward; it can have a long gestational period, and often significant victories go unrecognized because they are no longer apparent to us. One of her most intriguing examples of how unpredictable change can be is the Arab Spring uprising of 2011. The beginning of the insurgency is often traced to the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, but Solnit tracks it back to past events and the quiet organizing that was taking place out of sight, and to:

the comic book about Martin Luther King and civil disobedience that was translated into Arabic and widely distributed in Egypt shortly before the Arab Spring. You can tell of King's civil disobedience tactics being inspired by Gandhi's tactics, and Gandhi's inspired by Tolstoy and the radical acts of noncooperation and sabotage of the British women suffragists. So the threads of ideas weave around the world and through the decades and centuries (p. xv).

Solnit also makes a provocative argument to challenge the seemingly intractable power and reach of global capitalism. She observes most of the ways in which we carry out our daily lives are essentially anti-capitalist, from our commitments to family life, our friendships, avocations, to memberships in social, political and spiritual organizations. Even more thought-provoking are the words of feminist writer Ursula LeGuin, in reference to the French Revolution: "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings" (p. 126). While many political observers believe that democracy is in serious trouble, Solnit's view is that democracy is flourishing. The chapter, "Looking Backward: The Extraordinary Achievements of Ordinary People" (2009), revisits her previous research into disaster response. Contrary to popular belief, it is usually calmness, generosity and kindness that prevail in the face of catastrophes. From testimony gathered after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the London Blitz of World War Two, New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina, and 9/11, survivors find ways to act, organize and engage in deeply meaningful ways. Solnit draws a parallel between disasters and revolutions; she claims that through disruption and improvisation, new roles and identities are forged, and there is an exhilarating sense that anything is possible.

Solnit's writing is often beautiful and intensely personal, drawing on her own experiences through decades of activism. She quotes from authors across disciplines, including Virginia Woolf, Paolo Freire, Naomi Klein and Vaclav Havel. Since the text's publication, some of Solnit's exemplars of popular leadership have become tarnished. Brazil's first working-class president, "Lula" da Silva, is now in jail for corruption (Watson, 2018). Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is seen as complicit in the genocide of Rohingyas in Myanmar (Darusman, 2018), and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's image as a champion of feminism, Indigenous rights and the environment has lost its shine (Laidlaw, 2019).

Activists might critique *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* for failing to articulate a blueprint for action, and as previously noted, scholars may find many of Solnit's case histories lack depth. For example, her examination of the Arab Spring uprising would have benefitted from a more detailed exploration of the movement's ties to Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi and the women's suffrage movement. Though for many readers, Solnit's volume will echo the writing of Victor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning* for its uplifting and intelligent prose.

As a classroom teacher and novice scholar I found my spirits buoyed while reading Solnit's work. My thinking has shifted from a "pedagogy of the depressed" (Giroux, 2001), to an openness to the "wild possibilities" that spring from hope (Solnit, 2016). I find that I approach teaching and scholarship with a perspective that is grounded in an emergent hope, one that acknowledges the tensions and contradictions that arise in the practice of hope. As Paolo Freire (1994) explains: "Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope dissipates ... and turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can turn into tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope" (p.3). In fact, this is exactly what Solnit's volume provides: an education in hope.

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