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the adventure of
hope

MARY ZOURNAZI

Hope: New Philosophies for Change

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Hope is a difficult book to summarise, and after living with it for a little while and letting it sink in, I've come to the conclusion that this is to be expected. As Sydney philosopher Mary Zournazi explains in both her introduction and epilogue, the project was conceived in difficult times. Zournazi began thinking about hope in 1999, fuelled by 'anger, injustice and hopelessness' (15) at personal circumstances and the political climate, particularly in Australia. While cultural studies has infamously been subtitled the 'reformer's science', and Zournazi's project bears this out: an evaluation of hope as a catalyst to social change. In addition, it is a timely and compelling rebuke to the parochialist fraud of conservative national governments whose success, as Zournazi puts it so aptly, 'lies in reworking hope in a negative frame. Hope masquerades as a vision, where the passion and insecurity felt by people become part of a call for national unity and identity, part of a community sentiment and future ideal of what we imagine ourselves to be.' (15)

The substance of this book is a series of recorded conversations held in 2000 with twelve international philosophers and writers, some with follow-up meetings or extended dialogue by fax, email or telephone. The project was first supported as a radio feature by the ABC, and after further translation, revision and research, it was published as a collection of conversations in 2002. To an extent, this accounts for it being a little awkward to read from beginning to end, even though each conversation is tightly edited into a narrative of ideas and the interviews are grouped into clearly explained sections: The Elements of Hope, A

Politics of Hope, and Revolutionary Hope. Nevertheless, the density of these exchanges and the range of scholarly and life experiences canvassed here makes this a collection to be re-read a few times before the connections between the pieces become familiar.

However, this project's time span also proves compelling in terms of the book's central interest in developing an ethics and a politics of compassionate hope in times of great crisis. Only later did Zournazi realise that she had been discussing hope and revolution with Julia Kristeva in her Paris office when the first plane hit the World Trade Centre on September 11 2001. The conjunction seems relevant in two ways. First, for a project born out of a meditation on the possibility that the future might still contain surprises, this must have seemed an almost overwhelming demonstration of the incapacity of the Western imagination to prepare for something with no apparent precedent. This was among the strangest lessons of the event: how utterly the routines, protocols and hardware of Western national security had been undone by a philosophic (rather than military or techno-scientific) shift in the realm of what could be contemplated as revolutionary action.

Second, while the events of September 11 are now often taken to define the contemporary unforeseen, they have radically educated the West as to its complacency about difference of opinion in the world community. That these events had complex, careful histories of preparation, and that to some extent they were *foreseeable* even as the evidence was overlooked, speaks to this project quite clearly: whatever

form it takes, whatever aspiration it fixes on, hope always enunciates the difference between the present and the future, and so sends us constantly back to the past in search of the lessons of predictability. In seeking obsessively to identify the moment at which the first step was taken in the journey towards such a vivid and fatal collision of incompatible hopes and aspirations, Western news media returned again and again to the migratory patterns of young Arab men: at what point did this one or that one enter the country? Who were their friends? Where and what did they study? What did their neighbours notice? Beneath this superficial search for the practical steps which led to the execution of the plan lay a more generalised unease that still finds only cautious expression: what parts of the global political contest for land and hope had led to the situation where this plan seemed noble in the first place?

Whatever could have been observed, deduced and, above all changed about this event, September 11 casts its long shadow over all of the conversations that began before it, including those in this book. Looking back at a time that now seems peculiarly sheltered, we notice a poignancy to those conversations preoccupied with the nature of hope embodied in the everyday. But at the same time, in these discussions of the experience of the migrant, the traveller, the scientist and the teacher is a quiet prediction of the impact of global change within precisely these everyday cultures of self-evaluation. Christos Tsiolkas and Gayatri Spivak illustrate the combination of personal opportunity and cultural fracture occasioned by travel and education with stories of tiny but

critical crises of language within families, above all between parents and children. Nikos Papastergiadis reflects on the migrant experience of language learning as one of frustration that generates the constant energy of hope—in other words, hope as despair's near miss. This again connects to Spivak's discussion of the moment of crisis when a learned language suddenly becomes like the mother tongue: Spivak refers to this as a moment of hope, subtly recasting hope as that which emerges at the very instant when the previously hoped-for is achieved.

This core question—whether or not what is hoped for can ever be achieved, or whether hope is itself the salve that enables the preservation of structural inequities—is addressed with characteristic frankness in Zournazi's conversation with Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Where other contributors reflect on the way in which hope is the opposite of despair (in other words, as a pragmatic response to specific events), Mouffe and Laclau's formulation of the 'hegemonic game' positions hope in a manner closer to Papastergiadis, occasioned by lack, but in itself quite unspecific. Hope exists in collaboration with power, precisely because power cannot be refunded without the achievement of (or decline into) stasis. This connects, I believe, to the ways in which Ghassan Hage here also draws out the joyous momentum of hope as anti-static (and therefore maximised by collaboration with others). Hage connects Spinoza's formulation of joy to Bourdieu's notion of the accumulation of symbolic capital as *raison d'être*; (153) and in a later

section, Brian Massumi takes similar account of Spinoza's idea of joy as affirmative rather than shallowly aspirational. (241)

As these minor linking details between ideas, questions and points of reference begin to become concrete, something of the extraordinary experience of having these conversations in the first place—across distance, language, continents, and disciplines—is conveyed. These multiply connected reflections are complementary approaches to the analysis of something so fundamental to the energy of human development that it requires us to look backwards and forwards simultaneously, at all times, from all disciplinary positions. There are indeed many other writers engaged in the same project, and hope seems to be performing a particular signifying function in cultural reflection at the moment, in enabling us to think in troubled times. So what is it that makes hope different from that now-so-slightly-retro rhetorical figure of desire, which proved such a political frustration for movements seeking social change in the 1970s? Somewhere in those many discussions of desire as the co-dependent of lack, feminism in particular seemed to lose the sense that real political change was achievable. In *Hope*, Zournazi wisely turns the conversation to the formulations of possibility that were conceived under early Marxism, challenging and reconvening them for a century now dominated by already changed patterns of communication, migration, capital flow, virtuality, and economic opportunity for some. Here we see most clearly that hope lies in the as-yet-indescribable connections between events, ideas, memes, bits,

and signs, for which Michel Serres rustles up the useful term ‘desmology’—‘not so much the state of things, as the relations between them’. (204)

In seeking to understand the role that relations between things play in our understanding of the state of things, I find the most hopeful of Zournazi’s contributors to be Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers, who seems less convinced than Mouffe of the structural inevitability of hope’s mirage effect. Stengers takes the greater risk of pointing out that we really do not know what the future will hold:

I do think it may well be that our human history will be cut short, and we will never know what could have been possible, but even if that happens it will not be the ‘truth’ of our history. Nobody may claim the final truth about what humans are capable of. Life is an adventure and indeed some adventures have a bad end, but the end is not the moral of the adventure. (250)

If Zournazi and her contributors are right, the great potential of these dialogues is to enable us to confront the full scope of this possibility, and to encourage certain acts of speculation and rethinking.

For writers and scholars seeking to collaborate in devising an organised, effective and hopeful politics of change, rather than simply to survive the cumulative logic of shifts and surprises occasioned outside our understanding of the world, the real question is whether

the academy in its present state can contribute to the public conversation about world events and in so doing can change the nature of the thinkable. The evidence of this collection is hopeful in the fullest sense.

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