

NOT HOPE, BUT FAITH

ECE TEMELKURAN

Revolution is a word made of blood. It is history's most exquisite daemon asking for human sacrifice. Perhaps that is why throughout human history the term is pronounced more carelessly by the young, those clueless both about death and the consuming ordinariness of a long life. It is the crazy diamond.

It is the sweetest word, however. Like love and rage, lust and dignity, it electrifies a nerve in humans that turns the ordinary man into David. The word induces the illusion of being bigger and stronger than we actually are and makes us so. Revolution, even one mention of it in a loud voice, immediately builds a universe of emotions where there is no tomorrow, gifting us with the ultimate liberation from all fear and every drop of existential boredom. A giant whirlpool fans out everything that is not pure enough for the zenith of human existence and concentrates an iron seed of togetherness in joy for the many. Yet, revolution — as has been repeatedly proven in modern history — is a hungry beast that eats the most beautiful among us, leaving behind the mediocre to rule the ruins of our dream of building heaven on earth. And in today's world, it is nearly impossible to convince people of the possibility of a utopia when

the ticking of the countdown to the physical demise of the planet is so loud. Thus, we need a better word for our times — a new *pathos* that is less bloodthirsty and more reasonable.

Today, there is political inertia that is curiously disproportionate in the face of the urgent polycrisis our globe is experiencing. Yet, funnily enough, there are plenty of ideas for what to do to reverse the dangerous current of history. There is enough potential political energy waiting to be transformed into kinetic energy. There is enough rage, pain, and indignity to be mobilized. Unfortunately, however, lethargy is more present than it was a few decades ago. And as a code for the curious silence, a ghost word hovers over our political debates and the wide-ranging worrying topics, from climate catastrophe to the crisis of capitalism. The word hope, with its soft hands, has been abducting every conversation worldwide for the last decade. There is a reoccurring, almost tiring demand for hope. And to understand the reason for the current political lethargy, we should look more closely into the word hope and the insistent demand for it. Because only when we reveal the angel-faced perniciousness of hope can we enlarge our lexicon of politics and find a better term, or rather a *pathos*, to replace the word revolution. And maybe then we might even have sufficient stamina to work towards the dogma, that big idea to follow to change the world, the system.

“Is there hope?” It’s a question I’ve been asked countless times in several languages in numerous countries. After writing a book demonstrating that rising rightwing populism is a global phenomenon, and that a new form of fascism is a natural and consistent consequence of the neoliberal politics of the last five decades, when the audiences were convinced enough that full-force fascism is a close-by political possibility, this question of hope landed at the end of every talk I gave. Every time a member of the audience voiced it, the texture of the silence in the room became a lead-like substance, even though the word hope is supposed to induce a feather-like sense of lightness. The heaviness caused by the mention of the word meant only one thing: Hope calls for hopelessness louder than any other word. It is declared only because its antonym is more present and dominant than itself. However, the word and its presence in political conversation have several different and critical repercussions.

Hope is too fragile a word for our harsh times. If the term describing the central struggle in our age is survival — and it is — then the word hope is not only useless but also irrelevant. Survival is the mode of existence where a person never asks for hope and just keeps going. For those trying to survive, life is built on words such as *nevertheless*, *despite*, and *against all odds*. The person can spare no time convincing himself to continue the struggle for survival, he just survives. With a certain emotional numbness, he does the things required to be alive and remain standing. Imagine a miner under the rubble trying to dig out of the debris with his hands despite not seeing a single ray of light. Picture a refugee who is certain that he'll be sent back once he reaches the shore yet swims towards the land nevertheless, or a Covid patient trying to inhale just one more time, against all odds. None of us is any different than the miner or the refugee — as the human species, we are on the verge of extinction, politically and otherwise. Our daily comforts and the general nitty-gritty of life are distracting enough to make us forget the dire reality, yet this is where humanity stands today. Asking for hope or demanding proof of its existence is not only a waste of time but also reduces the strength dedicated to our struggle for survival.

Hope is too inconsequential a concept to be a component of political thinking. And the way to prove this is whenever the question of hope arises, to respond “What if there is hope? What would it change in your political actions tomorrow?” Or even better: “What if there is no hope? What would you be doing differently tomorrow?” The silence you get as the answer to these two questions is enough evidence that the question of hope does nothing but paralyze the political conversation by steering it into a cul-de-sac. In that endless cul-de-sac are the fake prophets of hope, enslaving the masses with their need for hope to act, and people who are woolgathering long enough to dismiss their initial and inherent political agency.

Having said all this, one should not be so cruel as to disregard the hopelessness of the masses. It is needless to deny that we all feel like the meek villagers terrified by the Goliath of the polycrisis. As the prize-winning movie of 2022 proclaimed, “Everything Everywhere All at Once.” Unless we are too immersed in political work to busy ourselves with procrastination, the depth and the scale of the polycrisis leave us with two

options: to develop numbness or to be overwhelmed. Both states of mind are impenetrable for fragile words such as hope. Thus, we need a sharp and mighty word with which to arm ourselves. That word is faith — faith in humankind and in politics. Hope is a placeholder term for the concept of a reason. When people ask for hope, they ask for a reason to get up and fight back against Goliath. And this is because our “raison d’être” for political action was stolen from us approximately five decades ago when the slogan “There is no alternative” (TINA) took center stage. “There is no alternative,” declared a woman with an Asprey bag and an old cowboy with American glee.¹ On both sides of the Atlantic, the rulers of global politics and finance ordered the people of the world to give up their political agency, in exchange for free markets and capitalist globalization. Even though the order was implemented through brutality and oppression, in the end it was so successful that two generations have grown up being convinced that politics is too dirty to be involved in, the economy is too complex to be handled by politics, and there is no longer the need to think beyond the current system. That was when, without knowing it, the majority pledged to believe in the neoliberal definition of a human — a self-centered, selfish, competitive, bastardly being that doesn’t deserve to be loved or sacrificed for through political action. That’s how we lost our faith in humans, the ugly beings. And that’s when we lost our inherent desire for politics, our *raison d’être* for political action — which, until then, had been the blind faith of humankind accompanied by the elation of doing politics with and for them. Thus, today’s maddening political lethargy and the sheepish masses constantly asking the wrong question, asking about hope.

Faith — secular faith in humankind and politics — fits the needs of our times, for it, more than any other word, consists of words such as *nevertheless*, *nonetheless*, and *despite*. It signifies the magic ability of our kind that gives us that much-needed *conviction* — as Yeats once put it — to do the consuming and thankless work the current political state of the world calls for. When the world doesn’t need a revolution but rather a transformation, what we need is determined patience, a maddening level of forgiveness, and the stubbornness of an evangelical.

1 I am, of course, referring to the politicians Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

Transformation, a word that cannot promise us the handsome heroes that revolutions do, nor does it give us the hype of the all-out rebellion, in fact asks much more from us than a revolution does. It is the least bloodthirsty tool capable of changing the world into a more humane place. However, the struggle — the blood, sweat, and tears — that it calls for is no less than the revolution. The courage it requires has to be more sustainable, and the conviction it needs is far more formidable. Because the emotional stamina required for one to keep one's moral and political spine straight is present abundantly in a revolution. In contrast, the transformation depends on one's faith in the journey despite the impossibility of the destination.

Faith is a moral and political stance that needs no proof. It needs miracles. Faith is a relentless force that knows no surrender and never steps back. It gives us the pathos that is lacking in each of us, thanks to the deeply engrained cynicism of our times, which makes us terrified of looking naive. It is the force we need when people are no longer moved by or even interested in facts. Faith is the source of strength that enables us to sacrifice our lives to change the world, providing us with the scarcest mineral in today's world: meaning. By doing so, it connects us, once again, to the undamaged definition of the human, a creature that cannot live without meaning. An animal that is intrinsically inclined to sacrifice itself to and for meaning.

Once meaning is present, the joy of political action follows — another component of near political history that we were made to forget by being told insistently that we — the ones who had once thrown ourselves into selfless political action for the good of people — were now defeated. The stories of our defeat have been told back to us so many times that we have forgotten the very essence of our political action: the joy of togetherness in the struggle, the mightiness of political friendship, and the wholeness felt when the self becomes one with the mass. And that is the miracle faith calls for. And these are the concepts — joy and the power of togetherness — that we need to discuss repeatedly to reinvent our faith in humankind and political action, not because there will be an ultimate victory at the end, but because we cannot risk the ultimate defeat of the human species.

To integrate such concepts and thinking into our political debate, we need to leave our condescending view of the politics of emotions behind. Considering the fact that the politics of emotions is mastered by the global rightwing populists, we, the anti-fascists, the climate activists, and the defenders of social equality, need to take the fears and the learnt numbness of the masses seriously and create a new lexicon of politics to move the crowds. Only then can we achieve the largest togetherness that the Goliath of the polycrisis demands from us. Only then can we find in ourselves the power to do the massive work to mend democracy, which has become mere theatrics of itself without any social justice. Then maybe we can once again talk about faith in democracy and find the faithful who will fight to preserve it.