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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pettifor, A. (2018). The Authors of "Miracles": A Plea to Act Politically. *Soziopolis: Gesellschaft beobachten*. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-82638-7>

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Ann Pettifor | Essay | 10.12.2018

The Authors of "Miracles"

A Plea to Act Politically

Am vergangenen Freitag, 7. Dezember 2018, wurde der britisch-südafrikanischen Ökonomin Ann Pettifor der Hannah-Arendt-Preis für Politisches Denken in Bremen überreicht. Soziopolis dokumentiert sowohl die Dankesrede der Preisträgerin als auch [die auf sie gehaltene Laudatio der Philologin Monika Tokarzewska](#). Wir bedanken uns herzlich bei den beiden Autorinnen sowie dem Hannah-Arendt-Preis für politisches Denken e. V. für die freundliche Erlaubnis zu Veröffentlichung. - Die Red.

If I may, I would like to begin by echoing Hannah Arendt's words when she accepted the Lessing Prize in 1959 from the Free City of Hamburg.

The prize is "an honour (that) gives us a forcible lesson in modesty. The honour not only reminds us emphatically of the gratitude we owe the world – but in particular the Senate of the City of Bremen and the Heinrich Boll Foundation; it also, to a very high degree, obligates us to it ... By accepting it we are not only strengthened in our position within the world but are accepting a kind of commitment to it."

Her address then was titled: *On Humanity in Dark Times*.

It is both extraordinary but also humbling and gratifying that, given the times we are living through, the Senate of the City of Bremen and the Heinrich Böll Foundation should consider making this award to me, a British citizen. By accepting it I am obligated to maintain my commitment to the world.

I would like to thank the Foundation and the City of Bremen, not just for the award, but also for the opportunity to rediscover Hannah Arendt. Reading her work again has elicited emotions generally associated with 'falling in love'. I have rediscovered the blinding clarity of her thought (even while her writing can be pretty dense!); her forensic and fearless investigations of the truth (as in the Eichmann trial) and her fierce courage when her work was met with outrage.

It would have been extraordinary to have known her, to have sipped coffee with her in a

noisy café, while she puffed away at a cigarette ... It would have been marvellous to have been one of her students. It is both an honour and a delight, today, to find myself standing here, vicariously associated with a woman as internationally renowned, as intellectually courageous and as formidable as Hannah Arendt.

She lived through terrible *Dark Times*. Today both in Europe and in our globalised world, we face some of the same challenges her generation faced – of a frightening rise in anti-semitism, racism, nationalism and even fascism. We can only tackle these threats by engaging and acting politically. And because politics is freedom Hannah Arendt argued, we must use the opportunity of the politics we have created to protect our freedom.

I am hopeful that we can transform the human condition, that we can overcome the threats we face. We can do it thinking with forensic clarity, by interaction with our fellow human beings, and then by political action – acting with the kind of fierce courage she demonstrated.

That is not to say, that there will not be more dark times. There will be. But, rest assured, there will be transformation too.

Bertolt Brecht famously asked:

“In the dark times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, – he replied – there will also be singing.

About the dark times.”¹

Nothing in our time is more dubious it seemed to Hannah Arendt, than our attitude to the world. “A world and public to which we owe the space into which we speak and in which we are heard.” Politics, she argued, deals with the coexistence and association of *different* men (and women). Politics arises in what lies *between men and women* and is established as relationships.

As a white South African I grew up under the racist and repressive Afrikaner Nationalist regime of apartheid – that denied millions of black and white people the freedom of

association and coexistence. Black people were by dint of their skin colour, denied the freedom of a safe and secure existence from the cradle to the grave. They were denied the human rights that were the privilege of alienated white South Africans.

But above all the Afrikaner Nationalist regime, which governed for nearly 50 years from 1947–1994 denied black South Africans the freedom to enter politics – not just the freedom to vote and to elect a government of their choice.

But also the freedom of association.

As far back as 1950 censorship was enshrined in internal security legislation based on the Suppression of Communism Act. This prohibited the quoting of banned persons as well as of publications and organisations, including the African National Congress (ANC), South African Congress of Democrats, Pan African Congress (PAC), Defence and Aid, South African Communist Party and the African Resistance Movement. The ANC led by Nelson Mandela was only unbanned forty years later, on 2 February, 1990. Black South Africans were denied the right to be free to act politically.

That taught me never to mock, deride or to refrain from politics, because where there is politics, there is freedom. For Hannah Arendt *the meaning of politics was freedom*. And that freedom was not understood negatively – in other words it was not understood ‘as not being ruled over or enslaved.’ Instead it was freedom that enabled the polity – the people – to engage, to share, to understand and then to act – politically.

“This freedom to interact in speech with many others [...] is not the end purpose of politics”, wrote Arendt. “It is rather the substance and meaning of all things political. In this sense, politics and freedom are identical, and wherever this kind of freedom does not exist, there is no political space in the true sense.”²

So it should come as no surprise that I am the product of the South African condition of my childhood and adolescence. I am fortunate in that I am political. I have endured an unfree and largely apolitical society.

As a young person I had no choice but to rebel against that unfreedom, and engage in politics. To be human in South Africa under apartheid - to understand my racist, colonised and divided community “in its objectivity and visibility from all sides” – it was necessary to “interact in speech with many others and experience the diversity that the world always is,

in its totally.”

To be locked up behind the segregated and gated communities of white South Africans – was to be less than human.

At the time – in the late 1960s as a student in Johannesburg - politics was hard, it was dangerous, and it seemed hopeless. But it was not hopeless. Our actions – our determination to find ways to interact with black students; to protest against a heavily armed and apparently impregnable racist regime; to internationalise our protests by inviting Bobby Kennedy to address students at the University – all these small actions gave us – and ultimately the country – greater freedom.

For me the news of the release of Nelson Mandela in 1989 and the collapse of apartheid thereafter – was a “miracle”. That is why I am optimistic about the future because I have lived through and experienced the politics of great transformations.

I have lived through an era when seemingly overnight the apparently impregnable Soviet Union collapsed, Germany was reunited, and Europe transformed. I have played a leading part in a global movement – Jubilee 2000 – which mobilised – and politicised – millions of people in more than 60 countries to persuade rich powerful creditor nations to cancel the debts of the poorest countries. At the 25th G8 summit held in Cologne in June, 1999, Chancellor Schröder and his fellow leaders began the process – the “miracle” – of cancellation (in nominal terms) of more than 100 billion US-Dollar of sovereign debt owed by 35 of the poorest countries of the world.

Back in the 1990s, and through the Jubilee 2000 movement we broke new ground in the use of the internet and web to reach out to, discuss and debate and mobilise millions of people behind our goal of debt cancellation by the year 2000. The early internet gave us the freedom to work together, to think and debate across national boundaries, and to act politically – to transform the balance of power between international sovereign creditors and sovereign debtors. To come together, to campaign, to advocate to begin to transform the human condition.

And now we must come together to tackle the triple crunch we face: a globally interconnected and systemic financial system prone to crisis; climate breakdown and third, the ‘energy crunch’ brought on by the transformation away from fossil fuels necessary to mitigate climate breakdown. For in these dark times, and to add to human anxiety, we face

an even graver threat: that of planetary collapse. It is a threat so grave that it repels the mind. The scale of the danger is incomprehensible to most citizens – beyond our imaginations.

Just as we were unable to envision the global financial crisis of 2007 to 2009 – and were stunned by the scale and severity of the crisis. But while it is something we *must* imagine, the danger of climate breakdown is no longer an imaginary one for those in California, or the Middle East, or in Greece or in India – that have lost homes, livelihoods and lives to fires and floods –

Ten years after the GFC, the ‘fantastic, self-regulating machinery’ that drives the global financial system has not been brought under democratic management. That, in my view, is because economists, politicians, but also we, the public, ignored the activities of the finance sector. We women believed that finance was for ‘men in pin-stripe suits’ – those that had mastered what we thought of as the complexities of the monetary system, mortgage-backed securities, collateralised debt obligations, structured investments ... and so on.

And so we left globalised finance to ‘the masters of the universe.’ Our ignorance rendered us helpless, but also impotent. We can no longer afford to leave finance to the few active in global capital markets. We women especially must get a grip on a subject, which I can assure you, is not rocket science. It might be clothed in language designed to hide and disguise the real activities of the sector – but it is not rocket science. We have to strengthen our understanding of the international financial architecture, and the monetary system.

I know that can be done, because millions of ordinary men and women, many thousands of German men and women, got a grip of the international system of sovereign debt – in all its complexity – took action and transformed the economic possibilities of more than 30 low income countries.

So understanding, shared discussion, and debate are vital to change.

We cannot transform that which we do not know exists; or that which we do not understand.

We were seduced by the sirens of the sector. As long as we could use our credit cards, we were made to feel content. As long as we could draw money from machines wherever we travelled around the world, we were just fine with globalisation. Above all, we were

seduced into using the finance to go shopping – to expand consumption. Like cars arriving at petrol stations, we happily stocked up on financial fuel at our banks or online – without understanding whether the financial fuel was sustainable. And we used – or were persuaded by financial capitalism to use – the money we borrowed or earned – to expand consumption. And so EasyMoney fuelled the Easy ‘family of brands’. EasyEnergy, EasyProperty, EasyShopping – and EasyJet ...

One of the reasons I believe it important that we should get political about finance – that we should learn about it, understand the system, engage with others, combine and ultimately organise – is because I am so convinced that there is a straight line between EasyMoney, EasyShopping and EasyJet. In other words, between deregulated credit creation, consumption and toxic emissions.

Until the Green movement understands that we cannot keep these activities in their separate silos – that we must first regulate the financial system if we are to manage consumption and reduce toxic emissions – until then our efforts to prevent and mitigate climate breakdown will be futile.

Of course our profligate burning of fossil fuels has already led to climate breakdown – and we have been too slow, too frightened, too greedy to tackle it. Our addiction to fossil fuels has held us captive.

We have not had the freedom to act politically to help prevent planetary collapse.

Until now.

Some, mainly young people, are escaping from the cage of fossil fuel addiction, and sowing seeds of hope. All over the world, they are campaigning to save the planet, and in some places, calling for a Green New Deal. But perhaps most importantly these young people are active in what many perceive as ‘the belly of the beast’ – the United States Congress. They are led by a young woman – Alexandria Ocasio Cortez of New York – and by a group known as [Justice Democrats](#). Immediately after the recent midterm elections, they used their freedom to create space for debate about alternatives to an economy based on fossil fuels – and to act politically. They occupied a part of the US Congress to demand change.

Ten years before that, in 2007 a much older group of people – a clutch of economists, energy experts and environmentalists (including Caroline Lucas the Green MEP at the time) – for

more than a year assembled regularly in our small apartment near Baker St, London. We came together “to draft a document that would tackle the “triple crunch”- the combination of a credit-fuelled financial crisis, accelerating climate change and soaring energy prices - underpinned by what we then wrongly thought was an encroaching peak in oil production. These three overlapping events threatened, we argued, to develop into a perfect storm, the like of which has not been seen since the Great Depression. To help prevent this from happening we drafted and then in 2008 published [a Green New Deal](#).

After launching our report, we “interacted in speech with many others to experience the diversity that the world always is, in its totality.”

Many backed our report, including distinguished leaders of the United Nations and the leaders of small exposed economies. It was, as you all know, adopted by the Heinrich Böll Foundation who published *Toward a Transatlantic Green New Deal* in 2009; [Green New Deal in Ukraine? The Energy Sector and modernizing a National Economy](#) in 2010, and *Protests for Social Justice: A Green New Deal for Israel* in 2011. It was used as part of the campaign of the European Green Party in the EU Parliamentary election of 2009. Jill Stein, the Green Presidential candidate in the United States used it in her campaigns of 2012 and 2016.

Then in early 2018 two Americans knocked on my door. They were Zack Exely and Saikat Chakrabarti of the Justice Democrats. They had been challenged by opponents on their economics. How did they expect to finance the transformation of the economy away from fossil fuels – the Green New Deal? They had read the short book *The Production of Money* and wanted to work together with British economists on the question of how *monetary policy* (not just fiscal policy) could be managed, to finance the Green New Deal. They were particularly impressed by Keynes’s assertion in his famous speech to Yale University in June 1933, ‘[National Self Sufficiency](#)’ that, thanks to the sound development of monetary systems, underpinned by vital institutions, *what we can create, we can afford. That we can afford what we can do* – within our own physical limits, and within the limits of the ecosystem.

Shortly after that, Zack and Saikat met up with Ms Osario-Cortez and persuaded her to challenge the sitting New York Democrat in the primaries. To everyone’s astonishment and delight, she won. Thanks to their political activity – thanks to their freedom to act politically – demands for a Green New Deal are now moving into the US political mainstream.

This gives me hope.

For together we have created the space in which people can interact with words and with action – and in that space politics comes alive and transformations are possible.

Hannah Arendt wrote (in *What is Freedom*) that it is necessary “to be prepared for and expect “miracles” in the political realm. And the more heavily the scales are weighted in favour of disaster, the more miraculous will the deed done in freedom appear ...”

Objectively (men and women) are the beginnings and the beginners ... She wrote:

“The decisive difference between the ‘infinite improbabilities’ on which the reality of our earthly life rests and the miraculous character inherent in those events which establish historical reality is that, in the realm of human affairs, we know the author of the ‘miracles’.

It is men and women who perform them – because they have received the twofold gift of freedom and action and can establish a reality of their own.”

In my life I have witnessed “miracles” performed by men and women. For that reason, and for as long as we are both free and political, I am sustained by hope.

Thank you.

Endnoten

1. Bertolt Brecht / Ralph Manheim, *Poems, 1913–1956*, London 1987, p. 320.
2. Ibid., p. 130.

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Ann Pettifor, Prof. Dr., ist Analystin und Finanzexpertin. Sie leitet das Netzwerk »Policy Research in Macroeconomics« (PRIME) und ist Mitglied der Organisation »New Economics Foundation«. Dort leitet sie den Forschungsbereich Globale Makroökonomik. Sie ist Ehrenmitglied des Forschungszentrums für Politische Ökonomie an der City University in London (CITYPERC), Fellow der New Economics Foundation, London und Vorsitzende des Beratungsgremiums des Economy Research Center des Goldsmiths College. Sie war Mitbegründerin der weltweiten Kampagne »Jubilee 2000«, die die Streichung der Schulden der ärmsten Länder forderte. (Foto: © Foyers Photography Website)

Dieser Beitrag wurde redaktionell betreut von Stephanie Kappacher.

Artikel auf soziopolis.de:

<https://www.sozopolis.de/the-authors-of-miracles.html>