

Politics of Hope

An interview with Rebecca Solnit

In an age of escalating global violence against human and non-human life, writer and historian Rebecca Solnit reminds us that seeds of hope take root in the darkest of times. Her writing, speeches and activism focus on creating change in an increasingly complex ecological and social landscape.

Solnit is a winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award and the author of a dozen books, including her most recent, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. She is a regular contributor to *Orion* magazine and The Nation Institute's *TomDispatch.com* daily newsgram. She will speak at the UO on the politics of hope in turbulent times, examining the histories of progressive movements across the globe and connecting them with today's struggles against ecological destruction and war.

Solnit's talk, "Hope in the Dark," is sponsored by the UO Center for the Study of Women in Society as part of the annual Joy Belsky lecture series. Free and open to the public, the event will be held at 7:30 pm Thursday, Dec. 2 in the Alumni Lounge of Gerlinger Hall on the UO campus, 1468 University St.

You've written about a great paradox of activism — that "Americans so often imagine political participation as something for times of crisis, at best." Do people have to be terrified to act?

No, there are a significant number of people who remain active at all times. It's partly about how far your imagination extends into identifying with people who are suffering, with species that are threatened and places that can disappear, when you're not suffering yourself. There are a great many activists in this country who fight for the environment and social justice even though their own well-being doesn't depend on it. There's a certain amount of obliviousness in this country too, of course.

Are you describing a sort of yin-yang model in which desperate times, such as now, propel activism while comfortable times, such as under Clinton, bring political apathy?

What I see over and over is that there are moments when you see a groundswell, such as [the global protests against the Iraq War on] Feb. 15, 2003, the recent election, and the nuclear freeze movement, when huge masses of people become politically involved. Moments such as these are as motivating as terrible times. People who are committed over the long haul are the embers who never burn out, and the next fire will arise from them.



'change is not an assembly-line product. It's a bolt of lightning, a drop wearing away stone, a gradual emergence, a shift in the balance, one person or a million who drive their dreams into reality.' — REBECCA SOLNIT

Before the Nov. 2 election, you wrote about the international community's negative view of the U.S. How did George W. Bush's re-election affect that view?

I think that those of us who are against Bush in this country are in the same boat as people in the rest of the world who are deeply dismayed that a very narrow majority of Americans who voted — supposedly, if you don't count election fraud — think that environmental devastation, economic disaster, loss of civil rights and endless war are good ideas. One comfort for those of us who voted against Bush is that we are a part of the global majority.

How can America's progressives counter negative images of Americans in the rest of the world?

Not enough of these movements are visible outside the country, and I think even activists are surprised when they hear of these wonderful things happening in the United States. It's important to keep doing what you're doing and to talk to the media at home and abroad.

What message will you bring to your Eugene audience?

"Hope in the Dark" has two strong tenets. One is that the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the environmental movement, and other movements have so powerfully transformed the world that people don't even apprehend how different the world was 40 years ago. Part of activist despair is not remembering our own victories. What would the world be like if we

happen, but change is not an assembly-line product. It's a bolt of lightning, a drop wearing away stone, a gradual emergence, a shift in the balance, one person or a million who drive their dreams into reality.

You have a hopeful message, but in your heart, do you fear four more years under Bush?

Of course! Hope and fear aren't incompatible. I hope that good things will happen, and I recognize that it's not all of one or all of another. We have had victories under Bush; we will have more victories under Bush. John Kerry wasn't exactly the dream prince I was always waiting for, and I think that a lot of his [policies] could have been disappointing at best.

We've lost a lot of things, but we haven't lost everything, and we're not going to. A lot of it, for me, is being stubborn. I refuse to be defeated, and I refuse to be silenced, and I think most of us — those who aren't threatened with prison or deportment — are in a position to take a stand. For middle-class white people, it's actually kind of fun and easy.

Is the left organized enough to combat the conservative corporate government?

Oh God, no. If we were we'd overthrow it. There are victories at the grassroots. And internationally, there are movements that are growing not only in numbers, but in networks and in sophistication. We're coming up on the fifth anniversary of the WTO shutdown in Seattle. That really marks the shift into making alliances with people from the Third World and recognizing the common ground between issues like the environment and labor. We've really won against the WTO. The WTO is paralyzed and failing. That's something that nobody thought would happen five years ago, before the shutdown in Seattle, and it's extraordinary. In Sept. 1999, the WTO was a tank that nobody thought could be stopped. On Sept. 15, 2003 [after the mobilization in Cancun], that tank was spinning its wheels in a ditch, and that's a huge victory. **EW**

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