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Greening the Media

Pessimism of the Intelligence, Optimism of the Will

Facing Trump's anti-environmental policies with brains, humor, and courage

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Lamentations for a disappointing 2016 have rung out. People—some people—were saddened and even traumatized by the British plebiscite to leave the European Union,^[1] the electoral collegians' vote to embrace Donald Trump,^[2] and the Colombian people's referendum to reject a peace accord.^[3] Others don't like the fact that the fourth season of Sherlock resembles a 007 movie.^[4]

These disappointed folks look to 2017 with a mixture of hope and fear. Happy that a revised peace plan was supported by the Colombian congress. Hopeful that Brexit negotiations will not undo the cosmopolitanism and environmental and worker protections that Europe provides the UK. Trusting that the balances to executive authority guaranteed (?) by the bureaucracy, the courts, the mid-terms, and his own folly will limit Trump's autonomy. Concerned that Mr Holmes will engage in too much derring-do and too little intellection. And fearful that hope will not bear the fruit they so desire.

Being disappointed is part of the environmentalist's lot. But so is an insistent sense of feeling positive.

Romain Rolland, the French Nobel laureate of a century ago, called for "pessimism of the intelligence, which penetrates every illusion, and optimism of the will."^[5]

That remarkable blend of thinking realistically while maintaining utopian drives spoke to the radical journalist Antonio Gramsci as he lingered in a Fascist jail during Mussolini's dictatorship.^[6]

In environmental terms, it means facing up to the facts, not the distortions, of climate change and human pollution; facing down mendacious and gullible naysayers; insisting on realistic science education and denouncing supine media coverage that bows before the false idol of capital; and calling for renewed, revitalized laws, regulations, and enforcement by governments in keeping with international standards.

So what does this mean for the United States in the years to come?

In reviewing the dismal records of the two main parties' 2016 Presidential candidates, we found little to inspire from these docile servants of imperial and corporate ideals.^[7]

Trump is both inarticulate and confused in his thinking, so it is very difficult to distinguish his beliefs on one day from another, given the way that he combines stridency with inconsistency and ignorance. But to the extent that the fog sometimes clears, he seems to cast doubt on the science of global warming.^[8] And his Party pours scorn on the world's climate scientists on a routine basis, maintaining that they are selfish careerists.^[9]

Whichever road Trump and his chorines decide to take, they must confront the fact that US businesses have been both stimulated and curbed by environmental law—it represents a reasonably settled body of legislation and precedent that helps corporations decide on investment and managerial policies. Interrupting that process would be chaotic. And trying to get rid of the Environmental Protection Agency, which lest we forget, is a

creature of the Republican Party, would potentially face a Democrat filibuster in the upper house.^[10]

But Trump may dismantle the current White House's Climate Action Plan, which attempts to diminish greenhouse-gas emissions, along with the EPA's Clean Power Plan.^[11] Undermining such initiatives would clear the way for more coal-powered devastation.

And the selection of Supreme Court justices may well be of even greater moment. If Trump serves a full term, and perhaps two, he will have at least one and probably four nominees, thereby potentially giving reactionaries a really clear majority on the Court—virtually for the first time since it tried to destroy the New Deal.^[12] That could play a huge part in the ability of civil society to restrict the Federal government's anti-environment agenda, which they successfully did in defending Bill Clinton's work from George W. Bush.^[13]

Not that Clinton's record was so great. The Democratic Party in general, and the current Obama administration in particular, have dreadful environmental records. Even a dutiful party hack like Al Gore acknowledges the fact.^[14]

So both the current government and the next one raise ecological frowns. The hortatory rhetoric of Obama was excellent, the material performance poor. The rhetoric of Trump is poor, and we await the performance.

One thing is certain. In order to get the message across to the American people, reporters, politicians, and officials, we need to think long and hard about how to use evidence. Clinton was bad at it in her campaign, and Trump simply eschewed it.

But as a way of making and implementing policy, evidence can still matter (though sometimes it works the other way. The 2003 decision to invade Iraq embodied policy-based evidence rather than evidence-based policy).^[15]

So we need to provide citizens, journalists, and our representatives with information and interpretation from science, not ideology; research, not fantasy; mathematics, not accountancy; geography, not profits.

And throughout, while confronting a political climate potentially as risky as the physical one, we must do so with the pessimism of intelligence (confronting very real problems) and optimism of the will (believing that truth can speak to and through power) that Romain Rolland proposed a century ago. His formula has kept many people going through the darkest of days.

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