

Nothing is Something Dangerous

Written by Tanzil Chowdhury

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TANZIL CHOWDHURY, SEP 6 2012

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality” Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Politics is all about talking the talk and (when politicians can be bothered) walking the walk. On the whole, therefore, it is all about *doing*. So an article about *nothing* seems, at first, rather out of place. But often doing nothing can be the biggest act of doing. After all you are *doing* nothing.

Still with me? Good.

Nothing can be coloured in the following shades; apathy, silence and neutrality.

Apathy isn't just synonymous with laziness. We all probably know someone who is more concerned about who is getting voted out of X-Factor than out of the government. Who is to blame for this absence of consciousness is something that many, particularly grassroots and working class organisations, try to determine. Whilst deciphering where apathy is rooted is not the discussion here, one can observe that it often takes one of two forms. Some are *involuntarily disconnected* from any political process because their attention is more captivated by other worldly or spiritual pursuits. Some are *voluntarily disconnected*, disenfranchised by the rampant corruption and isolation of the political process.

Silence is the omission of sound. If a discussion, to which you are a party, is taking place, you may chose not to say anything. Many observe this as abstention; you mate involve oneself in the forum of debate but would stop before the terminus of decision or policy making.

To seek the definition of Neutrality, sections 5[1] and 13[2] of the Hague Convention 1907 provide us with a good start. The legislation imposes duties and obligations upon state parties during peacetime and war, covering everything from conduct regarding trade relations with belligerent states to how to deal with warring troops crossing into your border. Switzerland is often held as the model neutral state having given birth to its neutrality in the Treaty of Paris in 1815.

If we go back to the quote of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, he would postulate that these variations of doing nothing are tantamount to siding with an aggressor. Tutu was of course talking in the context of the brutal white supremacy in South Africa and indeed, this sentiment has since been adopted with respect to the increasing colonisation and occupation of Historical Palestine (of which Tutu is also vocal on).

Let's go from the *macro-* to the *mirco-* and imagine a confrontation between two people in the street. In this confrontation, one person has been accosted by another and it escalates in to a fight. Ignoring for now who is responsible, if we were to walk by and ignore the fracas, are we simply ignoring the situation or have we in fact taken sides? Imagine once again the same situation but the weaker of the two calls out for help; can we still convince ourselves that walking by is remaining neutral?

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Firstly, in order to assess each situation, we have to move the goal posts slightly. In both cases, the issue of whether we are impartial tends to be based on a centrality around ourselves. We think of ourselves in this world as atomised individuals alongside other individuals occupying the same space. But this position is untenable in an increasingly interconnected world. Therefore, we must take a more *holistic* approach.

In the first situation, the weaker party, by virtue of being weaker creates an asymmetry in the *totality* of events of which we are a party. The situation exists not separate from us, but rather with us as a part of it. Because of the asymmetry, doing nothing and walking by is a tacit consent of this present reality *as fact*. It *acknowledges the normalcy* of this reality in that one party is the aggressor and one party is the victim. Therefore, we cannot but help arrive at the same position articulated by Bishop Tutu. This position is more so accentuated in the second situation.

In light of this explanation, apathy/silence/neutrality is as dangerous a position to uphold. Indeed, how can such a position be sustainable in the face of increasing criticism when poverty, misery and war continue to ravage the Earth? Also, it is a position of cowardice; an outer veneer of neutrality and silence can often hide deeper partisanship. Indeed, echoing the words of Malcolm X who once said *'I have more respect for a man who lets me know where he stands, even if he's wrong, than the one who comes up like an angel and is nothing but a devil.'*

But what about the position that neutrality is objectivity? Such a comparison is quite frankly short-sighted. Objectivity is a position supplemented by objective arguments and therefore the objective person is necessitated to make an active choice. A neutral person is not.

Perhaps the danger with such an argument which dissuades against fence sitting is that it would encourage more states to take controversial positions. After all, as we have seen, the *'neutral position'* is often interpreted as siding with the aggressor parties. Thus, we may have opened the flood gates toward hegemonic states arbitrarily justifying *'humanitarian intervention'* or arming certain groups to support proxy wars however, this is still not an argument against the disingenuousness of neutrality.

Either of these three positions place agency with the individual. Indeed it judges withdrawing, abstaining as an acceptable position. But neutrality does in fact entertain ideas which would typically fall out of the purview of mainstream politics. Without assessing the validity of opinion through this stubbornness of neutrality, we may be compelled to include opinions that occupy the far right of the political spectrum. Additionally, silence espouses a lethargy on the part of the initiator. It thinks it demonstrates political sagacity but instead it is airheadedness. And finally apathy is a state of disconnectedness or disillusionment; less an active shun, more a passive sigh.

But the discussion here is merely scratching the surface. As conscious citizens, we must begin to deconstruct the status quo that doing nothing is an inconsequential act. Quite the contrary, it is humanity's hamartia, the wool over the eyes to think that doing nothing, remaining static has no effect on things. But in light of these issues, what about questions of autonomy; are we unwittingly entering into the realms of *'forced choice'* and is ignorance a sacrosanct bliss? By compelling people to *do*, does one accidentally create a dichotomy of *'with us-against us'*? Indeed, is mandating action going to agglutinate power behind the hegemonic tyrants that already monopolise it?

These indeed must be addressed but the tangible effects of *nothing* far outweigh the potential effects of something. The culture of radical and uninformed individualism, that makes doing nothing a reasonable option, must be addressed; from the individual up to the collective. Otherwise the sitting duck may become the snake in the grass.

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[1] Second Hague Convention, Section 5

[2] Second Hague Convention, Section 13