

The Teach In

The banner at the University of Alberta read “Demystifying the ‘Successes’ of War” and the event was called a teach-in, so I had to be there. Not just for the nostalgic value - although it’s true I would wish for every generation of undergrads and the professors who teach them the passion for a social justice cause shared en masse - but also because I felt shamed into it, by a commentary that had appeared that morning in the *Globe and Mail* by Amos Oz, Israeli writer.

Oz was not commenting on the war in Afghanistan: his troubled observations had to do with the war and terror in Israel and the Occupied Territories. No, it wasn’t so much his theme that sent me to the teach-in, it was the fact he is a writer. He’s a novelist and essayist, associated for years with the Israeli peace movement, and if the intractable violence in his homeland hasn’t yet succeeded in discouraging him or shutting him up as a man of peace, who was I, cosy Albertan, to stay at home when there was a teach-in, about the current war in Afghanistan, organized by the students just across the river?

My memory of teach-ins is that they happened on gymnasium floors - the crowds were that big (although this may be a memory of photographs of teach-ins rather than of the real thing) - and that they provided a succession of anti-war professors and really smart (and confident and male) students and teaching assistants who more or less lectured, albeit passionately even rabidly, about what they knew, about the gruesome record of Western colonialism in southeast Asia, the inspiring history of indigenous resistance (always socialist if not Marxist-Leninist), and the urgency of being in solidarity with them, young and middle-class and callow though we were.

Today’s teach-in was not like that. It took place in a corner near a pedway between buildings, with about thirty people standing in a semi-circle listening passively to speakers who competed with the noise of students rushing by between classes. This event was organized by the University of Alberta Coalition Against War and Racism, formed shortly after September 11 last year, and was inspired by the perplexity of wondering “what the hell is going on,” in the words of Rob the moderator. “I mean, I got a subscription to the *Globe and Mail* but you know what? It doesn’t help.”

I took notes, the most useful thing I could think of doing on the spot. And so I noted that the three speakers were all male - in dark blue shirt and lemony-yellow tie, in ring-pierced lower lip and black t-shirt, and in baseball cap and khaki pants respectively - that they each spoke with considerable authority if nervously, the pages of their speeches rattling in their hands, and that they all had much more to say about the perfidy of American policies and actions than of Canadian. (In fact, Canada’s own “complicity” in those policies and actions was raised only once, by a listener, who was misheard by the speaker as having asked about our “complacency.”) Much was made of the fact that the U.S. could have chosen negotiation with not war against the Taliban, that the Revolutionary Alliance of Women of Afghanistan itself deplores the current

(transitional) government's utter lack of support for the Ministry of Women, that the captured soldiers are being held in "brutal custody" in Cuba ("even Charles Manson is better treated in prison," the speaker underscored, and I was touched that someone his age was still keeping track of that monster), that western governments' aid to Afghanistan should be seen as "reparations" for more than twenty years of sponsored war in that country - and (this from an environmental activist) that the current bombing has disturbed the migratory routes of pelicans and the Siberian crane.

And then I left, to go meet a writing deadline.

I began this column by saying I had been shamed in going to this teach-in. What Amos Oz's commentary had provoked in me was the guilty acknowledgement that I, along with the writers' communities that I belong to, have been so inaudible *as writers* on this issue of the impact of the consequences of September 11 on our civic life, Canadian and American. (I was outside the country from October to mid-December so maybe I missed something?) I am thinking of the bellicose "war on terrorism," the criminalization of the right to dissent in the name of our security, the disappearance of the peace and social agendas in the face of rearmament, and the coarsening of public speech in the simplistic polarization of good and evil.

The last time we as a public were subjected to this kind of polemic and rhetoric was not so long ago: remember the NATO bombing campaign in Kosovo and Serbia in 1999, alleged to be humanitarian? The anguished public debate and quarrel was extensive and widespread - pages upon pages in the newspapers, for instance - and fellow Canadians were seen marching in the streets on one or the other side of the campaign, friendships were strained, and even we in the Writers Guild of Alberta rose to the occasion when former president George Melnyk drew up a petition - calling on Prime Minister Chretien to press for the halt in bombing and for the resumption of negotiations with the Yugoslav government - and some of us helped circulate it for signatures among the WGA's members. And you signed.

What is it about this particular military campaign in Afghanistan, in which the civilian casualties now outnumber the dead of the World Trade Centre, that seems to have silenced us and our organizations? Where are the forums and broadsheets, the websites and list-serves, the petitions and editorials that our community of conscience-stricken thinkers and writers could be producing as our modest contribution against the official bafflegab and pernicious propaganda whose interests the war in Afghanistan really serves? Perhaps we are feeling powerless, as I have felt, against the "shoulder to shoulder" wall of power that our continental elites have formed: absolutely nothing that you or I could say will make a difference.

Yet that didn't stop the university students, nor has it stopped the formation of an Edmonton chapter of the international peace activists' group, Women in Black, who stand in silent vigil every Saturday morning at the farmers' market. ("We are all Afghani women," reads one placard). Last December I read of how the Austrian writer Peter

Handke has donated half of the prize money for a literary award he received in November to a museum of Afghan culture in Switzerland which has sheltered more than 13,000 books and 25,000 photos since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980.

Well, some of us may say, at least we are *writing* about some of these subjects in our novels, poems, plays. But then I think of how Nadine Gordimer and Gunter Grass, two very politically committed writers and Nobel Laureates, recently went public with their disappointment in last year's winner, V.S. Naipaul and his denial of any political motivation in his writing. "He was born into a political situation," Gordimer said with indignation. "Writing about colonial structures without ever taking a stance on them is cowardly and pointless." For his part, Grass diagnosed modern German literature as suffering "mostly from writers limiting their subject matter to themselves, looking at their 'own navels.'"

Is it possible we really have nothing to say?

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February 6, 2002
Edmonton