

A Voice

A few days ago I watched a film like no other I have seen. It's a 90 minute documentary composed of old, already filmed records which allow us to watch and to listen to Captain Thomas Sankara during the years from 1983 to 1987 when he was President of the small Central African Republic of Burkina Faso.

We hear his speeches, we laugh at his jokes, we watch his face, we walk with him, we look into his eyes, we are enthralled by his spontaneity and his transparent sincerity.

Everything Sankara says about the world in which we are living is clear and true : he names imperialism, capitalism and the so-called liberal economy for what they are, and he does it so naturally and spontaneously that he is like a messenger, the herald of those – the global majority – who are never heard.

At the end of the film, however, we learn that in 1987 Captain Sankara was assassinated and that the assassination was planned by one of his closest friends and collaborators. After four years in power, he had to be got rid of.

The story has the unwritten fate of a Greek tragedy. We are left speechless. And the tragedy we are left with took place somewhere between words being spoken and what happens when the words are put into action.

I think about the space between intentions and practice, about administration.

Fascist ideologies are easy to spot ; public situations which prompt « fascist » behaviour are less evident.

The larger a crowd, the more its trajectories can be blind. Recently in Saudi Arabia among the millions of Muslim pilgrims visiting Mecca to attest their faith, 700 were killed and another thousand injured by the elbowing pressure of the innocent crowd of which they were part.

All popular, public creativity needs to be guided and supervised. The gift of supervision is perhaps the first human gift. It's what makes man *homo sapiens*. Yet within it there is a temptation. Any supervisor may be tempted,

through weariness or impatience, to consider by definition those he or she is guiding as dumb, slow-witted, inferior beings. And then the supervision risks to become dictatorial, imposing a dictatorship of supermen over submen. The risk is inherent in every form of administration.

When a crowd has a strong collective identity, this is less likely to occur and supervisors remain modest.

Today, however, the experience of joining or belonging to any collective has become rare. The consumer is an isolated individual. History has been reduced to a departmental category of Academic Studies. A crowd today is often an assembly of solitudes. And so supervisors become tempted.

All this is very far away from Burkina Faso in the 1980s. But when I look at what is around us today I look for a voice to put into words what I see. And the voice which comes to me is Thomas Sankara's.

John Berger, October 2015