



Cassandra's Choice

Consider Cassandra. She knows that almost everything about the way we live is incapable of being sustained. She knows that this civilization must be radically changed, and soon, if it is to continue. The *problématique* was what Aurelio Peccei called the set of problems that inform her unwelcome knowledge.

If Cassandra pushes our awareness of the *problématique* without offering solutions for it, she will often be held in mild contempt by almost everyone. (The word "whining" is often spoken in this circumstance.) But if she offers effective solutions, which are necessarily radical, people who don't share her perception of the *problématique* will often assume that she offers her solutions not because she thinks they are necessary responses to an unavoidable problem, but because she will get some payoff from the solutions that they won't, or they will assume that she desires the harm her solutions would necessarily do them. These assumptions can lead to their hating her. Disingenuous opponents will assert that she desires the harm her solutions would necessarily cause.

Cassandra gets to choose which reaction she prefers: being a source of annoyance and an object of mild, sometimes amused, contempt, or being completely ignored by most and hated by some. For problems for which there are non-radical solutions, her dilemma would not be this severe, and might not exist at all. For the problématique, however, for which the only effective solutions are radical, and always will be radical, her dilemma is excruciating.

Both strategies, diagnosing only, or also proposing solutions, are ineffective in changing minds about the problématique, but offering solutions is much the more ineffective of the two strategies. Any effective solution must assume a lot about the problématique, and be radical. Those who see harm for themselves in a solution will dismiss it without considering it further, as soon as they detect a detail of an assumption they don't agree with. This is a crippling disadvantage of offering effective solutions for the problématique, since effective solutions would harm almost everyone.

If Cassandra restricts herself to diagnosing the problématique, she will have the advantage of having to make many fewer assumptions. She can make powerful arguments to deprecate solutions that arise from wishful thinking, and to deprecate solutions that are insufficiently radical to be effective. But she will annoy far more people and be far more generally disliked for pushing us to acknowledge the hazards of the problématique than if she offers her own effective solutions for it -- solutions that will not be threatening because they can be easily ridiculed and ignored.

By restricting herself to pushing our awareness of the problématique, Cassandra will change more minds than by offering solutions for it. But she will change only a few minds, and she will attract general disapproval.