The Handmaid's Tale: Resistance is not futile

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Most people on earth have very difficult lives. Many face deprivation and even starvation. International capital in crisis has set about "reorganizing" social life to such an extreme degree of inequality and political instability that authoritarian forms of rule threaten to find a home not only in former colonial countries, but also in the erstwhile democratic centers of imperialism, including the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Japan and Australia.

In many places, the water is poisoned, schools are crumbling, apartment complexes go up in flames. War ravages country after country, region after region. Pensions, healthcare and social welfare evaporate at the hands of the authorities. The old organizations, trade unions, etc., do not lift a finger—on the contrary, they help preside over the general immiseration.

Artistic expression is perhaps beginning to catch up. A case in point is the recent version of Ibsen's classic *Enemy of the People* adapted with the Flint water poisoning in mind. On television, *Hulu's* new series *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on the 1985 novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood (also made into a film released in 1990, with Natasha Richardson and directed by Volker Schlöndorff), has received 13 Emmy nominations and stands out in several regards.

First, the program offers a palpable, realistic view of a theocratic dictatorship in the United States, set in the present. A Christian fundamentalist regime known as the Gilead has come to power through terror plots and suspensions of the constitution, always promised to be "temporary."

The political group behind the Gilead is called the Sons of Jacob. From the background story of the protagonist's paramour, Nick (Max Minghella), we learn that the Sons came to prominence in a time of high unemployment. His own family came from Michigan and never recovered from the closure of a steel mill. It is implied that the Sons of Jacob take advantage of economic decline to win followers, some of whom, like Nick, have few other prospects.

Dissidents, particularly women, flee to Canada. Fertile women are rare due to environmental degradation, and the Gilead rounds them up, forcing them to bear children for the elite officers of the regime in a highly ritualized, religiously sanctioned form of procreative concubinage.

The so-called handmaids—based on a Bible passage where a handmaid of Jacob's barren wife, Rachel, bears children for the pair—undergo extensive brainwashing and torture that seems consciously depicted to evoke the repressive environment of a Catholic school. A pompous nun figure named Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd) breaks the women's spirits with cattle prods, even mutilation.

In the background, rifle-wielding soldiers are ever-present, the noise of radio chatter among them providing an eerie tone. People address one another in a Biblical (or 17th century New England) manner of speaking. Public hangings are normal, as are mass burnings of corpses.

The protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale* (the title is meant to bring Chaucer to mind) is herself a handmaid, Offred, formerly June, played with great skill by Elizabeth Moss (*Mad Men*). One particularly striking scene involves June being interrogated and shocked with a cattle prod inside her master's home (he is known as "the Commander") about a fellow handmaid's homosexuality. The Commander's wife, Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski), bursts into the room, telling the interrogators that June is pregnant, not to hurt her, and one of them replies, with utter sincerity, "Congratulations on your miracle," as June quivers on the floor.

To the show's credit, much of this has a tangible realism to it. Scenes that depict the protagonist before and during the Gilead's creation ring true. The phases of its conquest—the regime freezes women's bank accounts, then forbids them from working and eventually guns down protesters—echo the process by which Adolf Hitler's Nazi party implemented its murderous treatment of Jews and other minorities.

Second, and this strengthens the first point about realism, the Gilead is riddled with contradictions. Unlike George Orwell's Oceania (in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,

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1949), with its inescapable regime of perfected domination, able to crush anyone's spirit, the Gilead dictatorship stumbles from one crisis to another. Infighting among the officer caste breeds mistrust bordering on paralysis (one high-level officer has a hand sawed off as a punishment for illicit sexual acts with his handmaid).

The handmaids build a resistance movement with an élan reflecting a high level of consciousness about their critical role in society. Over the course of Season One, June develops from a pot-smoking college party kid, into a young professional, a dissident fleeing with her husband and daughter, a handmaid who again tries to flee, and finally, into a key node in a resistance network, as well as a visible symbol of defiance for the other handmaids.

Every step, every hindrance, every misstep, is believable and lifelike. She learns how to manipulate the Commander with whom she is forced to breed. She draws strength from an etching left on her closet wall by a prior handmaid that reads, "Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum," a jocular corruption of the mock-Latin phrase, "Illegitimi non carborundum," or "Don't let the bastards grind you down." She leaves her own encouragement, "You are not alone."

As her fighting spirit develops, June challenges those around her to resist the Gilead regime, turning their indifference, escapism and self-seeking into conscious opposition. She encourages her old college friend, Moira (Samira Wiley, who played Poussey in *Orange is the New Black*), to abandon her life of prostitution and drug addiction and to take up the cause against the Gilead. Most dramatically, June intercedes to prevent the stoning of fellow handmaid Janine, convicted of endangering her baby.

This is the strongest and most commendable aspect of *The Handmaid's Tale*. By and through this dynamic content numerous actors excel, including Joseph Fiennes, the hypocritical, cruel and lonely Commander; Strahovski as Serena Joy; Minghella as Nick, the Commander's driver and June's paramour; and Madeleine Brewer (also from *Orange is the New Black*) as the delicate but defiant handmaid, Janine. Dowd plays the dreaded Aunt Lydia, overseer of the handmaids, with success.

Thankfully, Season One of *Handmaid's Tale*does not stew for the most part in Atwood's limited political outlook, a Canadian nationalism of liberal and anticommunist coloration. The novel expressed opposition to the so-called Reagan revolution, the rise of the Moral Majority and Christian fundamentalism in the United States. That period of reaction truly deserves serious analysis and artistic reflection at the highest level.

For Atwood, however, the Gilead flows more or less naturally from "the 17th-century Puritan roots that have always lain beneath the modern-day America we thought we knew." The deeply progressive and revolutionary content of the American Revolution and subsequent Civil War to abolish slavery elude Atwood and so many in the intelligentsia.

The purported Puritanical roots of the American Revolution do not make it into the show. To a limited extent, Atwood's somewhat obsessive hostility to women mistreating one another, such as "slut shaming," as she calls it, finds expression. More significant and more problematic artistically is Canadian nationalism. When Moira eventually escapes, her treatment at a refugee camp in Ontario is unrealistically humane. She receives food, clothing, a pre-paid cell phone, a prescription drug card and a few hundred dollars in cash, courtesy of Canada. A large maple leaf flag hangs in the background, taking up most of the shot. Canada is the haven for the rebels and resisters, according to Atwood.

In the end, this doesn't derail the series, but a deeper understanding of the social dynamic, including the fact that it is social class, not nationality or gender or religion, that divides humanity and drives the threat of dictatorship would only have strengthened it. To the extent that Season Two fails to take this central truth of the modern era into account, to that extent can one safely predict its limitations.

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