

Book Review: “Indignez-Vous” by Stéphane Hessel

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Stéphane Hessel’s recent treatise has obviously hit a nerve, selling over 1.5 million copies in France. In “Indignez-Vous” (“Outrage”) he lambasts the current state of the world, expressing his frustration at growing levels of economic inequality, political injustice, and social discrimination. Indifference, though, the “worst of attitudes,” is what most troubles the 93 year-old French resistance fighter and concentration camp survivor.

Hessel’s 20-page pamphlet has become a kind of founding text for a generation of young people, largely educated and wealthy, who are feeling less and less comfortable with the political and financial reality (of which they have largely benefited). From the “15 de Mayo” movement in Madrid, to campus protests in Paris, student-activists across Europe are echoing Hessel’s call to “get mad!” and to take action.

But the form that this action should take is less clear. After all, Hessel’s book is all diagnosis and no prognosis, and critics have been quick to point out that it’s easier to get angry about a problem than to try to solve it.

If the primary culprit for the world’s problems, in Hessel’s view, is the establishment, the establishment has been quick to fight back. “Indignation for indignation’s sake is not a way to think,” says French PM François Fillon. “The complexity of the modern world calls for clear thinking... because the world is not written in black and white.”

Fillon worries that “the difficult task of taking action” risks being “smothered by the all-too-easy tendency to object to everything.” And he’s right. If for nothing else, the “15 de Mayo” movement’s name should give some indication of its effectiveness at making timely political changes. It is, after all, late September.

Fillon's assertion that we need more brains and less outrage is only partially true. Complex problems call for complex solutions, and smart people are the best at coming up with those. But it occurred to me, as we walked past the ATM room, that despite the combined degrees, experiences, and supposed "callings" of those I was with, what most defined us was our indifference.

If Fillon is right to assert that action trumps anger, he'd be wrong to call anger useless. The injustices of the modern world are indeed outrageous, and Hessel is correct in pointing out that the motivation for successful change has often been outrage. We, the young and the smart, feign interest in helping our fellow man because we want to be perceived a certain way. We are the most well-educated generation in history. But, by and large, we don't care about people we don't know.

Maybe it's the collapse of communities, the demise of religion, or the glorification of the individual that have made us this way. Then again, maybe humans have always been jerks. But if Hessel's diagnosis of the world's problems lacks analysis and "clear thinking," at least it's got a backbone. I can't say the same for any of us who went out drinking the other night.

The world needs doctors, scientists, teachers, investors, and engineers. But it needs a lot more than just that. No matter your education, if you are capable of looking at the state of things and calling it anything other than outrageous, you are an alien. An education that leaves one feeling anything less than outrage at a world rife with racism, inequality, and violence, is a hollow one, a prelude to a paycheck.

No one can be sure of the answers to all the world's problems, but "outrage" is a good start.

Hessel, Stéphane. *Indignez-Vous*. European Schoolbooks Limited, 2010.