

Telos PRIMOPLANAc

Tina Rosenberg is the author of *Join the Club: How Peer Pressure can Transform the World*. She has also written *Children of Cain: Violence and the Violent in Latin America* and *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism*, which won her the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Together with David Bornstein, she launched the column *Fixes* in the New York Times; she is also a contributing editor for the New York Times magazine, and an editorial writer for the Times. Her articles are published in The New Yorker, Rolling Stone, the Atlantic, and many other publications. Born in Brooklyn, she lives in New York with her family.

Editorial

Man is by nature a social animal. We certainly don't have to cite Aristotle to remember this. However in recent months we've focused so much on the economic and financial crisis we've forgotten that our lives are based mainly on the rules governing social relationships and much less on those of the economy and politics. Instead Tina Rosenberg reminds us that human behaviour is defined by our relationships with our acquaintances. And she proves it. Of course, using social motivation to *transform the world* is very ambitious, but considering the *social cure* as a possible way to address the most recalcitrant problems in our societies could actually not be a utopian dream. Rosenberg (winner amongst other things of the Pulitzer Prize) believes our relationships with our acquaintances are dominated by the search for status, identity, and acceptance by others. Rosenberg therefore asks us to *imagine a new social change* based on this *motivator*. With this in mind, reading her account of the role of the Otpor movement in the fall of Milosevic in Serbia is truly exhilarating. She also peeks our attention when she describes the ambiguity of the human soul, when she tries to wheedle her way into the deepest depths of the *reasons* behind violence. A clear example of how the Manichean vision of reality is truly useless if not dangerous, without falling, however, into the trap of cultural relativism - just as dangerous. Nevertheless, Rosenberg maintains an optimism which sinks its roots in reality and opens a window on the sophisticated and tangibly useful world of B Corporations. These companies are committed to making economic and social improvement an integral part of their business strategy, without forgoing profit. But not just with words used as a marketing ploy: to be a B Corp, as you'll read in her last answer, you have provide PROOF. At a time when trust is declining in the world and cooperation between nations and cultures appears to have hit a dead end, Rosenberg's words shine through the mist - precise, profound and important. They shed light on a crucial and comforting trait of our human nature: the desire to belong, and we can't help but be enthralled. With these words published a little ahead of our usual schedule, everyone at Telos would like to wish you Festive Holidays and above all a peaceful New Year!

Mariella Palazzolo

Tina Rosenberg. Not on Economy alone...

Telos: In your book *Join the Club* you write about a revolution that might change or is changing the way we are and the course of the events: the positive force of peer pressure. Could you introduce this fascinating concept to us?

Tina Rosenberg: We all know how powerful peer pressure can be, and we're afraid of it because we're used to think of it as an exclusively negative force. In *Join the Club*, I argue that peer pressure can be an equally powerful force for good. The most effective way to help people change their behaviour is not by scaring them. It's by surrounding them with a new group of peers who are doing the same thing so that they support each other and hold each other accountable. Motivations coming from identifying with a new set of peers. The classic model is Alcoholics Anonymous. But in *Join the Club* I write about how this strategy has worked to bring down rates of AIDS in South Africa and teen smoking in the United States, has helped minority students at *élite* colleges do better in math, has fought Islamic terrorism in London and even led to the fall of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia.

The pursuit of approval from those who surround us is often referred to as conformism, a word that usually has a negative connotation. Your case studies give a completely different value to this word. May we hear about one of them?

By their nature, human beings are groupists. They yearn to be respected by the community they live in. This is most visible in teenagers. Beyond a biological basis, teenagers are looking for a group that fits with them. As adults, most of us have found the group we want to belong to. When we surround ourselves with the people we want as peers, that's not conformism: we've just chosen which is our community. All of the stories in my book work like this. An example is the fall of Slobodan Milosevic. In 1998, a group of 11 students at Belgrade University decided to try a new kind of politics. They realized how useless was criticizing the Government. Serbs already knew how bad it was, but they needed to be motivated to go into the street and face the problem. Thanks to peer pressure they made politics cool. They formed a group, Otpor (*Resistance* in Serbian) that gave kids the chance to be daring and important, to be their own James Bond. Kids who always saw political activity as boring and useless and not about them now had the chance to make a difference by organising their own schools' activities, sneaking about in the dead of night to put up posters, writing and performing street theatre modelled on Monty Python's Flying Circus, and getting arrested. People joined in groups with their friends because Otpor was a way to be seen as part of something, to be heroes. Two years later, the movement had at least 70,000 members. It was absolutely key to Milosevic's defeat.



Kids who always saw political activity as boring and useless and not about them now had the chance to make a difference. Otpor was a way to be seen as part of something, to be heroes. Two years later, the movement had at least 70,000 members. It was absolutely key to Milosevic's defeat.

In many cases, programmes aiming at promoting social/behavioural change basing on the force of peer pressure might be seen as an alternative to traditional welfare programmes funded by national Governments. Do you think that peer-oriented strategies will play a significant role in the future of public welfare?

I see them playing a complementary role. For example, in the United States, obesity and diabetes are looming catastrophes. These are problems best solved with behaviour change. It's well known that to adopt healthier habits, it's best to do it in a group. Again, what's needed is not information – is there anyone who doesn't know that French fries are bad for you? It's motivation.

This use of peer pressure can't replace Government welfare programmes. But it can support them. It can make any program that seeks behaviour change more effective.

Two of your books dealt with moral and political problems in Latin America and post-communist Europe. What did you learn about political violence?

Both *Children of Cain* – about political violence in Latin America – and *The Haunted Land*, which is about dealing with the past in post-Communist Europe, were mainly about the perpetrators of violence, since too much has been written about the victims of violence. I wanted to try to understand what makes violence happen. For this reason, in *Children of Cain*, I interviewed an Argentine naval officer who ran the most notorious camp of the Dirty War, then the head of the Interior Ministry in Sandinista Nicaragua and wealthy death-squad supporters in El Salvador. I also talked to ordinary citizens of Medellin, Colombia, who had fully adapted living in a society controlled by drug traffickers through money and violence. In *The Haunted Land*, I talked to secret Police spies, border guards who shot fleeing citizens at the Berlin Wall and General Wojciech Jaruzelski in Poland, who cracked down on *Solidarity* and called Martial Law. My purpose was to try to understand what was guilt in Communist societies, who should be punished, and who gets to decide. What hit me in the gut, over and over, is that behaviour that seems from the outside so alien and monstrous turned out to be much more understandable than I would have liked. It made me very uncomfortable to be able to see why they did what they did. I began to think that many people who found themselves in the same circumstances would behave as they did. They responded to the political and social pressures around them. That doesn't excuse their crimes - many, many people I talked to should be in prison for many years, and it's a shame that their societies don't have the strength to prosecute them. But it does tell us that we need to take a wider view if we want to say *never again*.

Your on-line column on the NYT Opinionator is very popular. Recently you wrote about the B Corps, benefit corporations, a new way to interpret being a socially responsible company. Can you please tell us more about it?

In my online column, *Fixes*, we look at a different solutions to a specific social problem.

In April I wrote about Benefit Corporations, or B Corps. These are for-profit companies that adopts a broader bottom line: they seek not only to make money, but to do good for their employees, the community and the planet. There are hundreds of examples in the United States of companies that are committed to being environmentally responsible, to pay above-market wages and benefits so their employees live well, or that give back to their cities in many ways part of their profits. They do all sorts of different things: Greyston Bakery will give any ex-convict a job. King Arthur Flour is completely employee-owned. IceStone makes environmentally friendly countertops.

You might think that any business can do that, but there are two reasons which make necessary such a category. One is that any company can *claim* to be green or to be socially responsible. Thousands and thousands do that but not all of them are. B Corps belong to an organisation that audits their practices, gives them specific scores in different areas, and helps them to improve. Companies that want to become B Corps have to pass an audit. In that way consumers and investors can be sure that a company calling itself green really is green. The other thing that B Corps must do is revise their bylaws so that business decisions can take into account their impact on the environment, the community or their workforce. Without that agreement, a shareholder can sue if he feels you are not maximizing profit. That agreement gives to business a longer and wider look at what profit really is.