Contesting realities

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Abstract

In 2004, an unnamed Bush adviser accused a senior Wall Street Journal reporter of belonging to the "reality based community"—a community that believed solutions stem from the judicious study of reality. "We're history's actors", he told the journalist, "and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." Overwhelmingly, the response of those on the left, and of US progressives to this comment was to smugly deride the irrationalism and the arrogance of the Bush Administration. This paper, in contrast, will examine what is missed in the rush to accept membership of the reality based community. It will suggest that the advisor's comments express something that was once a central tenet of the left: the belief that political action is capable of transforming reality. Today, on the left, this belief has been all but abandoned in the face of a seemingly unstoppable onslaught of free market capitalism and increasingly repressive state power. This paper will ask what it would mean today to begin to re-imagine political action as capable of remaking the world.

In 2004, an unnamed Bush advisor accused a senior *Wall Street Journal* reporter of belonging to the "reality based community". This 'community', according to the adviser, is made up of people who "believe that solutions arise from your judicious study of reality." Not realising he was being insulted, the reporter nodded at this description of himself and made some reference to enlightenment principles and empiricism. Before he could finish, the Bush aide interrupted him.

"That's not the way the world really works anymore," he said. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will –we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do" (Suskind 2004).

Overwhelmingly, US progressives responded to this anecdote by smugly deriding the irrationalism and the arrogance of the Bush administration. Bloggers emblazoned "proud member of the reality based community" across their banners; Wikipedia suggested the phrase could form the rallying call for disparate opponents of the Bush administration.

As the years, and the Iraq war, dragged on, the ability of the US to drop its version of reality on the world from a stealth bomber began to look tenuous. In Iraq, the "mission

accomplished" exuberance disappeared, with even Bush acknowledging in 2007 that the occupation had brought "a tragic escalation of sectarian rage and reprisal that continues to this day"(Bush 2007). In light of Dick Cheney's 2008 statement that the invasion was "a difficult, challenging but nonetheless successful endeavour", it seems reasonable to argue that the Bush administration fell victim, at least in part, to its own 'reality deficit' in Iraq.

In such a context, a reclamation of 'reality' seems nothing if not realistic. Yet, something important is missed in the rush to accept membership of the "reality based community." The easy dismissals of the Bush advisor obscure the extent to which his comments expressed an idea once central to the left: the possibility that political action can *transform* reality. Today, few on the left still believe it is possible to alter the entire terrain on which political action would once have been judged 'unrealistic'. The portrayal of the aide's comments as irrational illustrates the extent to which those who once believed in the transformative capacity of political action have succumbed to a pragmatic realism that finds its most recent domestic expression in Rudd's positioning of the ALP as the party of the 'reforming centre.'

As we begin to survey the wreckage left behind by the neocons, it may be worth examining not only what they bequeathed to the world, in their ferocious attempt to transform our reality, but also how it was that they were able to come to ascendancy. Today, many of the dreams, and the concepts, that once sustained faith in social transformation lie in tatters. Firstly, the ideology of *progress* has been undermined by the very history that was supposed to lead inexorably to a more humane world. After the Nazi death camps, the disillusionment with the idea that technological progress necessarily heralded social progress was captured starkly in Theodor Adorno's remark, "No universal history leads from savagery to humanity, but one indeed from the slingshot to the H-bomb"(1973, p. 315). This realization had a profoundly demoralizing effect on a left that could no longer conceive of its goals as the goals of history itself. In this sense, George W. Bush was correct when he argued, in 2002, "the 20th century ended with a single surviving model of human progress"? (Bush 2002) As the neocons set about imposing their own model of 'progress' on the world, they did so in the genuine belief, by then discarded by most on the left, that history was on their side.

Our time is marked by more than the failure of progressive narratives however. Almost two decades ago, the Berlin Wall was reduced to rubble; today, its shards are packaged into small

glass jars, sealed with cork stoppers, and sold to tourists on the streets of a unified Berlin. And yet, the collapse of communism still haunts our political reality. If communism were only a wall, a collection of authoritarian states, or a teleological conception of history, the profound effect of its loss would be incomprehensible. Communism was all those things. It was also the dream of a better world that gave strength to those who struggled amidst the brutality and the grinding drudgery of this one. It was an organisational form that united people across oceans, a form of historical memory that allowed the defeats and victories of the past to live in the present, and a source of political futurity. Only by understanding the contradictory nature of this loss can we understand how we have lost the belief that political action can transform our reality.

As the wall crumbled, the right took the offensive, claiming as its own not only the rhetoric of progress but also the belief that the world could be re-made. "Until now, the world we've known has been a world divided – a world of barbed wire and concrete block, conflict and cold war," George Bush senior announced two years after the collapse of the wall. "Now, we can see a new world coming into view. A world in which there is the very real prospect of a new world order"(Bush 1991).

A year after Bush senior's New World Order speech, then US Under Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, drafted a document that advocated US interventions throughout the world to "encourage the spread of democratic forms of government and open economic systems"(2003). Even amidst the new world order hype, Wolfowitz's document – which suggested the US should "retain the pre-eminent responsibility for addressing selectively those wrongs which threaten not only our interests, but those of our allies or friends, or which could seriously unsettle international relations"(2003) – was rejected as too extreme.

With the election of George W. Bush administration, Wolfowitz's manifesto was revived to underpin the doctrine of "regime change", which asserts the right of the US to wage wars to depose sovereign governments and remake political systems. The neo-cons, it seemed, still believed it possible to radically re-make the world. As former Trotskyist Christopher Hitchens explained of his alignment with US power; "I feel much more like I used to in the 1960s, working with revolutionaries" (Wolfowitz 2003).

As the neocons forcefully remodelled the world, their 'war on terror' eroded liberal democracy, which has given way to a form of state power that is neither liberal nor democratic. While the contours of liberalism's replacement are still undefined, a discourse of permanent emergency has enabled the introduction of counter-terror measures that undermine central elements of the liberal rule of law, from freedom of speech to habeas corpus to the presumption of innocence.

Some random examples:
- Millions of people around the world rally against the war on Iraq. Their voices are ignored – they watch, powerlessly, as the bombs fall.
- Counter-terror laws allow for control orders that subject people to home detention, prohibit them from speaking to certain other people, and compel them to wear tracking devices, with no requirement to prove "beyond reasonable doubt" an involvement in terrorism.
- After five years in Guantanamo Bay, David Hicks confesses to aiding a terrorist organisation. His 'confession' reads like a speech at a Stalinist show trial.

And so on.

Wartime emergency measures are nothing new. And yet the representation of the war on terror as a war without temporal limits – Dick Cheney infamously suggested it "may never end. At least, not in our lifetime" – provides little basis for believing liberal democracy will be restored unscathed in the future (Dougherty 2001). Barack Obama has inherited a status quo in which, in Walter Benjamin's words, "the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule."(2003, p. 392) What he will do with this reality largely remains to be seen. While early promises to close Guantanamo and abandon those military tribunals he called an "enormous failure" were reassuring, the more recent suggestions that these tribunals will be retained, and that those responsible for authorising torture will not be brought to justice are indicative of how much emergency measures have insinuated themselves into the very structure of the US state (Pilkington 2009, p. 15).

While all of this may call for a radical critique of liberal democracy, the erosion of liberalism has profoundly destabilised those who have seen themselves as its radical critics. Anatole France's remark about the abstraction of liberal categories of rights and legal equality – "poor

and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges" (Anatole France quoted in Benjamin 1985, p. 151) – once marked out the chasm separating a liberal world view from a politics that sought not the management of injustice through a system of formal juridical equality, but the overthrow of a system founded on substantive inequality.

Today, however, when the alternative seems to include everything up to the use of torture as a legitimate tool of state, liberal democracy seems, perhaps, the 'least-worst' system. As the re-election of the ALP here, and the demise of the neocons in the US foster hopes for an end to the onslaught on civil rights that characterised the neocon era, any criticism of liberal democracy begins to appear untimely, perhaps even treacherous.

Wendy Brown has suggested that while the death of communism is like the death of a beloved, the loss of liberal democracy is "like the loss of a hated but needed father"(Brown 2006, p. 25). The demise of the familiar, yet contradictory, enemy that was liberalism seems to generate the temptation for radicals to step into the costume of the departed adversary, abandoning critiques of capitalism in the process. The belief that the discourse of rights, rule of law and due process offers the greatest advantage in what is conceptualised in advance as a purely defensive struggle, is underpinned by the assumption that it is no longer possible to change the world in any substantial way.

To escape our current impasse, we must find the courage to rethink the fundamental assumptions of liberalism, and of a political practice centred on progress, sovereignty and right[s]. In 1938, Walter Benjamin wrote of the need to develop concepts "completely unusable for the purposes of Fascism"(Benjamin 1999). Two years later he was dead, killing himself after border guards refused him passage across the border to Spain as he sought to escape the Nazis. The stakes in his attempt to develop new concepts could not have been higher.

Today, we too face the urgent need to develop a conceptual apparatus adequate to contemporary problems. Such critical thought, as Benjamin understood, is not a luxury to be saved for times of peace or subordinated to political pragmatism. Faced with the destabilization of familiar political categories, we need to ask what effects these categories produced, and what other political possibilities they foreclosed. If we simply defend

liberalism on its own terms, we abandon too easily a Left critique of liberal democracy that retains all its past validity.

Today, we need to ask why the rhetoric of liberalism, in which opposition to contemporary counter-terror measures has largely been framed, has proved so useful to those waging the war on terror, a conflict increasingly cast as a war for liberal values – for 'democracy', 'human rights', and the 'rule of law'. To fail to do so would be to miss the connection between familiar liberal concepts and the newer political project of neo-conservativism.

In a 'war' of a thousand battlegrounds, a war without spatial or temporal limitation, the categories of liberalism have provided coherence to a narrative which recasts the 'war on terror' as a civilizing mission. In Iraq, for instance – in the wake of the Coalition's inability to produce evidence of either weapons of mass destruction or Al Qaeda links – 'democracy', 'human rights' and the 'rule of law' provided retrospective justification for the war and occupation. Following the announcement that Saddam Hussein would be executed for his role in the killings of 138 Shiites from the town of Al Dujail – the only charge he faced in which the United States was not directly implicated – John Howard claimed "[t]here's something heroic about a nation that is going through all the pain and difficulty as Iraq is,[sic] yet still struggles to give this monster a fair trial – that is the mark of a country that desperately wants democracy"(John Howard quoted in AAP 2006b). Bush likewise relied on a familiar distinction between tyranny and legality, referring to Saddam's trial as "a milestone in the Iraqi people's effort to replace the rule of a tyrant with the rule of law"(George W. Bush quoted in AAP 2006a).

Of course, there's room today for an immanent critique, which questions the democratic credentials of those who would export democracy by force, and reminds them of their fervent commitment to the rule of law each time they introduce a domestic law enabling detention without trial. Yet, as rights discourses morph into demands for greater security measures – to ensure the primary "right to security" – and 'democracy' and the 'rule of law' are used to justify bombings and military occupation, we need to recognise that imperial wars have always relied on liberal categories: the First World War was, after all, also the 'Great War for Civilisation'.

What we are seeing today is not simply a corruption of these categories, but an expression of contradictions already present in liberalism, a system which presupposes a state capable of maintaining social order. This means it is crucial to resist the blackmail that suggests that to critique the rule of law, or liberal democracy, would be to undermine the struggle against the real, neoconservative, enemy. Today, we must begin the critical work of developing new political concepts adequate to a struggle to transform our political reality – concepts that will only arise in struggle against this reality. It may be that the possibility for such political innovation can be traced to the same source as the demoralization. Giorgio Agamben has argued:

> The fall of the Soviet Communist Party and the unconcealed rule of the capitalist-democratic state have cleared the field of the two main ideological obstacles hindering the resumption of a political philosophy worthy of our time: Stalinism on one side, and progressivism and the constitutional state on the other (2000, p. 109).

Both of these were forms that anchored political imagination to the state. If we are to grasp the possibilities generated by the exhaustion of Stalinism and liberalism, we must do without nostalgia and sentimentality, and begin to develop a political praxis that no longer presupposes the continuing existence of the state. As long as we continue to rely on statist political categories, we will find our resistance recuperated into the project of re-consolidating state power. If our time is to produce new political concepts, this will not occur in a realm of pure thought, or within a university system that is increasingly subjected to a neoliberal political rationality. The creation of new political concepts entails praxis, and will require the courage to act and to experiment politically in the face of an uncertain future. This means acting without teleological certainty, without a pre-formulated political alternative, and without guarantees.

Yet true political action *always* lacks guarantees – a point obscured by the myth of progress. To act politically is to act without knowing the results in advance, precisely because true political action, as the Bush administration understood well, can transform the very terrain on which its consequences are evaluated. In this sense, to act politically is truly to "demand the impossible", as every political act contains the potential to make what seemed impossible possible. To demand the impossible requires imagination and bravery. Our time is not especially conducive to either. Under the Bush administration, the mantra "there is no alternative" served to vanquish political imagination, while the policy of preemption colonized the future, and high-profile terror raids foster – unevenly distributed – fear.

If today we are offered not the assertion that there are no alternatives, but a discourse of audacity and hope, this is not without significance. It is up to us, however, to ensure that these words reverberate in struggle, rather than wearing thin, and ultimately generating cynicism, in the face of 'realistic' compromises. It is still necessary to act – now more so than ever – because, despite all that was revolutionary about the neocon's political project, the transformation they brought about had one aim: to ensure the world would never change again, to destroy any *future* challenge to the global ascendancy of capital or to US military dominance, extending both into perpetuity. If we are to refuse them their (belated) victory, if we are not to acquiesce to a world that destroys both courage and imagination in the name of security, we must firstly challenge ourselves to think, and to act, *against reality*.

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