

## THE POST-MODERNITY OF AMERICAN POLITICS AND THEORY

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I must begin my talk with an apology. It is very presumptuous for a guest from another country who, when he is invited to address his hosts, proceeds to force them to listen as he lectures them about the politics of his own country. My dilemma is, of course, that I am probably more ignorant of the politics of Japan than most members of this audience are about the politics of the United States. I shall try and resolve the dilemma by discussing American politics in the context of a problem that is familiar to both societies, the problem of modernization or, more precisely, the problem of post-modernity. One more note of apology. Realizing that I am also a guest in a Christian university and that a text is an appropriate beginning, I have chosen a text but, unfortunately, it is from a writer whom many Christians regard with alarm, Karl Marx. Perhaps I may be forgiven because I have selected a text which Marx wrote before he became a Marxist. While he was still a graduate student he wrote these lines: "Philosophy is becoming more worldly, and the world is becoming more philosophical." I should like you to try and remember these lines as I discuss the phenomenon of "post-modernity."

If we take "philosophy" in a broader sense than usual and use it to signify "theoretical knowledge" it becomes apparent that the high prestige which such knowledge enjoys is a distinctively modern phenomenon. Theoretical knowledge is associated pre-eminently with mathematics and the natural sciences, but it has also been self-consciously pursued among the social sciences. And at the current moment "theory" is all the rage in the humanities or literary studies. Indeed, ever since the Age of the

Enlightenment in the West, modernity has been closely identified with the development and expansion of "theory" and, above all, with making "theory" of practical use. The result has been the development of all sorts of technologies, not only in industrial production, or in agriculture, but in health care, medical science, warfare, popular culture (as in movies, photography, and later developments), education, transportation, and communication. In the United States Americans are even "blessed" by "electronic ministers." Thus we live in a world created by theory.

Modernity was more, however, than the practical application of theoretical knowledge to daily life. It was the promise of a more equitable distribution of the material and spiritual or cultural values which knowledge would make available. Modernity was thus the promise of a just society. We might say that Marx and other 19th century socialists represented this aspect of modernity.

Modernity was also, however, a political promise of greater individual freedom, the equalization of political rights, and the creation of representative government and the consequent democratization not only of elections but of politics generally. If Marx was the symbol of economic and social justice, John Stuart Mill was the symbol of liberal political values and the potential democratization of politics. Both writers shared a common belief in the plasticity of the world and a critical conception of theory.

The growing popularity of the phrase "post-modernity" or "post-modernism" in the U.S. is a sign that in some sense modernity is finished, that its projects have either been fulfilled or they have proved impossible to realize, and that so-called "advanced societies" are undergoing a new evolutionary change. Thus justice, for example, is no longer considered to be a goal to be realized but, at best, a strategy for buying off social discontent; or democracy has been rendered anachronistic because a truly modern society depends upon expert decision-making. Significantly, Nietzsche, not Marx or Mill, is now the principal text in many American colleges and universities.

I want now to turn to American politics and to examine in what

sense, if any, that politics is beginning to display the symptoms of post-modernity.

The election of an American president is of interest to the peoples of other countries, not only because the successful candidate will become head of what is arguably still the single most powerful country in the world, but because that country has symbolized as perhaps no other has the "modern" and its various promises, political, economic, and social. The election is taking place, as perhaps everyone is aware, at a time when the United States is confronted by many difficult problems, foreign and domestic. Foremost among the former is the question of relationships with the Soviet Union in the age of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Then there are the unresolved problems of the Middle East, of Central America, South Africa, and last, but by no means least, trade policy with Japan. Domestic questions are the relatively familiar ones of assigning priorities among national defense, social services, education, and environmental protection.

At first glance these problems appear to be very much the same as those which have been discussed in American politics since the end of the Vietnam War. There is, however, one major difference. As more Americans are beginning to recognize and as most other peoples have already recognized, American power in its various forms—political, economic, and military, and one might add, its ideological appeal—is appreciably less than what it was during the quarter-century that followed the end of World War II. This fact, especially as it is expressed in the superior economic performance of countries such as Japan, West Germany, and South Korea, has produced an increasing pessimism among large numbers of middle and working class Americans who are experiencing a profound reversal in their expectations. For about two centuries it has been an article of faith among Americans that the future was bound to be better than the past, that one's children would experience a more prosperous condition than their parents and surely be better educated. Most Americans now know that, except for the wealthy few, that prospect has diminished. Housing, education, and health care, and the enjoyment of natural environments, to take only these examples,

are becoming scarce values and their quality is clearly lower than before. Pessimism, then, is the product of a narrowed future, more constrained, even more regulated.

These tendencies, I would claim, are also evident in the type of candidate now campaigning for the presidency. If one reflects back on the presidential candidates of the past twenty years or more, it seems apparent that there are fewer contrasts between them than between earlier candidates. In 1964 it was Johnson, the great champion of the welfare state, against Goldwater, an arch-conservative. In 1968 it was the classic American liberal, Hubert Humphrey, against the supreme pragmatist, Richard Nixon. In 1972 it was Nixon, the symbol of the Vietnam War, against McGovern, the supreme liberal and the symbol of opposition to that war. In 1976 it was the cautious liberal, Carter, against the cautious conservative Ford. In 1980 the same Carter against the radically conservative Reagan. And in 1984 Reagan against the traditional American mid-Western liberal, Mondale.

At the present moment, however, it is not contrasts or differences that confront the American voter but puzzlement. One candidate, George Bush, has not only occupied every kind of major office in American politics, but he has also adopted virtually every political position that seemed expedient, e.g., on abortion, civil rights, Reaganomics, and arms-for-hostages. He is the American patrician as political opportunist, a man of decent instincts, perhaps, but of too many positions, closer, by expediency, to Nixon than to Reagan.

The other candidate, Michael Dukakis, is widely perceived as a technocrat, a man of too few rather than too many positions. "Competence" is claimed as his virtue. The first true technocrat to run for office since Herbert Hoover in 1928, Dukakis symbolizes the technocratic impulse to reduce politics to policies so that it becomes a matter of choosing rationally, that is, of choosing the policy which will not only produce the desired consequences but do it more efficiently in terms of resources. Where Bush is reputed to have some of the same indifference toward detail as Ronald Reagan, Dukakis apparently has a passion for detail rather than for clarifying the ends for which power is being used and

policies adopted.

Each candidate has, however, his own special ghost, a ghost who, unlike the ghost of Hamlet's father, is being laid to rest but whose burial is, for that reason, of some significance to our topic: the ghosts are pre-modern. George Bush strives to present himself as the successor to Ronald Reagan but this obscures the extent to which he is rejecting a distinctive part of Reaganism, a pre-modern part. The inimitable genius of Reagan was to present two contradictory faces to the American public and to persuade it that they were not contradictory. One face, a pre-modern face, looked nostalgically to the past and spoke of simple values of neighborliness, family, religious piety, hard work, and patriotism. This voice created a myth of American collective identity, a virtuous, deserving, and innocent people. The other face looked to the future and it spoke, not about innocence but about the real basis of American power in science, advanced technology, and expanded military power. This face exhorted Americans to embrace the values and risks of a high tech society with its endless innovations, fierce competition, its basis in scientific research (rather than religion). This face spoke of constant change, not of eternal or secure values and it praised the very forces of modernization that were busily undercutting the values which the other face had so eloquently praised. If one face spoke a pre-modern language of changeless values, this face spoke a post-modern language of science and technology and of forms of power which seemed divorced from moral and political values, foundationless.

One of the distinguishing marks of George Bush's campaign is that he has made very little effort to imitate the first face of Reaganism, the face which speaks of traditional values. There can be little doubt that Bush speaks more comfortably when he, too, speaks from the second face, the post-modern face. The fact that he can dispense so easily with the conception of collective identity professed by the first face suggests how artificial the original fabrication was. But it also suggests that we are moving into an era in which the old legitimating myths no longer seem so necessary. We might say, that politics is emulating deconstructionist and post-structuralist modes of thought. Political myths, like the fiction of

narrative unity, of the autonomous text, or the sovereign author, have been dissolved: the world, indeed, may be becoming more philosophical, a place of fewer myths and fewer presuppositions. It might mean, too, however, fewer consolations and that might be a serious matter if, as I have suggested earlier, post-modernity looms as a condition of lowered expectations and greater pessimism.

The Dukakis candidacy has had its ghost but it was laid to rest only after a harsh confrontation. This ghost was represented by Jesse Jackson. It is now widely acknowledged, even by Jackson's critics, that his campaign aroused the American voting public as no recent candidate, including Ronald Reagan, has. A truly sharp set of alternatives was presented; a rhetoric was employed that reflected a different America, an America of streets, ghettos, of cultures ravaged by drug abuse, of marginal populations mostly unmoved by either face of Reaganism. The Jackson ghost was the specter of a divided America: divided by worsening disparities between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, whites and non-whites. And he was the only candidate who, by his sympathies with the plight of Third World nations, with the victims of apartheid, with Palestinians, and with the populations of Central America tyrannized by military cliques mostly supported by American power, threatened to make foreign policy and defense strategy issues in the campaign. The harsh, even humiliating, rejection of Jackson by Dukakis and by other important Democratic politicians was a more important fact than the mathematics of elections in the United States which "proved" Jackson could not win. The rise of a technocratic candidate and the rejection of a black candidate who, curiously represented the values of an earlier modernity—equality, brotherhood, non-discrimination, social justice—was further evidence of the evolution toward post-modernity, an indication of the cooler, more rational politics it would bring and of the acceptance of permanent forms of social inequality as a fact of life to be treated symptomatically rather than radically.

One of the most curious and revealing features of the campaign thus far has been the widespread complaint of commentators and of ordinary citizens that, despite election coverage in the various media no one seems

confident that he "knows" the candidates. This complaint coming at a time when Americans are being treated to the most detailed descriptions of the medical and psychological condition of candidates, their personal finances, the intimate life of their families, and, of course, their sexual adventures and marital problems, makes one wonder what else would be needed for Americans to know them. Clearly something more is missing from the campaign and the citizen wants the candidate to reassure him or her that what is missing is really there.

I want to suggest that this complaint has to do with the disappearance of meaning from political life, a disappearance that is closely related to its opposite, the technocratic presence of the two main candidates. Simply put, citizens want more "represented" by politics than post-modern politics can supply. A rational politics is inevitably a reductionist politics: it must quantify, simplify, abstract if its choices are to be clarified and processed. The citizen has, however, symbolic needs as well as material interests. He or she wants the power of the state to represent more than rational efficiency. He or she is concerned about purposes, common goals, about the point of sacrifice, about the widely perceived corruption which it is feared pervades the political system and about the omnipresence of money in politics, and not least during elections.

But if there is one thing that the contemporary politician finds it difficult to do it is to "represent." There are many reasons for this. The first task of a politician is to win an election; and the first principle of winning an election is not to lose it. This requires the politician not to alienate potential supporters by representing an interest to which they are opposed. But the complexity of most constituencies makes it impossible that some significant groups of voters will not be alienated by any stand other than their own. This means further that the relationship of candidates to their constituencies is far different than the one imagined by modern liberal theorists. Liberal theorists assumed that a candidate would be in close contact with the citizenry and that his views would be responsive to their's, even be a distillation of them. According to this conception the representative would be shaped by the citizenry; but today it is the other way round. The representative seeks to shape

the citizen, shape him or her into a voter, that is, into the kind of being who responds to the sounds and images of the media. Thanks to the institutions of commercial advertizing the media excels at the homogenization of the voter who is treated simply as the consumer in another guise.

Thus the advance of modernization in politics eliminates the major pillar of modern liberal politics, the pillar of representation. Not only legislatures and political parties were supposed to be agencies of representation, but so was the executive or president. The assumption of earlier politics was that there existed certain matters of "common concern" about which elected representatives and officials would deliberate in order to discover what the common good required. The post-modern version of politics sees the politics of representation replaced by the politics of administration and the common good by the notion of rational choice. Ideally a post-modern system would represent rationality, rather than the interests or needs of citizens. This development has been prepared by so-called "voting studies" which have replaced the citizen by the voter and then found the voter to be unsuited for political participation. The voter was discovered to be ignorant, prejudiced, and apathetic. In short, using allegedly scientific methods, social scientists declared that the voter represented the irrational and hence a potential danger to the processes of rational decision-making which a modernizing society was dedicated to perfecting. The system is said to work more efficiently when voters do not participate for then decision-makers are freer to take decisions undistracted by electoral mandates or by a concerned citizenry looking over the shoulders of officials.

What role is political theory playing in this evolution toward the post-modern? One role is powerful, influential but uncritical. It is represented by the popularity of rational choice theory. It has developed a common language for academics and bureaucrats, the language of "policy." It connects not only the academy with governmental bureaucracy but each of these with the system of corporate power. The massive structures within which rationality is to operate do not allow for visions of radical change: the plasticity of the world has disappeared and theory



has found a comfortable home in a world it has helped to make. Rational choice signifies a world become philosophical.

There is also another role being played by theory. Earlier I noted that Nietzsche rather than Marx or Mill has become the major inspiration among many American academics. Nietzsche is a profoundly radical teacher and a very pessimistic one. Most of his American interpreters have attended primarily to the Nietzschean claim that all theories are "interpretations" rather than truths established with reference to some neutral standard. There are no neutral standards for Nietzsche because every truth-claim is the expression of a "will-to-power," of a natural impulse toward mastery. To interpret, therefore, is to decode a strategy of domination. Many American scholars are now busily applying Nietzschean insights, as developed by deconstructionists and post-structuralists, to the codes which compose "culture": codes of gender, race, elite culture, economic transactions, and political domination. Here we might say that philosophy remains critical and worldly. Yet one must also say that the tendency is empty, negative, and destructive. And it is difficult to see how it will be possible to get beyond that point because of the fundamental assumption from which these tendencies operate: if all theories are merely the expression of a will-to-power, then clearly these Nietzschean tendencies are not exempt. Two consequences follow: one, at stake is merely another academic "battle of the books", another academic fashion of no special political relevance. The other consequence is quite different: the discreditation of values works in favor of the tendencies toward diminished meaning which I remarked upon earlier as being an element in post-modern politics. The Nietzscheans thus become the allies of the rationalists' will-to-power in the project of simplifying the world and reducing the population of meaning.

Are there, then, no possibilities in post-modern politics and political theory that allow for hope, even radical hope? I think that there are but that they cannot be found *within* post-modernism, either as theory or practice. Rather we must look to what contradicts the post-modern, even subverts it.

What contradicts the post-modern is the archaic, and what has been

rendered archaic by the post-modern is democracy, not so much the democracy of elections, political parties, but the democracy of spontaneous forms of collective action by which ordinary citizens cooperate to meet common needs and felt injustices. It is a politics of improvised forms, a politics that creates its own terms of engagement. It is symbolized, I think, in a recent article by a columnist in the WASHINGTON POST who was concerned to criticize the Polish Solidarity movement for stubbornly challenging the Polish state with demands which it could not meet. In the course of his argument he compared Solidarity to a famous incident early in World War II when Polish cavalry mounted on horseback foolishly attacked German tanks. To the correspondent it seemed like the absurd effort of the past to conquer the future.

But while I would not advise the use of horses against tanks, I would claim that if we take the horse as a symbol of traditional resources, and we think of Solidarity as combining the traditional values of love of country, religion, the companionship of those who work together and live in the same place, as well as the values of free association and free thought which the Communist version of modernization had crushed, then maybe the cavalryman and the tank are an appropriate image because it has been a consistent policy of Solidarity *not* to attack the State or Communism directly but rather to protest their monolithic character. The horse, we might say, is not the symbol of irrationality but of the free spirit which needs space to express its own form of beauty and power. It is no match for the tank in a head-on confrontation, yet the tank cannot crush it. The spirit of Solidarity has persisted because it is not abstract but grounded in diverse, even conflicting traditions, values, and practices. It represents a cultural richness which modernizing societies, whether communist or capitalist, find to be archaic and hence dysfunctional. And this may point to the crucial political question facing societies in the transition to post-modernity: is culture to be tended or rationalized?

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