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Review

The Universal Adversary: Security, Capital and ‘The Enemies of All Mankind’

Mark Neocleous

Routledge, London, 2016, 180pp., ISBN: 9781138955165

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This book claims to be concerned with ‘imagination and fear in the world of contemporary security and capital’ (p. 2). It grounds itself in the Hobbesian problem of the ways in which human capacities for imagination and fear are open to manipulation by states and their political leaderships, and how that problem is manifest amid the contemporary war on terror and crisis of capital. As such it explores the notion of ‘the universal adversary,’ an invention of the project for US homeland security to describe the multiplicity of unknown enemies that—it has been supposed—might possibly attack the United States since 9/11. As the author describes, the concept is a useful way with which to conflate the many disparate sources of imaginable threat to American security, and yet it has apparently not attracted much critical attention. It involves the figure of the terrorist but it is not by any means limited to terror. In effect it is an empty container of a concept into which anything and anyone, potentially, can be thrown—which is, of course, precisely its function. Its nebulosity and flexibility calls into being, we are told, a ‘Universal Police Power, acting in the name of all and claiming power over all in its permanent war against the adversary in question’ (p. 5). As such the book does not simply ask ‘who is the universal adversary?’ but explores the nature of its function in service of the police power of the state as well as capital.

The book comprises just four chapters and an introduction. There is no conclusion. Each of the four substantive chapters focuses on a particular manifestation of the universal adversary. In the first chapter it is ‘the disgruntled worker’; in the second it is ‘the zombie’; in the third chapter it is ‘the Devil’; and, in the fourth, ‘the pirate.’ Each of these ‘universal adversaries,’ as the book explains, is also figured within the security imaginary of state and capital as enemies of humanity as a whole. Indeed, without any concluding chapter for the reader to otherwise draw upon, this would seem to be the main argument of the book—that state and capital produces images of threats to themselves which are likewise configured as enemies to humanity as a whole.



Readers familiar with post-9/11 debates on security, and even prior to that, won't be surprised to discover that the universal adversary is conceptualized as the enemy of humanity as a whole. In many ways this book could as well have been published in 2002, amid that slew of texts that filled the shelves of the International Relations and Security Studies sections of bookstores then. The points and arguments it makes about the functions of fear in constitution of state power are neither original nor particularly challenging. The reader has the sense of an author inspired by a concept which—while at first sounding nuanced, original, and interesting—turns out to be just another spin on a host of other concepts, revealing little of interest or originality for its analytic. Tired discussions about terror, monstrosity, enmity, and evil abound. But Marxists will enjoy the argument that because the universal adversary bundles together foreign terrorists with domestic radical groups and labor movements so the war on terror 'coincides with the class war' (p. 10). The bourgeoisie, since at least the nineteenth century, we learn, has seen 'itself as the guardian of civilization and democracy,' even 'the whole of humanity' and thus its enemies as the enemies of humanity as a whole (p. 10). So, there is a lot to be learned, still, about war, terror, and social class, and this book fills that absence, it would seem, taken at face value.

If there is a function to the book it is that it forces the reader to reflect on how the theorization of the text's core problematic might be done differently. The book addresses important and fascinating themes. Why is it that political theory, especially in its Anglophone variations, tends to replay the same arguments and approaches when it comes to the problem of the human imagination and its relations to power? Why does it remain, as this book does, in the shadow of Hobbes? One thinks of the many concentrated meditations on relations between imagination and political power written in the centuries which have passed since Hobbes, the libraries of works written on this subject, not just in political theory, but much wider literatures, and one begins to imagine the possibilities for a book on this subject. Likewise one begins to realize the absurdity of the basic premise grounding this book—the idea that it is possible for the state to colonize the political imaginations of its citizens and societies, and manipulate their fears, in the mythic ways it supposes and describes. In effect, the book illustrates the absurdity and limitations of the imaginary on which a vaguely Marxist, critical theory of modern state power is based, and a paucity of human imagination.

Indeed, the theorization of imagination, and its functions in human experience, has been absolutely central not just to political theory, but to western philosophy, from its inceptions, in the classical eras of Ancient Greece and Rome. In one dominant tradition, extending from Plato, images, the products of imagination, have tended to be condemned as inferior to the real, and sources of deception, as barriers to the discovery of truth. But in other traditions they have been understood as things human beings need in order to be able to act collectively upon the real, and to change the very nature of their individual, political, and social



circumstances. Theorizing imagination and its relations to political power today, as this book does, has to involve delineating the differences between these very different functions, and exploring the antagonisms between them.

There is, in other words, not simply an ‘image of thought’ as Gilles Deleuze convincingly argued there to be at the root of the western philosophical tradition, but an *image of imagination*. As much as thought has been imagined to have an affinity with the true, operating in possession of the true and materially wanting the true, imagination has been imagined to have an affinity with the false and material desire for the unreal. And so, as much as we can be said to need a radical critique of the dominant image of thought in western philosophy, so, also, do we need a radical critique of the image of imagination—one rigorous enough to expose and denounce the fundamentally non-philosophical nature of the image of imagination running through the Western tradition, to the present, and in books like this.

Politics is a complex art. On the one hand it is an art of preservation, or in contemporary parlance, of sustaining ways of life and forms of community—an art of protection and security. On the other hand it is also an art of destruction, of cutting, and of war waging. These two elements of the art of the political are also unthinkable without each other. No sustainability is possible that does not entail destruction. And in a sense this was Foucault’s great observation concerning the nature of the political; the ways in which any given regime, in so far as it is tasked with preserving and producing life, must engage at some point and in some ways in the taking of life. Spinoza would be as useful as a counterpoint to Hobbes in this context. His theory of the imagination revealed for us the ways in which these two biopolitical operations of power are prefigured, always, by movements of the imagination, that is to say, psychopolitical operations of power. The operation by which life is promoted, sustained, or enhanced is engendered by the pleasure we imagine that enhancement will deliver. It is itself a kind of expression of love, a will, and desire to see live, born of the image of pleasure. And likewise the operations by which life is taken, injured, or destroyed are engendered by the pleasure we imagine that injury or destruction will deliver us, and the less obstruction that life will perform in the development of the image of our life-enhancing pleasures. Such operations of power must be imagined before they can be performed. Psychopolitics precedes biopolitics.

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