

Dangerous Democracy: A View from the Periphery

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The title of my comments needs clarification. By the periphery, I mean the the United States, which is now a much-weakened player on the global scene. By dangerous democracy, I mean just that: not danger *to* democracy, but democracy *itself* as dangerous. That is how things look from the periphery, and you will tell me how exceptional the US case is. Perhaps in new global centers like Brazil and China, both well represented here, or France (which at least for intellectuals may never stop being the center of the earth) things look very different. And then again, perhaps they do not.

Seven years ago, at our Académie de la Latinité Conference in Alexandria, I spoke in support of a Global

Public Sphere in which political solidarities might be possible regardless of national borders, and irrespective of cultural differences. Today, at least from the periphery, that possibility looks dim. This is true despite accelerated communication, despite endless international conferences and dialogues of civilization. Lines of difference have hardened in the past decade. Anti-Muslim, anti-Mexican, antigay, antiimmigrant, antiabortion, anti-government, and anti-Arab sentiment have become more central than ever to public debates, inflamed by politicians who have made use of these negative passions for their own political advantage.

In Hollywood movies—but no less so in the art-market and the academy—Cynical Realism is in fashion. Nothing seems more out-of-date or absurdly hopeful than the politics of the 1960s—when student demonstrations spread around the globe like wildfire, attaining a measure of transnational solidarity far exceeding our own times, despite the absence of the internet, hence with an infinitesimally smaller quantity of global networking. Today, globalization is the hallmark of the times, and yet the idea of a common humanity loses ground. In this context, democracy becomes dangerous. What went wrong?

Political discourse is both symptom and cause of the present situation. Its purportedly democratic form rests on a structural contradiction between the nation-state organization of political life and the transnational realities of the global economy. We think as nationals; our material fate

is globally determined. Allusions to Marx are intentional. David Harvey's early book on *The Limits to Capital*, appeared in the 1980s, a time when Marxist theory and the Soviet Union were both on the wane. But in 2006, newly revised and updated, his book became an academic best seller. Harvey's analysis of the logic of finance capital as *necessarily* given to crisis (hence the financial debacle of 2008 was no surprise) provides a macro-economic explanation of the systemic tendencies of global capital that traditional neo-liberal accounts find inexplicable.¹

But if Marx remains today a brilliant analyst of the capitalist system, the theory's validity is descriptive. It interprets the world, whereas the point, of course, has always been to change it. The working people of the world were more united, more conscious of themselves as a class in 1912 or 1919, or even 1968, than they are in 2010. Clearly, in the US the trend has been in the opposite direction. There are pockets of trade union strength. The political alliance of organized labor with the Democratic Party remains. There are continuous instances of far-reaching worker solidarity and enlightened political action. But with few exceptions, the goal of labor organizations is to participate in capitalism, not to dismantle it.

When the Soviet Union disintegrated, euphoric Russians and East Europeans believed the neo-liberal mantra that democratic freedom and free markets went together

1 Harvey's video-lectures on reading Marx's *Capital* are free on his website: <http://davidharvey.org/>.

by necessity, although empirically that was already not the case (consider South Korea and Chile). Democratic political forms are hollow without people's control over their material life. Without government regulation, capitalism tends toward monopoly, not free markets. That most excellent historian of the market, Ferdinand Braudel, carefully delineated the difference when he declared capitalism the "antimarket," where the law of the jungle applies.²

It has long been suspected that US citizens are not in the same economic boat, as Robert Reich wrote several decades ago.³ But the divisions among them have been ambiguous. Economic self-interests cut across class lines. Certain workers, and certain businesses, were hurt by integration into the global economy; others were not.

2 "[C]apitalism' does not seem to me to be anything new, but rather a constant in Europe since the Middle Ages... I would argue that a third sector should be added to the pre-industrial model—that lowest stratum of the non-economy, the soil into which capitalism thrusts its roots but which it can never really penetrate. This lowest layer remains an enormous one. Above it, comes the favoured terrain of the market economy, with its many horizontal communications between the different markets: here a degree of automatic coordination usually links supply, demand and prices. Then alongside, or rather above this layer, comes the zone of the anti-market, where the great predators roam and the law of the jungle operates. This—today as in the past, before and after the industrial revolution—is the real home of capitalism" (Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*, p. 229-30).

3 Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism* (New York, Vintage, 1991).

Everyone lost in the global recession, at least initially. But now, as a slow economic recovery begins in the United States, class interests diverge significantly and become more evident. As jobs are lost, social welfare nets are destroyed and local governments are gutted, privatization makes further inroads into public institutions, the wage bill is reduced for capital by eliminating benefits, the rich continue to get richer, and unemployment soars. This is how it looks from the US periphery—not dissimilar to Japan after 1990, or Indonesia after 1998,⁴ or perhaps many economies in the global North today.

Nothing seems to me more obvious than the fact that the problems that plague the present order (or disorder) of the global economy, are systemic within capitalism. They are not caused or cured due to particular cultures, or particular policies, or particular parties in power. And yet nowhere in US public discourse is class, or capitalism, or systemic crisis, or the regime of private property systematically explored. We shun the language of Marx that was buried with ceremony at the end of the Cold War, even if, as Derrida insisted, the ghost of Marx

4 Japan has since experienced chronic deflation; Indonesia has recovered with the sacrifice of worker rights; Argentina had a moment of glory with its factory self-management movement that made a significant (if waning) symbolic impact on political discourse in the public sphere; but the worker-controlled factories are tangential to Argentine's economic recovery, based more substantially on exports (of soy to China, for example). "Growth" measured in GDP has returned, with corresponding growth unemployment and income discrepancy.

continues to haunt our present.⁵ Perhaps it is because I live in the periphery (I hope our Chinese colleagues here will enlighten me), but it appears to me that this taboo against publically analyzing the global economy from a Marxist perspective extends to the People's Republic of China as well.

My argument is that, in the case of the United States, the suppression of critiques of the *system* of global capital within the public discourse is a reason that democracy has become dangerous. Systemic critiques violate the bedrock myth that free markets create free societies. In light of this taboo, practiced by Democrats and Republicans alike, the American political debate is incoherent. The success of a phenomenon like the Tea Party movement, that displaces the existential fears of ordinary working people onto foreigners, should not surprise us. Under present conditions and practices of political discourse, it is one of the few ways of somehow making sense.

Global media has fractured, not united the global public. In theory, the increasing concentration of ownership might have been expected to cause an alarmingly homogenized reporting of news and an overly hierarchical mode of the production of knowledge. In practice the consequence has been very different—more democratic,

5 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York, Routledge, 1994).

and more dangerous. Consumer choice is the name of democracy here. Free choice between marketed products substitutes as democracy's avatar, and the real discrepancy between economic and political realms is glossed over in the process.⁶ Consider freedom of the press within the present media regime. CNN International programming is significantly different from programs domestically available on CNN/US. The premise is that domestic news coverage must be (because it technologically can be) broken up and separated from global coverage. Targeting news markets in specific localities supposedly brings the media closer to the people (while cutbacks in global reporting incidentally save the industry money). Choice is given to a consuming public between multiple carriers of news on the basis of their pre-existing preferences (hence, not new at all). This strategy guarantees that localities remain local in their thinking, and their understanding of the world dangerously provincial—far more so, in fact, than was the case when only a few television networks competed directly for a

6 According to Wikipedia, it was advertising, not consumer choice that led to regionalization of the newspaper: In 2009, *The [New York] Times* began production of local inserts in regions outside of the New York area. Beginning October 16, 2009, a two-page "Bay Area" insert was added to copies of the Northern California edition on Fridays and Sundays. *The Times* commenced production of a similar Friday and Sunday insert to the Chicago edition on November 20, 2009. The inserts consist of local news, policy, sports, and culture pieces, usually supported by local advertisements.

national audience, and all Americans were informed of the same, world-wide events.

Today televised news shows are first and foremost entertainment. Partisan audiences are expected to watch their favorite commentators ridicule others who do not share their views. (Alternatively, so-called balanced reporting sanctimoniously gives both sides of any debate as if both sides have equally valid arguments.) The internet works in a similar fashion. By getting access to users' pre-existing preferences, targeted marketing encourages people to read more of the same. Facebook networks, internet dating sites, Twitter, etc. produce enclaves of like-minded contacts who are expected to identify with each other in terms of every and all of their already-held views. Non-members of the network are held at a distance, their opinions often reduced to caricatures. Given this everyday reality, Habermas' dream of rational consensus in the public sphere appears hallucinatory.

Those of us who grew up reading *The New York Times* as a daily ritual can only deplore its present fate. In financial hard times, with less than a million subscribers, the paper has suffered a dearth of global reporting, a rise of front-page human-interest rather than news stories, and a retreat from the global role that it has played since World War II. *The New York Times* was never averse to criticizing the power of the state or the corporations. It was able to do this precisely because its hegemonic status reflected—with good reason—the public trust. (Today, 73% of the American public believes *The New York Times* has

a “liberal bias,” even though nowhere near that number reads the paper.) The news reporting of Al-Jazeera has become influential today for similar reasons—not by competing for market share, but because it is comprehensive, reliable, and *therefore* growingly hegemonic throughout the Arab speaking world.⁷ I do not know how great the difference is between Al-Jazeera’s Arabic and English language reporting. I do know that the US public sphere would be enormously enhanced if Al-Jazeera English programming were available widely to US audiences from private cable TV companies without a special fee.

The public is not stupid. People know that the system is not working for them. But they are easily manipulated because they are uninformed. Our universities are not helping to remedy the situation. The training of public intellectuals is not considered part of our mandate. Instead, we train professionals—experts who, when they do enter political debates, head for Washington D.C. to advise the policy makers. The public is led to believe that the expertise of others exonerates them from citizen responsibility. They do not need to be involved in the deliberation process, and the consequence is passivity as one extreme, uninformed protest as the other.

The US still has the best university system in the world, but it is in the throes of a radical transformation.

⁷ *The New York Times* has 16 news bureaus in the state of New York, 11 for national news, and 26 foreign bureaus (total 53). Al-Jazeera has 70 bureaus in all.

Science and technology are increasingly wedded to the research and development needs of private industry. Political Science and Sociology are content to become handmaidens to the discipline of Economics, the mathematical and statistical methods of which are the gold standard of truth. The role of the humanities is reduced to a sideshow, a Potemkin village where values, cultural diversity and historical wisdom are put on display. Most distressing is the tendency toward complacency in the humanities. Rather than insisting on a hearing in the public sphere, humanists remain within their ivory towers, apparently failing to notice that the nature of their jobs has suffered from the same forces that burden the work force outside: speed-up (pressure to publish in quantity), deskilling (handling clerical work by internet that once provided jobs for a full-time staff), and deregulation (adjunct rather than tenure status for professors⁸).

Without a doubt, critical discourse exists in the humanities. Indeed, it thrives there, a blue orchard in the cultural landscape. But criticism may itself be part of the problem. The favorite object of attack by US humanist scholars is the neo-liberal subject—an isolated, self-seeking, quality-neutral individual, abstracted from the particularities of culture, gender and race. Multiple humanists elaborate the techniques of bio-politics that produce this subjectivity. While the neo-liberal subject is

8 In 1960, 75% of US college teachers were full-time tenure or tenure-track professors; in 2010, only 27% fit that description.

clearly recognized as a construct of *homo oeconomicus*, hence the offspring of the specifically capitalist economic system, the focus is not on understanding that system. Humanists are intent on analyzing the discourses of governmentality that *seem* democratic but deliver social control.

True, global capitalism is widely recognized within the humanities as the power behind these processes, or at least the power that gains from them, but the real culprit is discourse, the culturally mediated articulation of these forces. Political critique is limited to understanding how the processes of power are insinuated within our specific cultural identities and indeed, onto our very bodies, presumably in order to resist them. But what is to prevent this form of criticism from getting mired in cynicism? If the processes are not overtly intentional, if the mechanisms of control reach their tentacles into the most apparently harmless practices of everyday life, then how do we with our constructed subjectivities, as atomized, neo-liberal subjects, avoid paralyzing paranoia on the one hand or de-politicizing resignation on the other?

There is a move among US intellectuals toward ethics, understood as personal morality that eschews engagement in the messy realm of the political. Really existing democracy is dismissed as ineffective at best, politically obfuscating at worst. Neo-liberalism is said to infect the logic of politics and markets alike. Citizenship is an ideological subject-formation. Notions of the public good are totalitarian, and welfare programs are forms

of surveillance. Social justice is old-fashioned. To organize for the latter is to collaborate with policing regimes. Anarchism is the least bad alternative. Withdrawal is the preferred political practice. End of story.

Of course, this is an exaggeration. The practices of critical theory in the humanities are far more “nuanced” (a favorite word in the discourse) than I have described. Moreover, cynicism need not win out over hope. Obama’s presidential campaign changed the academic atmosphere seemingly overnight. Suddenly, the political discourse became rational, constructed subjectivities put aside their multiple identities, and citizens united enthusiastically for a common cause. Obama brought two conflicting dimensions, global and national, into focus in one human being. To a global public, his election showed the United States was a place where the son of an African immigrant could become President. Simultaneously, he embodied more than a century of US civil rights struggles for racial equality. His victory on both counts was exhilarating. But the symbolic strength of Obama’s candidacy was followed by growing disillusionment with his presidency, demonstrating that a shift in discourse is not enough.

The policies of Obama as President have been frustratingly cautious. He remains opposed in principle to policies of the Bush administration, while staying very close to them in practice. He does not want the Afghanistan war (but intensifies the American occupation). He believes in government intervention in the economy (but not FDR’s interventionist New Deal). On cultural issues

he is a left-of-center liberal (but personally against gay marriage). A technocrat, his governing style is to trust the experts (but not those who are radically critical of the status quo). *And*, he is a staunch supporter of the “free market” with only minimum government regulation, and no ideological reservation.

On economic issues, there might have been solidarity between Democrats and Republicans as to how to handle the 2008 economic crisis. Indeed, while still a candidate, Obama gave immediate support to the Republican administration’s plan to bail out the banks. But precisely his realistic acknowledgment of the fact that there is no space between Democrats and Republicans in their unquestioned acceptance of the capitalist system enabled the Republican Party to launch a diabolically brilliant, political counter-attack: While sharing his pro-market beliefs, they opposed him anyway. As a minority party, the Republicans could not, and did not desire to stop his support of Wall Street, using government intervention to bolster the banks and industry. Instead, they out-flanked his pro-business policies, but they did it with right-wing populist slogans that appealed to precisely the working people who would suffer the consequences. “Support fiscal responsibility” (cut government social programs). “Keep the Bush tax cuts” (that favor the very wealthy). Repeal the “socialist” legislation of “Obama-care” (the weak public option to private health insurance). “Reform Social Security” (privatize retirement savings as personal investment risks). The call is for ordinary people

to become zealously engaged in undermining their own class welfare. And (I write two weeks before the mid-term elections) it seems to be working.

Some label such right-wing populism as fascism. But in the US case, precisely the economic policies are radically different. Fascism was corporatist; it entailed heavy government involvement in the private sector. The new right is as antistate as any antiglobal anarchist might desire. Instead, it is in terms of affect that right-wing populism and antiglobal anarchism are opposed. The latter is optimistic about the future of the human community. Right-wing populism is motivated by fear.

“The Civilization of Fear” was an early theme of l’Académie de la Latinité. Foremost in our minds at that time was the fear-laden atmosphere in the wake of the September 11 attacks in New York City and the Bush administration’s bellicose response—invading not one, but two sovereign nations, the governments of which had not attacked our own. In terms of the perceived clash of civilizations, much has been done in the US to lessen the tensions. Initiatives came from many directions. Local churches, schools and community organizations worked to build bridges and increase cultural and religious understanding. Publishers translated texts on liberal and radical Islam. Students are now funded to study Arabic abroad. Scholarly research, art exhibitions, and video series are promoted in formerly neglected areas—Andalusian Spain, Late Antiquity, the Silk Road, and the shared culture of the Mediterranean, as well as Islamic

civilization, comparative religion, Middle Eastern Studies, and the cultural anthropology of international law. Obama's election victory and early speech in Cairo seemed to promise civilizational understanding. But in one short year, these gains underwent a reversal: anti-immigrant legislation in Arizona, opposition to an Islamic Cultural Center in New York City, suspicions that Obama is a foreign-born, clandestine Muslim, and a pervasive atmosphere of xenophobia mobilized by the Tea Party with political success. What accounts for this rapid transformation?

Surprisingly, the War on Terror, the still violent situation in Iraq and stalled offensive in Afghanistan are issues largely absent from the political debate in the 2010 mid-term elections. Defense of America's superpower status is considerably muted. The Tea Party is split between isolationists and interventionists. The dominant tone of the political discourse is, rather, *existential* fear—fear that millions of jobs lost in the financial recession are not coming back, that corporations will ship more enterprises overseas, that people will continue to lose their homes, that immigrants are consuming more social resources than they contribute, and that government spending on all levels—local, state, and national—will undermine still further the already uncertain economic situation.

Existential fear permeates the most basic levels of daily life. The US citizenry is experiencing first-hand what it means to undergo the “structural readjustment”

mandated by the Washington consensus that other countries have been compelled to experience, in order to adapt local working conditions to the needs of the global economy. But this time, the readjustment is not only *within* capitalism. Capitalism itself is undergoing structural change. The era of finance capital that dates to *belle époque* of Reagan, Clinton, Bush *et fils* is being countered by a pendulum swing back to an epoch of production expansion, from which the United States may well be excluded.⁹ Hegemony is moving away from the finance capitals of the North and toward the resource — and land — rich countries of the global South. In this period of transition, Brazil is thriving, capable of expanding its production base at the same time that expands social welfare and stabilizes its democracy. Brazil's success is under-reported to the US public, but the authorities are well aware. Not without envy, Obama recently repeated his 2009 comment at the G-20 summit, that Lula de Silva leaves office as the most popular President on earth.

And what of China? Are we witnessing not only an enmeshing of US-Chinese economic fates, but a true subsumption of Chinese socialism within the global capitalist system? Or, is China's macro-economic understanding still informed by Marx's critique in ways that explain its

9 Beverly J. Silver, "2010: Crisis of Labor, Crisis of Capital: A Global View from the End of the 'American Century,'" talk at the Center for Place, Culture and Politics, CUNY Graduate Center, October 19, 2010.

policies of eschewing direct loans to developing countries (like Brazil), and purchasing foreign land and production resources instead? Is the goal of the government to succeed in competition with capitalist investors while remaining socialist in significant ways? I am eager to learn from our Chinese colleagues how the present transformation of global capital looks to them.

One thing seems certain. The hegemony of the United States is on the wane. Perhaps it is only in terms of military resources that its market and political niche is still unchallenged. Many nation states continue to benefit from military security provided by the *Pax Americana*, allowing them to keep their military budgets small. But precisely this situation may be the most disturbing manifestation of our dangerous democracy. The world is entrusting the fate of the planet to the actions of a country, the United States, whose citizens are uninformed, or worse, *disinformed* regarding the rest of the world. Nurtured on ignorance and fear, *these citizens nonetheless have the vote*, and a small but enthusiastic number of them wants to use their vote to elect a new breed of politicians whose global understanding is just like their own.

I remain hopeful that these dangers will not be realized. But my optimism is not based on the present political system. Neither Democratic nor Republican Party has been honest with the public. Both avoid acknowledging the degree to which the recovery of global capital will need to come at the expense of the nation's standard of living and its earlier global dominance. The "middle

class” that Obama still addresses in his middle-of-the-road political rhetoric is a vanishing signifier. While the gap between rich and poor increases as the economy recovers, the mythical middle tends to disappear.¹⁰ His short-term technocratic fixes will not change the situation, because the problem is structural. Can US citizens be counted on to reconcile themselves to the realities of this shifting global situation?

On, October 30, ten days before the US midterm elections (and the day before the presidential run-off election in that enviously benign democracy, Brazil), there will be a non-political, political event in the United States. Two TV entertainers, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, whose popular news satire nightly shows have earned the trust of a population grown wary of professional politicians, will join forces to lead a demonstration in Washington D. C. Stewart, who ridicules political life as a New York liberal, has proclaimed a “Rally to Restore Sanity,” appealing to “rational people”—those US citizens disgusted with the extreme rhetoric of distrust fostered by both Democrat

10 Hacker and Pierson argue convincingly that the rich have essentially bought the country, focusing on two statistics: Since 1980, the top 1% of the country has received 36% of all gains in household incomes. The top 1/10 of 1% (300,000 people) received a greater increase than 60% (180 million people). Jacob S Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2010).

and Republican candidates in this election campaign.¹¹ Colbert, whose TV character is a parody of right-wing radical pundits, wants instead to “Keep Fear Alive.” They have merged their two events under the title: “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear.”

Who would have thought that, faced with a Tocquevilian moment of dangerous democracy, we would need to rely on two TV satirical showmen to resurrect the Habermasian dream of reason within the US public sphere?

11 <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Election-2010/Vox-News/2010/0917/Stephen-Colbert-Jon-Stewart-rally-Might-TV-duo-affect-Election-2010>.

