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Politics Most Unusual

Violence, Sovereignty and Democracy in the 'War on Terror'

Damian Cox
Bond University

Michael Levine
University of Western Australia

Saul Newman
Goldsmiths – University of London

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*To Jean Charles de Menezes, and the countless
other victims of the 'war on terror'*

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Preface

The changes in political landscape wrought by the events on and after 9/11 – the move to what we call in this book ‘politics most unusual’ – have brought about a significant revitalization of political theory and close scrutiny of the relation between political theory and moral philosophy. It seems that there is hardly a political theorist or moral philosopher around that has not in some way turned their attention to these events. After all, the conglomeration of political actions traced back to 9/11 (sometimes accurately, sometimes not) has resulted in massive loss of life and has changed the lives of a great many.

Some of the academic work that has been produced post 9/11 rehashes old issues in old ways. Moral philosophers working in ‘just war’ or ‘human rights’ traditions, as well as philosophers working more broadly within the ‘analytic’ tradition of moral philosophy, continue to be embroiled with the problem of defining terrorism and the question of whether terrorism can ever be morally justified. Many are obsessed with, and tend to overstate, the practical significance of non-combatant immunity and criteria for distinguishing combatants from non-combatants. (In a sense, they are conceptualizing the issue as if armies still lined up to face each other in a field of battle.) Many continue to finesse the doctrine of double-effect in an effort to make it seem practical; as if it could be enlisted to do the analytical and explanatory work needed to get clear about the moral challenge of terrorism. The conclusions of some other moral philosophers are trite. Is something of real significance uncovered when a philosopher discovers that at least one reason why terrorism is immoral is that terrorists instill fear, thereby undermining the tranquility and comfort of ordinary life? And what value is there in the re-emergence of those old Machiavellians, only recently ‘out of the closet’, who argue for the moral permissibility of torture and assassination? Part of the motivation for writing this book is a sense of the inadequacy of so much of the philosophical response to politics after 9/11.

However, where mainstream academic philosophy has come up with very little that is new or worthwhile, new perspectives have emerged from other sources, with analyses that draw from many disciplines. Responses to 9/11 are being scrutinized, theorized and problematized in relation to democratic theory, notions of sovereignty and the so-called

state of exception. What is to be made of the fact that some Western nations, notably the US and its allies such as Israel, have endorsed and practised torture and have sought either a legal justification for it or a redefinition of it? Just how much of a threat to democracy is the creeping normalization of a 'state of exception' given that exceptions allow torture, invasions of privacy and curtailment of many other human rights and freedoms? What has become and what is to become of the very idea of a democracy given the lawlessness and barbarity of democratic nations like the US? Democracy is not an all or nothing thing. But even those who see democracy as largely procedural, constitutional and institutional are beginning to claim that contemporary institutions of democracy fall too far short of standards of equity and fairness to be called fully democratic. And for those who believe that democracy must be substantive as well as procedural – that it must guarantee the kinds of rights and conditions that make democratic life possible; that it must adhere to the principle of equal consideration of interests¹ – the self-claimed democracies of the West fall a very long way short of a fully democratic condition; they are partial democracies at best.

This book argues that the current political climate has been a long time coming. It seeks to describe deeper issues and underlying dynamics that are causally related to the violence, lies, prejudices, curtailments of freedoms, religious fervour, neoliberal and neoconservative ways of thinking and other threats to democracy constitutive of what we term 'politics most unusual'. It is a book that eschews easy answers and solutions along with unwarranted optimism. It does not counsel despair but is meant to engender serious concern – perhaps even useful worry.

The argument of the book is developed through seven chapters. Chapter 1 examines the authoritarian nature of responses to terrorism characteristic of Western democracies after 9/11, particularly, but by no means only, those of the US and the UK. The underlying logic of this response – in which demands for security are established on the basis of the manipulative creation of *insecurity* – leads to a highly anti-democratic political environment. We set out to describe the logic of the security paradigm: its power as well as its paradoxical and anti-democratic nature. Underlying the vulnerability of a population to manipulation in a politics of security – at the hands of the security industry and its political masters – is a pervasive psychological vulnerability. We explore a number of aspects of this vulnerability in the next two chapters.

The politics of security relies on an extreme sensitivity to threats of violence: sensitivity out of all proportion to actual levels of risk. The general vulnerability of people to this kind of fallacy is well known and

not at all mysterious. Of deeper concern is the vulnerability of people to violent responses *per se*. One feature of the politics of security is a kind of violence directed against those who threaten and those who *might* threaten or indeed those who somehow *resemble* or *represent* people who might threaten. The violent response to threat (real, perceived or invented) characterizes much of post-9/11 politics. The US response to the assault of 9/11 was a murderous one: a rampage of violence, a violent reassertion of power, shock and awe as television therapy. Our aim in Chapter 2, therefore, is to try to explain something of the psychological basis of this violent reflex. We find the most explanatorily useful term in which to understand this phenomenon is that of prejudice, and the most powerful explanation of the operations of prejudice and its translation into violence to be a psychoanalytic one in which prejudicial mental states function primarily as modes of ego-defence. The crucial feature of a threat of violence is not the risk of harm *per se*, but the affront to one's sense of self and to the narcissistic comforts of one's self-image (an image which, in the prejudicial mind, is constructed out of a denigration of others). We concentrate on two kinds of prejudice, both central features of post-9/11 politics: racism and religion. Racist attitudes and religious belief are both kinds of prejudicial mental states, and are both ubiquitous sources of violence.

Another psychological vulnerability—another crucial piece of the puzzle—is the vulnerability of people to lies and distortion, and to political mendacity in particular. In Chapter 3, we take up the task of explaining this vulnerability. What primarily needs explaining is not the fact that politicians lie or that their lies often go unexposed. What needs explaining is the fact that politicians get away with lies when they are transparently caught out by them. A politician lies. We accept that they have lied. And yet we are disposed to believe their very next claim. What accounts for this gullibility and this unwillingness to hold politicians to account for their lies? Why did it not matter that George W. Bush lied so transparently and manipulatively about Iraqi weapons programmes in the lead-up to the 2003 US invasion and subjugation of Iraq? This has even been confirmed by his former press secretary Scott McClellan, whose recently published book exposing the Administration's deceit and propagandistic manipulation of the American public has created quite a stir.² We look for the explanation of our vulnerability to political lies and to the other mendacious characteristics of political discourse – to spin, distortion, rhetorical manipulation and so on – in aspects of group psychology.

In Chapter 4, we turn to the question of the political character of violence and, in particular, the violence at the heart of the idea of

sovereignty. The idea of sovereignty presupposes the possibility of operating under a state of exception: a state in which ordinary, constitutional and legal protections are suspended. The decision to operate under a state of exception is a prerogative of sovereignty. The state of exception is therefore a crystallization of the power of the state, a strange no-man's-land beyond the law in which the sovereign can act with violent impunity. We argue that this situation applies increasingly to political life in contemporary Western societies, societies which define themselves as formally liberal democratic but which implement 'security' measures that are more akin to those of authoritarian police states.

Chapter 5 examines the internationalization of the violence of post-9/11 politics in the guise of what we call the project of American Empire. We argue that while imperialism has long been a feature of US foreign policy, under the Bush Administration the project of empire became fully explicit. This is something that could be seen in that administration's overt militarism, its doctrine of pre-emptive strikes and regime change, and in the ideological and political discourse of neo-conservatism. We also develop a critique of imperialist politics on both ethical and pragmatic grounds, taking issue with those who attempt to justify US empire in terms of either liberal humanitarianism or the promotion of a stable world order.

The project of American Empire is morally bankrupt, and the paradigm of security leads to authoritarian excess, the violent assertion of sovereignty and the permanency of a state of exception. If we are right about all this, then what are the prospects for a more just, morally legitimate and democratic politics in the future? We turn to this question in the next two chapters. First we consider the question as a purely ethical one. What prospects are there for pursuing a security agenda within the basic ethical framework of liberal democracy? In Chapter 6, we examine Michael Ignatieff's attempt to do just this through an ethics of the lesser evil. Ignatieff tries to show how liberal democracies, as they currently stand, are capable of responding to the threat of international terrorism – are capable of fighting a 'war on terror' – without compromising fundamental ethical commitments of a liberal democracy. He does this by trying to articulate a compromise ethics: an ethics in which a greater evil (the destruction of democracy) may be averted by allowing lesser evils (preventative imprisonment, extra-judicial killings, war). His attempt unravels very easily, as we show. Although we have not the space to explore every possibility, we suggest that there is no ethically legitimate compromise to be had between pursuit of the security paradigm and the maintenance of

the ethical conditions of liberal democracy. This paves the way for our discussion of the politics of anti-security in the final chapter.

In Chapter 7, we move at last to the task of advancing positive suggestions for ways forward. How do we respond to contemporary political situation in full knowledge of the depth and complexity of the problems we face? How do we respond in ways that are neither politically naive nor assume that the psychological vulnerabilities which underlie so much of the condition of contemporary politics can be wished away? We argue for a range of concrete measures that would ameliorate many of the worst aspects of this politics, including the promotion of a politics of anti-security, but we also recognize that there is no honest hope for them without a profound re-invigoration of democratic culture. The challenge of a politics most unusual is first and foremost a challenge to this culture. We examine a major ideological obstacle to democracy today – neoliberalism – and suggest ways of getting around it. We highlight some of the principal conditions for bringing democracy back to life.

As we write this Preface, Bush's reign is in its twilight hour, and we are witnessing the unseemly and interminable nomination contest between the two Democrat presidential contenders. The future political situation in the US is unclear. Some perceive a new politics of hope, and believe a Democratic administration (assuming McCain doesn't get in!) will mean an end to the disastrous 'war on terror' in the form we have endured it for six long years, and a radically new direction in US foreign and domestic policy. We are not quite so sanguine. Indeed, the Clinton–Obama spectacle over the past few months – with its overtones over race and religion and with the same talk of God, 'national security' and support for Israel – seems to suggest little grounds for optimism. The 'controversy of the two pastors' sums it all up: Jeremiah Wright, Obama's pastor, was vociferously condemned from every quarter (including from Obama himself) for his 'inflammatory rhetoric' over (in our view perfectly reasonable) comments about racism, the oppression of the Palestinians and the US bearing some of the blame for 9/11. And, on the other side, a certain evangelical Reverend Hagee, who has endorsed McCain, caused quite a stir himself when he said that God sent Hitler to chase the Jews out of Europe so they could go to Israel. Somehow, this speaks for all the things we talk about in this book: the deeply troubling mix of religious extremism, political spin and image control, blind support for Israel (driven in reality by anti-Semitism), racism, economic inequality, imperialism, double standards and the denial of moral culpability that characterizes much of what passes as politics in the US at the moment. As we have argued, it is only through a democratic

transformation of politics – not only in the US but everywhere – that there can be any hope for a different kind of future.

This work is collaboration by a political theorist and two philosophers. It is a very different work than one of us could have produced and in virtually all ways it is better. Three heads are sometimes better than one and we can each heartily recommend collaborative work. Of course, broad agreement on the important issues, along with a shared concern about the moral condition of contemporary politics, does not guarantee agreement on all particular points. Each of the chapters is the result of considerable collaboration that often altered an initial draft considerably.

In his *Essay on Liberty* Mill discussed the importance of dissent and various liberties, not least of which was freedom of speech. He believed that something good, or at least better, could often come of disagreement (even profound disagreement), whereas idle agreement and blind or cockeyed adherence to tradition merely enshrined ‘dead dogma’ and impeded all kinds of progress – political, social and personal. Like most great philosophers, Mill was mistaken about a great many things, indeed most things. Let’s hope he got this one right.

Notes

1. See T. Christiano (2002) ‘Democracy and Equality’, in D. Estlund (ed.) In *Democracy* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 46, pp. 315–50.
2. S. McClellan (2008) *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington’s Culture of Deception* (Public Affairs).