

Sovereignty and the Cult of Immediacy

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My question here is: what constitutes the attractiveness of the Trump candidacy and regime to its supporters? What is its draw? What are the main elements of the ideology--at once phantasmic and metaphysical--that this regime represents? How does it unwittingly repeat aspects of late eighteenth century Counterenlightenment--irrationalism--while combining these with motifs more specifically drawn from the discourse of twentieth century authoritarianisms and fascisms--e.g. the myth of absolute sovereignty and a cult of radical immediacy that entails a disavowal of finitude and temporality? And how does it fuse these with the American discourse of the free will of the individual to appeal to the anxieties of a broad swathe of the American public faced with the globalization not just of the economy but, perhaps even more threateningly, of culture in general? My response remains here both hypothetical and fragmentary.

To begin with sovereignty: globalization represents the radical limitation of the American cultural Subject (both individual and collective), not just an *external* limit to the US will to power but an *internal* differentiation, perhaps even an internal dissolution or, to some, a decadence of the American Subject. For this Subject finds itself as it were suddenly--since 9/11?--entirely connected with and dependent on multiplicitous and unmasterable otherness--the surrounding world. Good mo(u)rning. This constitutive relation of the would-be self-same US American Subject with radically different cultural economies means that this Subject has become in essential part its own radical outside. Understandably beside themselves over this beside-oneseif-ness of being a self, but without the conceptual-emotional means to come to terms with it, the enthusiastic supporters of the movements represented by the Trump regime embrace the illusory

consolation of a Leader figure who represents himself as absolutely self-same and sovereign: "I did it my way," etc. This sovereign--the sovereign as narcissist--is the One who decides on the state of the American exception.¹ This sovereign--our "Leader"--symbolically represents the absolute freedom of the individual (male, straight, white, and Christian)--a nostalgic distortion of the American Idea--and invites us all to identify with him, to follow him, to believe in him ("believe me"), and to celebrate our own noncastrated condition vicariously through his own transcendence of limits in every sense.

The sovereign transcendence of the limit or border in general, however, has a two-sided relationship to this very concept of the border. On the one hand, to be free, one must suffer no border, no limit that would constrain one's self-affirmation. (One tactic through which Trump himself simulates and approaches this state of affairs is by always keeping all the options on the table, and by having no fixed principles: being contourless.) But on the other hand, equally, to be free, one must prevent any other(ness) from entering into one's own territory except as invited, as subject to one's own will. One's borders must be absolutely impenetrable from without, but they must pose no limits to one's own expansive tendencies. The border must only be a border for--i.e. against--the other, and one must oneself be the sole positing origin of that border. Further, it belongs to this limitlessly limit-positing freedom that, in its very indeterminacy, it exists fully in the here and now and that in this here and now it entirely coincides with itself: it is in a state of immediacy. As nothing limits it from without, so nothing mediates its relationship with itself and divides it from itself, as for example language divides us from ourselves and from our experiences.

This conception of the borderlessly self-bordered and immediately free self is structurally untenable, however, because--as Jacques Derrida tirelessly demonstrated--any border that exists between myself and the other--even if I posit it--at once connects me with the other: it mediates between me and the other in both senses of mediation, not just preventing a connection but also establishing one.² The border that is between me and the other is then both constitutively inside me and constitutively inside the other, for it holds us within

the bounds of our separate selves, and so belongs to who we are. But being inside of both of us, it connects us intimately. It renders my relationship with myself one that is mediated through the other. The untenability of the border as pure exclusion of the other consequently requires that those who hold fast to the illusory promise of impermeably "secure" borders can never build strong enough borders against the others; they are driven by their own ideological project of self-purification to expend more and more energy and resources, and to exercise more and more destructive violence, in the name of that very project.

How does such a metaphysical ideology or cult of sovereign immediacy manifest itself in some of the main gestures and positions of the Trump campaign and the current regime in its initial phase? Starting with apparently *external* limits, mediations, and differences: the rhetoric and reality of the wall against Mexico is the most crudely obvious instance of playing to the fantasy of securing the US American Subject against the other, marked as Southern, dark-skinned, native American, etc. The wall transparently symbolizes the possibility of designating as an existential threat or "enemy" à la Carl Schmitt all those "uninvited guests" who might remind us that we are always other than what we think we are: that all identity has its limits.³ It designates the purified identity of the US American as-- "essentially"--Northern, white, of European origin (albeit certainly not European!), and even preferentially Protestant. And finally, "Mexico will pay for the wall." Why? Because if the other does not pay the price of her exclusion, one is being imposed upon by the other to keep the other out, and so one is not truly preventing the other from having any effect on oneself that one hasn't chosen freely. The logic here is insidiously impeccable, and its supporters understand this intuitively.

Simultaneous with this exclusion, the both rhetorical and real act constituted by the Muslim ban--intentionally muddying the distinction between refugees and terrorists--reinforces the idea of the purification of the US Subject as white, Northern, and also Western, and draws the line very clearly at the distinction between Christian and Muslim, while providing itself with alibis as well as profits by restricting the ban to citizens of a limited number of predominantly

Muslim states. According to the echoing dictates of the Aryan myth here, the role of the inimical Semitic other is filled here by the Muslim, vaguely associated with the linguistic and ethnic Arab essence. As the Muslim ban tries to remind us, the West begins, three religions of the book or no, *outside* the Muslim world. As always in Aryanist Orientalism, the semitic other here is not only divided into Hebraic and Arabic, but it is also split into the good and bad semite, the assimilable and the non-assimilable one. In this instance, the Muslim functions in essence as the "bad" Semite. American Jewry, for its part, is confronted with a choice between two options: to be a "good" Jew, the American Jew can opt for white, Western identity, in which case he must support both the US policies hostile to Islam and the reactionary forces in Israel, which is henceforth entirely functionalized as, i.e.. reduced to, a Christian bulwark against the Muslim East, and by implication against the East and South more generally. In this case, Israel functions much as Judaism functioned for the ambivalence of medieval Christianity: as the (all too porous) limit to the pagan world and as its mediating developmental passage to the Christian world. Alternatively, if she chooses to be a "bad" Jew, that is, a "bad Semite," the kind *not* assimilable to the white Western Christian male fold, then the henceforth "no longer properly American" Jew can choose to reject a reactionary Israeli stance, favor and work toward reconciliation between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East, and reject xenophobic attitudes and policies vis-a-vis Muslims and Arabs in the US. It is only to the "good" Jew, the "good" Semite, in these terms, that Trump's claim not to be an anti-Semite applies, as his relationships with Jared Kushner, David Friedman, Benjamin Netanyahu, Bannon, and others make quite clear. It applies neither to the "bad" Jew nor above all to the Arab or Muslim world. And the alliance with Putin's Russia, given Putin's rhetoric about how the Christian West is failing to save itself from the Muslim hordes, supports this position further.

But of course, these borders vainly erected against the ostensibly "external" cultures--borders meant to deny that one has any limits imposed from without--are not the only ones. The regime is also trying to wall out (or absorb

into itself, which amounts to the same) "internal" institutions that limit executive sovereignty, namely the judiciary, the press, and education. Just a word on each.

The discourse of law (adherence to which the judiciary ensures)--both in the literal sense of the legal institutions, and in the more general sense of rule and regularity--is manifestly a discourse of limits. As with the instance of state borders per se, the current regime proposes to set limits on the others, especially the limit-setters, while placing itself ostentatiously above them as law-positing origin. Law and order is here to be in principle monopolized by the lawless sovereign. As Washington State Attorney General Bob Ferguson has made very clear, and as James Comey and others have tried to uphold, no one is above the law, but the current regime and its supporters are obviously not on board with this principle.

The logic of their refusal is not only rooted in the fantasy of freedom as lawlessness, and the notion that the Leader has to have a free hand to impose order by excluding anything he deems inimical to that freedom, but also in a certain antinomial aspect of the Christian and especially Lutheran discourse, for which the law of Jews (and then of Catholics) is replaced by faith. "Believe me," says Trump, again and again, in a grotesque parody of the Christian discourse which nonetheless exploits its powerful hold on the American public. This hostility toward law is reminiscent, however distantly, of the delegitimation of the entire discourse of law, and its entire subordination to the party apparatus, that was characteristic of the National Socialist regime, and that there, of course, went hand in hand with the demonization of the Jews. Nazi legislation against the Jews, for example, signified legislation against law itself, and Hitler famously said that he wanted to make it impossible for there to be anything like a lawyer in Germany. These echoes should indeed give us pause. Today, too, granting innumerable differences, Islamophobia is often linked to the association of Islam with the figure of law under the name of Shariah.

Concerning the press--or, precisely the news "media"--their function as *mediators* of the power of the government makes them--quite logically, given the presuppositions of the current executive regime--enemies of the regime itself as

embodiment of freedom right here and now. News critical of the President is by definition "fake news," but further, any interpretive reflection is by definition critical because it inscribes the President's fantasmic immediate self-presence into the differentiation and deferral of representational mediation. To subordinate media to the power of capital, however, is to subordinate it to the principle of freedom, the freedom of the sovereign entrepreneur.

Finally, the attack on education initiated with the DeVos appointment, and supported not only by plans to cancel NEH and NEA funding but also by appointments such as that of science-hostile climate-change skeptic Scott Pruitt to head the EPA, is manifestly aimed at the further consolidation of the power of the executive as the instrument of large capital and the interests of the super-rich. But crucially, these interests are sold in the name of limitless freedom and immediate presence. In contrast, education means--once again--*mediation*. It reminds us that we cannot just speak for ourselves without further ado, because language, knowledge, tradition, history, aesthetic conventions, and the laws and facts of nature as determined by science, within the limits of methodological self-reflection, both make possible what we might have to say and limit what we can say. They enable our speech and distance us from ourselves at once.

To conclude: in a historical trope on Carl Schmitt--sovereign is the one who decides on whether you are hired or fired, in this sense saved or damned, i.e. the one you want to see in the mirror, the one who decides on all the others' employment (as the Other of *jouissance*, the one who "enjoys"). Within the frame of this mirror of decision, politics no longer exists: politics has disappeared through disavowal into a certain aestheticization; it has become an art, the art of absolute freedom, the art of the deal.⁴ All the rest is passivity, femininity, the castration of the masculine, culpable failure to assert one's will against all limitations, political correctness. All borders and limits on "us," indeed, are finally due to political correctness, says the regime, i.e. due to the political as such, the Un-American, or the departure from humanity properly so-called. This position--at once fantasmic, metaphysical, and ideological--is what we need to understand

better, to teach people to mourn (because in principle it's dead), and to learn to contest.

¹ The reference is to the "crown jurist of the third Reich," Carl Schmitt, whose *Politische Theologie* famously begins with the assertion: "Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet" (11).

² See for example, amongst many other texts by Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* and *La vérité en peinture*, especially "Le parergon" (19-168).

³ Cf. Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*: "Die spezifisch politische Unterscheidung. . . ist die Unterscheidung von *Freund* und *Feind*" (26).

⁴ I am referring here of course to Walter Benjamin's well-known characterization of fascism as an aestheticization of politics in "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit."

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