

**The Attraction of Post-Territorial Politics: Ethics and Activism in the  
International Sphere (The Inaugural Lecture of Professor David Chandler, 2  
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**Introduction**

It seems that our engagement with and understanding of politics is increasingly shaped by global questions from international terrorism and the war in Iraq, to climate change, the WTO, humanitarian crises and relief from poverty. For many people the fact that politics has become global – that politics is no longer restricted to narrow questions and institutions at a national level, or mainly contested in territorial boxes of the nation state – demonstrates that the stakes are much higher today. On the one hand, it appears that Western powers have carte blanche for the assertion of power in the war on terror or new rights of preventive or humanitarian intervention, on the other, it appears that there are new forms of global opposition in global civic movements and radical campaigns. The sense of global struggle is well summed up in radical theorists Hardt and Negri's view of a struggle between Empire and the Multitude – where every struggle and protest becomes a direct struggle against the Empire of global capital serviced under US leadership. I think that the stakes are high in the new global ethics and activism, but that the stakes are somewhat different to those laid out above. I want to discuss what I think these stakes are by drawing out the reasons for the shift in politics to the global level and the consequences of this process.

**The Demand for Global Politics**

The stakes seem to exist largely at a global level at the same time as what is at stake in domestic politics seems to be increasingly diminished. There are local elections tomorrow; I guess that many people here will be voting. However, our relationship to the electoral process and its role in political life has changed. In the past, casting our vote gave us a sense of connection with society, a sense of connection to other voters who shared our support for a certain political programme and a sense of connection (albeit a hostile one) to those who supported opposing programmes. Voting meant something to us and gave us a sense of relationship to political representatives and to

the government of the day. Today, if we vote, we experience not a sense of connection but one of disconnection; we don't really feel that we share much with others who voted the same way and certainly don't feel a sense of being part of a project or sharing a goal of the political party which we may have voted for. Today, elections do not give an incoming government the social and political legitimacy that elections did in the past. Governments have a fairly fragile and unmediated relationship with their societies, and individuals have an increasingly atomised sense of their social and political selves.

However, politics is no less important to many of us today. Politics still gives us a sense of social connection and social rootedness and gives meaning to many of our lives. It is just that the nature and practices of this politics are different. We are less likely to engage in the formal politics of representation - of elections and governments - but in post-territorial politics, a politics where there is much less division between the private sphere and the public one and much less division between national, territorial, concerns and global ones. This type of politics is on the one hand 'global' but, on the other, highly individualised: it is very much the politics of our everyday lives – the sense of meaning we get from thinking about global warming when we turn off the taps when we brush our teeth, take our rubbish out for recycling or cut back on our car use - we might also do global politics in deriving meaning from the ethical or social value of our work, or in our subscription or support for good causes from Oxfam to Greenpeace and Christian Aid.

I want to suggest that when we do 'politics' nowadays it is less the 'old' politics, of self-interest, political parties, and concern for governmental power, than the 'new' politics of global ethical concerns. I further want to suggest that the forms and content of this new global approach to the political are more akin to religious beliefs and practices than to the forms of our social political engagement in the past. Global politics is similar to religious approaches in three vital respects: 1) global post-territorial politics are no longer concerned with power, its' concerns are free-floating and in many ways, existential, about how we live our lives; 2) global politics revolve around practices which are private and individualised, they are about us as individuals and our ethical choices; 3) the practice of global politics tends to be non-instrumental, we do not subordinate ourselves to collective associations or parties and are more

likely to give value to our aspirations, acts, or the fact of our awareness of an issue, as an end in-itself. It is as if we are upholding our goodness or ethicality in the face of an increasingly confusing, problematic and alienating world – our politics in this sense are an expression or voice, in Marx’s words, of ‘the heart in a heartless world’ or ‘the soul of a soulless condition’.

The practice of ‘doing politics’ as a form of religiosity is a highly conservative one. As Marx argued, religion was the ‘opium of the people’ - this is politics as a sedative or pacifier: it feeds an illusory view of change at the expense of genuine social engagement and transformation. I want to argue that global ethical politics reflects and institutionalises our sense of disconnection and social atomisation and results in irrational and unaccountable government policy making. I want to illustrate my points by briefly looking at the practices of global ethics in three spheres, those of radical political activism, government policy making and academia.

### **Radical activism**

People often argue that there is nothing passive or conservative about radical political activist protests, such as the 2003 anti-war march, anti-capitalism and anti-globalisation protests, the huge march to Make Poverty History at the end of 2005, involvement in the World Social Forums or the radical jihad of Al-Qaeda. I disagree; these new forms of protest are highly individualised and personal ones - there is no attempt to build a social or collective movement. It appears that theatrical suicide, demonstrating, badge and bracelet wearing are ethical acts in themselves: personal statements of awareness, rather than attempts to engage politically with society.

This is illustrated by the ‘celebration of differences’ at marches, protests and social forums. It is as if people are more concerned with the creation of a sense of community through differences than with any political debate, shared agreement or collective purpose. It seems to me that if someone was really concerned with ending war or with ending poverty or with overthrowing capitalism, that political views and political differences would be quite important. Is war caused by capitalism, by human nature, or by the existence of guns and other weapons? It would seem important to debate reasons, causes and solutions, it would also seem necessary to give those

political differences an organisational expression if there was a serious project of social change.

Rather than a political engagement with the world, it seems that radical political activism today is a form of social disengagement – expressed in the anti-war marchers' slogan of 'Not in My Name', or the assumption that wearing a plastic bracelet or setting up an internet blog diary is the same as engaging in political debate. In fact, it seems that political activism is a practice which isolates individuals who think that demonstrating a personal commitment or awareness of problems is preferable to engaging with other people who are often dismissed as uncaring or brain-washed by consumerism. The narcissistic aspects of the practice of this type of global politics are expressed clearly by individuals who are obsessed with reducing their carbon footprint, deriving their idealised sense of social connection from an ever increasing awareness of themselves and by giving 'political' meaning to every personal action.

Global ethics appear to be in demand because they offer us a sense of social connection and meaning while at the same time giving us the freedom to construct the meaning for ourselves, to pick our causes of concern, and enabling us to be free of responsibilities for acting as part of a collective association, for winning an argument or for success at the ballot-box. While the appeal of global ethical politics is an individualistic one, the lack of success or impact of radical activism is also reflected in its rejection of any form of social movement or organisation.

## **Governments**

Strange as it may seem, the only people who are keener on global ethics than radical activists are political elites. Since the end of the Cold War, global ethics have formed the core of foreign policy and foreign policy has tended to dominate domestic politics. Global ethics are at the centre of debates and discussion over humanitarian intervention, 'healing the scar of Africa', the war on terror and the 'war against climate insecurity'. Tony Blair argued in the *Guardian* last week that 'foreign policy is no longer foreign policy' (Timothy Garten Ash, 'Like it or Loath it, after 10 years Blair knows exactly what he stands for', 26 April 2007), this is certainly true.

Traditional foreign policy, based on strategic geo-political interests with a clear framework for policy-making, no longer seems so important. The government is down-sizing the old Foreign and Commonwealth Office where people were regional experts, spoke the languages and were engaged for the long-term, and provides more resources to the Department for International Development where its staff are experts in good causes. This shift was clear in the UK's attempt to develop an Ethical Foreign Policy in the 1990s – an approach which openly claimed to have rejected strategic interests for values and the promotion of Britain's caring and sharing 'identity'. Clearly, the projection of foreign policy on the basis of demonstrations of values and identity, rather than an understanding of the needs and interests of people on the ground, leads to ill thought-through and short-termist policy-making, as was seen in the 'value-based' interventions from Bosnia to Iraq (see Blair's recent *Foreign Affairs* article, 'A Battle for Global Values', 86:1 (2007), pp.79–90).

Governments have been more than happy to put global ethics at the top of the political agenda for - the same reasons that radical activists have been eager to shift to the global sphere – the freedom from political responsibility that it affords them. Every government and international institution has shifted from strategic and instrumental policy-making based on a clear political programme to the ambitious assertion of global causes – saving the planet, ending poverty, saving Africa, not just ending war but solving the causes of conflict etc – of course, the more ambitious the aim the less anyone can be held to account for success and failure. In fact, the more global the problem is, the more responsibility can be shifted to blame the US or the UN for the failure to translate ethical claims into concrete results. Ethical global questions, where the alleged values of the UN, the UK, the 'civilised world', NATO or the EU are on the line in 'wars of choice' from the war on terror to the war on global warming lack traditional instrumentality because they are driven less by the traditional interests of *Realpolitik* than the narcissistic search for meaning or identity.

Governments feel the consequences of their lack of social connection, even more than we do as individuals; it undermines any attempt to represent shared interests or cohere political programmes. As Baudrillard suggests, without a connection to the 'represented' masses, political leaders are as open to ridicule and exposure as the

‘Emperor with no clothes’ (*In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1983, for example). It is this lack of shared social goals which makes instrumental policy-making increasingly problematic. As Donald Rumsfeld stated about the war on terror, ‘there are no metrics’ to help assess whether the war is being won or lost. These wars and campaigns, often alleged to be based on the altruistic claim of the needs and interests of others, are demonstrations and performances, based on ethical claims rather than responsible practices and policies. Max Weber once counterposed this type of politics – the ‘ethics of conviction’ – to the ‘ethics of responsibility’ in his lecture on ‘Politics as a Vocation’. The desire to act on the international scene without a clear strategy or purpose has led to highly destabilising interventions from the Balkans to Iraq and to the moralisation of a wide range of issues from war crimes to EU membership requirements.

## **Academia**

Today more and more people are ‘doing politics’ in their academic work. This is the reason for the boom in International Relations study and the attraction of other social sciences to the global sphere. I would argue that the attraction of IR for many people has not been IR theory but the desire to practice global ethics. The boom in the IR discipline has coincided with a rejection of Realist theoretical frameworks of power and interests and the sovereignty/anarchy problematic. However, I would argue that this rejection has not been a product of theoretical engagement with Realism but an ethical act of rejection of Realism’s ontological focus.

It seems that our ideas and our theories say much more about us than the world we live in. Normative theorists and Constructivists tend to support the global ethical turn arguing that we should not be as concerned with ‘what is’ as with the potential for the emergence of global ethical community. Constructivists, in particular, focus upon the ethical language which political elites espouse rather than the practices of power. But the most dangerous trends in the discipline today are those frameworks which have taken up Critical theory and argue that focusing on the world as it exists is conservative ‘problem-solving’ while the task for critical theorists is to focus on emancipatory alternative forms of living or of thinking about the world. Critical thought then becomes a process of wishful thinking rather than one of engagement,

with its advocates arguing that we need to focus on clarifying our own ethical frameworks and biases and positionality before thinking about or teaching on world affairs; in the process this becomes ‘me-search’ rather than research. We have moved a long way from Hedley Bull’s perspective that, for academic research to be truly radical, we had to put our values to the side to follow where the question or inquiry might lead.

The inward-looking and narcissistic trends in academia, where we are more concerned with our ‘reflectivity’ – the awareness of our own ethics and values - than with engaging with the world, was brought home to me when I asked my IR students which theoretical frameworks they agreed with most and they replied mostly Critical theory and Constructivism despite the fact that they thought that states operated on the basis of power and self-interest in a world of anarchy. Their theoretical preferences were based more on what their choices said about them as ethical individuals than about how theory might be used to understand and engage with the world.

## **Conclusion**

I have attempted to argue that there is a lot at stake in the new politics of global ethics. Politics has become a religious activity, an activity which is no longer socially mediated; it is less and less an activity based on social engagement and the testing of ideas in public debate or in the academy. Doing politics today, whether in radical activism, government policy-making, or in academia, seems to bring people into a one-to-one relationship with global issues in the same way religious people have a one-to-one relationship with their God.

Politics is increasingly like religion because when we look for meaning we find it inside ourselves rather than in the external consequences of our ‘political’ acts. What matters is the conviction or the act in itself: its connection to the global sphere is one that we increasingly tend to provide idealistically. Another way of expressing this limited sense of our subjectivity is in the popularity of globalisation theory – the idea that instrumentality is no longer possible today because the world is such a complex and interconnected place and therefore there is no way of knowing the consequences of our actions. The more we engage in the new politics where there is an unmediated

relationship between us as individuals and global issues, the less we engage instrumentally with the outside world and the less we engage with our peers and colleagues at the level of political or intellectual debate and organisation.

You may be thinking that I have gone some way to describing or identifying what the problems might be but I have not mentioned anything about a solution. I won't dodge the issue. One thing that is clear is that the solution is not purely an intellectual or academic one; the demand for global ethics is generated by our social reality and social experiences. Marx spent some time considering a similar crisis of political subjectivity in 1840s Germany and in his writings - *The German Ideology*, 'Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"', 'Theses on Feuerbach', and elsewhere - he raged against the idealism of contemporary thought and argued that the criticism of religion needed to be replaced by the criticism of politics - by political activism and social change based on the emerging proletariat. Nearly two centuries later it is more difficult to see an emerging political subject which can fulfil the task of 'changing the world' rather than merely 'reinterpreting it' through philosophy.

I have two suggestions. Firstly, that there is a pressing need for an intellectual struggle against the idealism of global ethics. The point needs to be emphasised that our 'freedom' to engage in politics, to choose our identities and political campaigns, as well as governments' freedom to choose their ethical campaigns and wars of choice, reflects a lack of social ties and social engagement. There is no global political struggle between Empire and its' Radical Discontents, the Foucauldian temptation to see power and resistance everywhere is a product of wishful or lazy thinking dominated by the social categories of the past. The stakes are not in the global stratosphere but much closer to home. Politics appear to have gone global because there is a breakdown of genuine community and the construction of fantasy communities and fantasy connections in global space. Unless we bring politics back down to earth from heaven, our critical, social and intellectual lives will continue to be diminished ones.

Secondly, on the basis that the political 'freedom' of our social atomisation leads us into increasingly idealised approaches to the world we live in, we should take more

seriously Bull's injunction to pursue the question, or in Alain Badiou's words subordinate ourselves to the 'discipline of the real'. Subordination to the world outside ourselves is a powerful factor that can bind those interested in critical research, whereas the turn away from the world and the focus on our personal values can ultimately only be divisive. To facilitate external engagement and external judgement, I suggest we experiment with ways to build up social bonds with our peers that can limit our freedoms and develop our sense of responsibility and accountability to others. We may have to artificially construct these social connections but their value and instrumentality will have to be proven through our ability to engage with, understand, critique, and ultimately overcome the practices and subjectivities of our time.