

Politics as Religion

David Chandler *on the pitfalls of global ethical politics*



Our engagement with and understanding of politics is, it seems, increasingly shaped by global questions: from international terrorism and the war in Iraq, to climate change, humanitarian crises and relief from poverty. For many people the fact that politics has become global – that it is no longer restricted to issues and institutions at the national level – shows that the stakes in politics are higher today

than they once were. Western powers, it seems, have carte blanche to assert their power in the war on terror or their new rights of humanitarian intervention; and new forms of global opposition – global civic movements and campaigns – have emerged.

Domestic politics seems to matter less today. Our relationship to the electoral process, and the role of elections in political life, have changed. In the past, voting gave us a sense of connection: to society as a whole; to other voters, whether or not they supported the same political programme as us; to political representatives; and to the government. Today, if we vote, we experience a sense of disconnection, a feeling that we share little with other voters;

we certainly do not feel part of a common project, or share the goals of the political party for which we voted. Individuals have an increasingly atomized sense of their social and political selves.

Nor do elections today – unlike in the past – give an incoming government social and political legitimacy. Governments have a fragile, unmediated relationship with their societies.

For many of us, though, politics remains important; it still gives us a

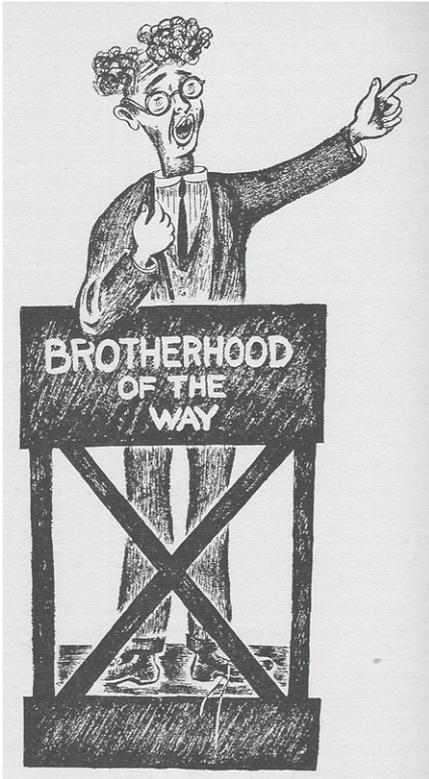
sense of social connection and rootedness. But we are now more likely to engage in ‘post-territorial’ politics, where both the private and the public spheres and national, territorial and global concerns substantially overlap. This type of politics is both ‘global’ and highly individualized. It is the politics of our everyday lives – the sense of meaning we get from thinking about global warming when we recycle our rubbish; from the ethical or social value of our work; or from supporting good causes – Oxfam, Greenpeace and Christian Aid.

The form and content of this new, global approach to politics resemble less ‘old’ politics – the social and political engagement of the past – than they do, in three ways, religious beliefs and practices. First, global, post-territorial politics is no longer concerned with self-interest, political parties, and governmental power: it is, rather, existential – it is about how we live our lives. Secondly, it entails private and individualized practices that centre on ethical choices. Thirdly, this politics tends to be non-instrumental: we do not subordinate ourselves to collective associations or parties; we treat as an end in itself our aspirations and acts, or the fact that we are aware of an issue. It is as if we are upholding our goodness or ethicality in the face of an increasingly confusing and alienating world. Our politics is the voice – in Marx’s words – of ‘the heart in a heartless world’.

Doing politics as religion is highly conservative, and it feeds an illusion of change at the expense of genuine social engagement and transformation. More than that, global ethical politics reflects and institutionalizes our sense of disconnection and social atomization and results in irrational and unaccountable government policy making.

RADICAL ACTIVISM

People often argue that there is nothing conservative about radical political protests: the February 2003 anti-war marches, anti-capitalism and anti-globalization protests, the huge ‘Make Poverty History’ march in 2005, the World Social Forums, or



even the radical jihad of Al-Qaeda. But these new forms of protest are highly individualized – they are not an attempt to build a social or collective movement. People seem to regard demonstrating, badge and bracelet wearing, or theatrical suicide, as ethical acts in themselves: as personal statements of awareness, rather than as attempts to engage politically with society.

The ‘celebration of differences’ at marches, protests and social forums illustrates this. It is as if people are more concerned with the creation of a sense of community through accepting personal differences than with political debate and agreement, or collective purpose. Yet to end war or poverty, or to overthrow capitalism, one needs to express *political* views and establish *political* differences: what, say, are the roots of war – capitalism, human nature, the existence of weapons?

Radical political activism today seems to entail not political engagement with, but social disengagement from, the world – evident in the February 2003 anti-war marchers’ slogan, ‘Not in My Name’.

Global ethics offer us a sense of social connection and meaning while

allowing us to construct the meaning ourselves; to pick our causes of concern. It frees us from the responsibility to act as part of a collective association, to win an argument, or to work for success at the ballot box. Yet – and this is reflected in its rejection of any form of social movement or organization – radical activism has had little impact.

GOVERNMENTS

The only people keener on global ethics than radical activists are political elites. Since the end of the Cold War, foreign policy has tended to dominate domestic politics; and global ethics have formed the core of foreign policy – they have been central to debates about humanitarian intervention, ‘healing the scar of Africa’, or the ‘war on terror’.

Traditional foreign policy, based on strategic geo-political interests and with a clear framework for policy-making, is less important than it was. The British government has been down-sizing the Foreign and Commonwealth Office – the staff of which are regional experts and speak the relevant languages – and is giving more resources to the Department for International Development, the staff of which 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 that claimed to reject

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strategic interests in favour of values. The execution of a foreign policy based on values and identity, rather than on the needs and interests of people on the ground, leads to ill thought-through and short-term policy-making, as the destabilizing, ‘value-based’ interventions from Bosnia to Iraq have demonstrated.

These campaigns and wars are demonstrations and performances, based on ethical claims rather than responsible practices and policies. In

‘Politics as a Vocation’ Max Weber counterposed this type of politics – the ‘ethics of conviction’ – to the ‘ethics of responsibility’.

Governments have put global ethics at the top of the political agenda for the same reason radical activists have shifted to the global sphere: it frees them from political responsibility. Every government and international institution has replaced strategic and instrumental policy-making based on a clear political programme with the ambitious assertion of global causes – saving the planet; eradicating poverty; saving Africa; not just ending war but removing the causes of conflict. The more ambitious the aim the less one is accountable for success and failure. Donald Rumsfeld said that ‘there are no metrics’ to help assess whether the war on terror is being won or lost. In fact, the more global the problem, the more the US or the UN can be blamed for not translating ethical claims into concrete results.

Yet governments, even more than individuals, feel the consequences of their lack of social connection: this lack undermines any attempt to represent shared interests or to produce coherent political programmes. As Jean 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*, 1983).

ACADEMIA

More and more people are studying International Relations. But it is not IR theory that attracts people to the discipline; it is the desire to practice global ethics. The boom in IR has coincided with a rejection of Realist theoretical frameworks of power and interests and of the sovereignty/anarchy problematic. But this is an ethical rejection, not the product of theoretical engagement with Realism.

Normative theorists and Constructivists tend to support the global ethical turn; they argue that we should not be as concerned with ‘what is’ as with the potential emer-

gence of a global ethical community. Constructivists in particular focus on the ethical language that political elites use, rather than on practices of power. But the most dangerous trends in IR are those frameworks that have adopted Critical Theory; they 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.

This turns critical thought into a process of wishful thinking, not one of engagement. Critical Theorists argue that we need to clarify our own ethical frameworks and biases before thinking about or teaching world affairs; in the process this becomes 'me-search' rather than research. We have moved a long way from Hedley Bull's view that, for academic research to be truly radical, we have to put our values to one side and follow the inquiry, wherever it leads.

I recently asked my IR students which theoretical frameworks they agreed with. Critical Theory and Constructivism, most replied. Yet

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they still thought that states operated on the basis of power and self-interest in a world of anarchy. Their theoretical preferences were based on their ethical choices; they were less interested in how theory might help one understand and engage with the world.

ALTERNATIVES

The problem, then, is that politics is increasingly like religion. What is the solution? It cannot be purely intellectual or academic: the demand for global ethics, after all, is generated by our social reality and experiences. Marx spent some time considering a similar crisis of political subjectivity in 1840s Germany. In his writings – *The German Ideology*, '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 by social change based on the emerging proletariat. Today it is harder to identify an emerging political subject that can fulfil the task of 'changing the world' rather than merely 'reinterpreting it' through philosophy.

Yet there is a pressing need for an intellectual struggle against the idealism of global ethics. The point needs to be emphasized 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, reflects a lack of social ties and social engagement.

There is no global political struggle between 'empire' and its 'radical discontents', as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri would have it; and 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 appears to have gone global because there is a breakdown of genuine community. Unless we bring politics back down to earth from heaven, our critical, social and intellectual lives will continue to be diminished.

Moreover, since the political 'freedom' of our social atomization encourages us to pursue increasingly idealized approaches to the world, we should take more seriously Bull's injunction to 'pursue the question',



or – in Alain Badiou's words – we should subordinate ourselves to the 'discipline of the real'. Subordination to the world outside ourselves can bind together those interested in critical research. To facilitate engagement with what is external, we should experiment with ways of creating social bonds with our peers that can limit our freedoms and develop our sense of responsibility and accountability to others. The value and instrumentality of these bonds will then have to be proven as we engage with, understand, critique, and ultimately overcome the practices and subjectivities of our time.

This is an edited extract from David Chandler's inaugural professorial lecture, 2 May 2007.

