

The Invisibility of Intellectual Freedom

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In my books *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* and the co-authored book with Clayton Crockett, *Religion, Politics and the Earth*, I've sometimes been accused of being a bit too rosy-eyed. My professed faith in the revolutionary power of the people—of a democratized public that always demands *more democracy*—has been criticized for failing to give sufficient attention to the social antagonisms within the body politic where questions of economic class and identity pose persistent challenges. The points are made of democracy's Western—even more, its colonial and imperialistic—pedigree, of democracy's capture by consumer capitalism, and of its logic of exclusionary inclusion built on the backs of slave, immigrant and domestic labor.

Perhaps my tone struck when declaring democracy the political instantiation of the death of God came across too celebratory. What I wish to have made clear is that Alexis de Tocqueville's expressed "terror" at God's apparent self-willed annihilation with the people's claim to the sovereignty that was once the exclusive province of God's should be regarded as no different from Colonel Hertz's horror at his own "heart of darkness," and by extension, the nearly orgiastic violence and hatred that lies at the heart of Western man's civilizing project. Or, there is the more familiar reference from Nietzsche's proclamation that God is dead. The pathos and foreboding from both Tocqueville and Nietzsche are real. After all, without the working hypothesis of God, we are left with the ambivalent conclusion that our fate is in our hands. It is the ultimate theo-political question of sovereignty in that it poses to us the

question of “Who will decide the fate of humanity?”

As I have written elsewhere, when Carl Schmitt addresses this question, he provides real, albeit limited, clarity. The problem, he says, with the modern, technocratic state is that, whether by bureaucratic machinations or constitutional proceduralism, *no one* decides.

We might add to this the specter of global capital where the power of the transnational corporation so often usurps, coopts, undermines or distorts the claims to, and institutions of, the sovereign nation state. The point here, as Wendy Brown has masterfully analyzed in her book *Undoing the Demos*, is that when not only the state, but also society, rationalize themselves in exclusively economic terms, as prevails in the current neoliberal order, the condition of possibility for politics itself is vanquished. As Brown puts it, “*homo politicus* is the most important causality in the ascendance of neoliberal reason.”

Democracy is under threat, but it is not the external or overt threats that we should be concerned with; rather, it is the way by which democracy is “hollowed out from within”—a complacency or docility wherein neoliberal reason slowly but ineluctably becomes the governing rationality in a fashion that is “more termitelike than lionlike,” a biopolitics by which the human subject gets reprogrammed, domesticated, even denatured as a political animal, a mode of disciplinary power no longer operating by command and control, but in an integrated, networked and cooperative fashion.

The examples and effects Brown gives to this process of transmogrification are real and widespread. The main examples for her are what she calls the “remaking of the soul” and the “remaking of the state.” The former is my principal concern here and speaks to the steady erosion of the Humanities within higher education. This erosion has occurred partly as a result of defunding, but even more, it is the result of the order of neoliberal rationality that demands all value be justified in exclusively economic terms. So the “cultivation and expression of distinctly human capacities for ethical and political freedom, creativity, unbounded reflection, or invention” become unaffordable luxuries reserved only for the privileged few not confined or consumed by the necessity for wealth accumulation (or, even more basically, the necessity to find gainful employment).

We might see this as an attack on intellectual freedom. And given the “globally ubiquitous” form of this neoliberal norm of rationality, we must ask what are the conditions of possibility for resistance against this attack? Once again, this brings me back the question that has animated my work in political theology all along—namely, “Who decides?” The mistake that some radical democratic theories make is the untenable suggestion that *everyone* decides. Not only does the persistence of various social antagonisms, but also tracing

the various social, political and economic trends to their source, reveal such a suggestion to be nothing more than a statement of faith or a form of wish fulfillment. The solution offered by Schmitt is that if we are right to diagnose the essentially apolitical character of contemporary life then the means to restore politics is by way of the state of exception. If our problem is that no one decides, then the remedy is that *only one* must decide, and that this authority to decide is not only the defining characteristic, but also the exclusive prerogative, of the sovereign.

I have called this Schmittian solution a form of theo-political fatalism. And my argument has been that he effectively throws the baby out with the bathwater insofar as he refuses the altered conditions, operation, and conception of sovereign power in its dispersed and pluralized form.

What this means, for my analysis thus far, is that we are left with a series of non-starters when it comes to the question of who decides. What is left after “everyone,” “no one,” and “only one” are left wanting? How are we to address ourselves to the question if the very alternatives that present themselves are exhausted by such naiveté, exploitation, and domination? Is it possible to delink the notion of the sovereign decision from subjective consciousness altogether? Can we consider a scenario in which the alternatives of “everyone,” “no one,” and “only one” do not exhaust the full range of possibilities? Is there a philosophy and a mode of action that if not escape then at least contest or subvert the logic of the all, none or one? What, if any, figure of resistance remains? Following Foucault who trains us by the maxim that where there is power, there is always resistance, I argue that we must look for a disguised figure of resistance, defigured from the forms of political subjectivity that have been so thoroughly decimated.

If the problem in the current neoliberal political order is that no one decides, then why not make use of the guerilla tactic of invisibility, incognition, or the impersonal. After all, as has long been noted from W.E.B. DuBois’ notion of double-consciousness, while systemic oppression is to be condemned and resisted at every level, it also provides certain epistemic advantages—a knowledge that goes beyond self-knowledge to the knowledge of others fundamental lack of regard. As Jose Medina has written, this provides the basis for a subversive meta-lucidity by its “heightened sensitivity to insensitivity.” In this way double-consciousness holds the potentiality for a resistant perception and resistant action. “One can also comfortably and strategically occupy one’s invisibility,” Medina argues, “exploiting the benefits of being unperceived while having access to bodies of evidence one is not assumed to know, of being able to use channels of communication that go undetected, of being able to exercise forms of reasoning that are not recognized, and so on.”

I am describing this in terms of a guerilla tactic because it is not meant to ameliorate. It is not trying to resolve conflict or overcome struggle; rather, it seeks to provoke and reenergize them. And insofar as the norms of neoliberal rationality has produced a generalized condition of depersonalization and powerlessness, this becomes a tactic of resistance that is freely available to any or all.

In short, there is not only freedom, but the power of resistance, hidden in the invisibility wrought by “neoliberalism’s stealth revolution.”