

HUMAN NATURE

Our Socialist Response to Proto-fascist Fundamentalism

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The recent “town hall” meetings are past and are not likely to recur in their previous form. But their underlying dynamics can hardly have disappeared, rooted as deeply as they are in the disturbing psyches that produced them. Therefore, I would like to consider what they reveal about the American mentality as well as an appropriate response of the Left to what they portend.

Duly considering the tendency of the media to focus on the visceral and violent at the expense of “normality,” the recent expressions of proto-fascist disorder at attempted “town hall” meetings remains very disturbing. For once again we are presented with the spectacle of choreographed anti-democratic “spontaneity” and the question of how to respond. Suggestions range from permitting this political psychodrama to run its course to providing a left version of the initial reactionary mayhem in which we would replicate their fundamentalist hatred and accept the chaos that would follow even to the point of drowning our own voice in the ensuing mayhem. This last proposal, the restoration of order through violence, though an extreme if minority position, reveals the deepest confusion: imposing reason through its violation remains a blatant self-contradiction.

The difficulty is, however, deeper than a problem of tactics, for there is a more fundamental contradiction still. On the one hand, one feels justified—at least in the short run—in experiencing a violent reaction to the very violence that undermines the possibility of a democratic process. On the other hand, one also feels justified—at least in the short run—in permitting the process to run its course and, vindictively, in enjoying the ironic “justice” that is likely to emerge when these passionate opponents of collective health care find themselves suffering the absence of the very aid that they have striven to eliminate. In a cruel if childish state of mind, one can find welling up in one’s self, on occasion, the delight one might take in the defenders of “self-sufficiency” experiencing their utter helplessness at their own hands. But we are responsible for them too, whether they presently claim to accept our beneficence or not.

In fact, watch enough of these attempts at “meetings” and their betrayals, and you will also witness the horrendous phenomenon of some members of the audience referring to their own infirmities and their inability to receive adequate medical care. Rather than sympathy, they are instead greeted with violent attacks by those who will not tolerate the presentation of these often grievous conditions. The response of this segment of the participants is even exacerbated by the additional assertion by the infirm that they have not received adequate help, if any help at all. The entire confessional and accusation is met with cruel indignation. This is blaming the victim with a pathological vengeance. One may suspect that a state of guilt-laden helplessness is projected on to those who publicly present their fragility, evoking from other members of the audience who experience or fear the same fault lines but are too terribly defended to acknowledge their own mortality, a projection of their terror upon the helpless.

However, one of the most dangerous responses to emerge from this situation asserts that the stance of the anarchic Right, far from deserving wholesale condemnation, is instead, to some extent, to be admired; if not for the content of their proposals, then for the tenacity and unwavering ferocity of their dedication.

So, in one version of this approach entitled “Rage the Left Should Use,” Robert Kuttner notes:

Something is severely off when economically stressed Americans confront members of Congress about “death panels” in the Obama health plan. The rumors, fanned by talk radio with a little help from Republicans, are false and even delusional. Yet the anger, if misdirected, is genuine.¹

How anger, or any feeling for that matter, can be genuine if it is misdirected, is a question the author does not take up. The closest he comes to explaining his position is to assert that “The misdirected citizen anger at the Obama health reform efforts is a surrogate for broader, entirely legitimate, popular economic backlash.” But Kuttner does not tell us how he knows that the “delusional” beliefs he refers to are manifestations of other beliefs which derive from economic hardship, and which are apparently valid. Unfortunately, there is a tendency on the “Left” to exploit a convenient popular psychology when a more complex account of the situation is called for.

In another version of this position, Michael Moore, in conversation with Naomi Klein in *The Nation*, asserts “...what I really have always admired about the right wing: they are organized, they are dedicated, they are up at the crack of dawn fighting their fight. And on our side, I don’t really see that kind of commitment.”²

The assumption here is that our commitment should duplicate the commitment of the extreme right wing, as though commitment were a fixed, detachable and identifiable state of mind that could be affixed as much to our views as to theirs.

One of the most extensive statements of this stance of admiration for the stubborn dedication of the dogmatic Right—a position he has held since the origin of his journal—is that of Michael Lerner, who in a lead editorial in a recent issue of *Tikkun*, articulates his respect for the passion of the Right in the following terms:

The logic of [Obama’s] position was always this: let’s do what seems “realistic” given the current alignment of forces. He gave no indication of being open to the notion that a new president has the right to fight for a vision that makes sense and should attempt to use his immense popularity for that purpose.

Contrast that with right-wing presidents such as Ronald Reagan and the two Bush presidents. It will come as no surprise to you [the readers of *Tikkun*] that we spiritual progressives did not support the dramatic changes they proposed. *But we have a lot of respect for*

¹ Robert Kuttner, “Rage the Left Should Use,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2009, online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/17/AR2009081702363.html>.

² Naomi Klein, “America’s Teacher,” *The Nation*, September 23, 2009, available online at: <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20091012/klein>.

the fact that they were willing to fight for the changes that went against popular sentiment, and in the process they managed to move the national dialogue a long way toward their own assumptions.

Ronald Reagan managed to popularize the notion that the capitalist competitive marketplace could provide the economic security that people had previously gotten through New Deal-era public programs. He was so successful that Bill Clinton, representing the centrists organized in the Democratic Leadership Council, pushed through an “end to welfare as we have known it, provoking liberal figures in his administration to resign in disgust...”

George W. Bush pursued an unpopular war in Iraq and managed to hold on to *his disgusting, immoral, and destructive-to-America direction...*

*These people stood by their convictions, however reprehensible.*³ (italics added)

The idea of standing by one’s convictions is afforded high praise. But what of the nature of the convictions themselves? We are comfortably assured that “we spiritual progressives did not support the dramatic changes they proposed,” a rather uninspired statement of what should have produced a vigorous rebuttal. Let us consider an example that Lerner does not utilize but one that clearly focuses the principle he is asserting; America’s role in Central America. As Greg Grandin noted in *Empire’s Workshop*: “All told, U.S. allies in Central America during Reagan’s two terms killed over 300,000 people, tortured hundreds of thousands, and drove millions into exile.”

Let us recall just one of the atrocities carried out by the Reagan administration: the support of the Contras and the violation of the sovereignty of Nicaragua, an immoral and illegal act that undermined Nicaraguan democracy and led to the death of 50,000 of its citizens, many of whom perished as a result of the Reagan administration’s attack on “soft targets” such as medical facilities, peasant cooperatives, and schools.

The philosophical heart of Lerner’s position is the contention that we can separate the imperialist Republican crusade for American domination of the “lesser peoples” of the world from the fact that “they [Reagan and Bush, etc.] were willing to fight for changes that went against popular sentiment.” Of course, it is not merely the fact that their policy went against popular sentiment but that it went against the popular sentiment of those who were then murdered as a consequence of their disagreement.

Republican and Democratic crusaders alike shared views of democracy which included our right to determine the lives and deaths of peoples whose well-being and very existence was regarded as subordinate to the value of the interests of the American ruling class. We might find these view reprehensible, but we are being asked to regard them with respect given the commendable perseverance, resolution and effectiveness of those who espoused them. The positions may well have been abominable, but we owe respect to those who advocated them.

In short, we are asked to separate the validity of moral and political principles from the dedicated enthusiasm with which they are embraced. Lerner maintains that “George W. Bush pursued an unpopular war in Iraq and managed to hold on to his disgusting, immoral,

³ Michael Lerner, “Why the Left Lost Single-Payer Health Care Reform,” *Tikkun*, July/August 2009, online at: http://www.tikkun.org/article.php/july_aug_09_lerner_healthcare.

and destructive-to-America direction, despite immense popular pressure for an end to the war..." This is wholly to misconstrue the situation. First, the war in Iraq most likely slaughtered between 500,000 and 1,000,000 citizens. Second, what was disgusting in Bush's policy, which is now carried over to Obama, was not primarily the unpopularity of the war but the fact that it was a murderous enterprise of others, entered into on the basis of deceit and the manipulation of the purported evidence. Bush was "disgusting and immoral," but he deserves our respect for the tenacity with which he pursued his immorality. Certainly something in this argument is deeply flawed.

One source of the difficulty is that we are asked to separate something in the nature of Reagan's and Bush's intellectual and moral judgments, however "disgusting, immoral, and destructive" they may be, from the will with which they defended these principles and fought to impose them on those who disagreed with them. After all, we are reminded that "*These people stood by their convictions, however reprehensible those convictions were.*"

However, this is a dichotomy that cannot be defended. We are not composed of two distinct faculties: a will which may be weak or strong, and a moral intellect which may be principled or corrupt and self-serving. When we assert of people that they had the wrong principles but were tenacious in their devotion to them, how do we deal with such instances of tyranny as Hitler, Stalin, and, in fact, Reagan and Bush?

Let us consider the hyperbolic example of Hitler, whose conviction was never in doubt and whose moral practice led eventually to the slaughter of 50,000,000 persons. Does any of us choose to celebrate Hitler's will, his passion and purpose, his total dedication to his cause? The difficulty is that his "purpose," which seems so inseparable from his passion, cannot be stated without invoking the principles that formed and guided that purpose. And his "total" dedication cannot be separated from his totalitarian commitment to total power.

Nor need I be reminded at this point that Lerner is certainly not a proponent of fascism; rather, everything indicates that he is instead a devoted and principled defender of democracy. That is precisely what makes his present argument so pathetic. I referred above to Hitler as a "hyperbolic example," because I made reference to him solely for the purpose of relating Lerner's position to the *reductio ad absurdum* I believe it is inadvertently committed to.

I will take the liberty of reminding the reader that a "*reductio ad absurdum*" argument is one that reveals its author caught in an absurd conclusion that he or she would find otherwise unacceptable, but that follows from principles they espouse. Case in point; Lerner hates Hitler but accepts the principle that we should respect those who pursue their principles with passionate devotion; but Hitler pursued his principles with passionate devotion and is therefore worthy of respect for that commitment.

Of course Lerner would not support Hitler; the thought is wholly ridiculous. But if respect is due one who holds fiercely to his own perspective no matter how horrendous and inhuman that perspective might be, then how exactly do we distinguish between Hitler and Bush, not as a matter of degree alone but *on principle*? In fact, Bush also stole an election and murdered hundreds of thousands of innocents.

With respect to purely formal considerations, Hitler is like the rest of us. We too are simultaneously dedicated and defined by a view of the world and our place within it. If we have a vision of absolute control, of our right and need to exercise complete power, then we accept no opposition and act without regard for the diverse convictions of others. If, on the other hand, we believe that human societies are constituted out of a multiplicity of human subjects, each with the same ultimate claim on the world as we maintain for ourselves, then we are bound to respect this dispersal of human perspectives, and we find a political form which accommodates it. In this second alternative we define ourselves by a democratic imperative that is not simply a contingent practice, but the foundation of our being in the world. In short, our principles and passion are of a continuous fabric which cannot be so cut that their warp and woof can be neatly dichotomized.

We are approaching the heart of the matter: how we act and what we believe are inseparable, as are our passion or moderation, our willingness to risk what we hold dear or our decision to proceed with caution, our claim to superiority or our awareness of multiple subjectivities. Both our will and our principles are joined dialectically. Both depend on our view of how the world goes; what is fragile or permanent, temporary or fixed in time. We act in accordance with *what we most deeply claim to understand*, and we shape our comprehension on the basis of past trials and practices and our estimate of how they have succeeded or failed.

The deeper issue here, which is uniformly neglected, is the question of how states of mind, particularly experiences such as “feelings of dedication or persistence” are related to the principles which inform them. We should have learned from phenomenology, if nowhere else, that subject and object are inseparable; that is, our state of subjective consciousness cannot be detached from the object toward which it is directed. Subjectivity is intentional, which means that a full account of the mind requires a simultaneous account of the “object” toward which the mind is directed. The notion of “object” is admittedly a complex philosophical term, for it can stand for anything we direct our attention to, whether it be a physical object, a state of affairs, other states of mind, or even imaginary objects that have no existence in space and time, such as negative numbers and their interrelations.

So, when we analyze a feeling like fear, we are being wildly simplistic and ultimately mistaken in directing our attention to some “entity” we imagine resides wholly in a separate compartment of our mind, which supposedly houses our feelings. If we consider a feeling like “fear,” for example, reflection will convince us, I believe, that the felt quality of the emotion varies with its intended object, that is, with what it is that we are afraid *of*. So the fear that our team will lose; the fear that we have stained a garment we very much would like to wear; the fear, in heavy traffic, that we will be hit by an oncoming vehicle; the fear that we will be rejected by someone we desire; the fear that surgery will leave us handicapped for life; or even the fear that we may die—these states of mind are not reducible to a single emotion, “fear,” which is then conjoined to one or another objects of that fear. The experiences of “fear” vary with what it is that we are afraid of. And that is why writers who gain our respect never simply label the emotions of their characters without describing in vivid detail the world in which that feeling flourishes. Feelings are distinct because they are about different conditions. And consequently, the passion directed to enhancing one’s self at the expense of others is radically different from the feeling of joy in the fulfillment of others. A political perspective built on love, which is what socialism finally requires of us, is not identical in its subjectivity to a perspective founded on hatred and destruction. So, our dedication is not

identical with fascist dedication; our commitment is not their rageful commitment, our abiding by our principles when that is what moves us, is not their utilization of principles for the purpose of indulging their terror and nihilism.

But how then to explain the equally compelling consideration that we often feel respect for those with whom we disagree? For it cannot be the case that only those who accept our own views and the modes of our practice are worth our consideration. And of course, this protest is valid. But the reason we are open to views that differ from our own is that if we respect the alternative to our position, it is that even the differences we recognize are founded in perspectives that encompass and complement each other. There are obviously differences founded on divergent expressions of genuine concern. The further the differences establish themselves from each other, however, the more they strain the recognition of co-presence and ultimately of reciprocal respect. We may disagree about the proper means to the establishment of a just society, but if one denies the right of a mature individual to even participate in the discussion or the right to advocate a position that differs from our own, the dialogue is likely at an end.

It is illuminating to return to Lerner's original criticism of Obama and his commitment to

what seems "realistic" given the current alignment of forces. He gave no indication of being open to the notion that a new president has the right to fight for a vision that makes sense and should attempt to use his immense popularity for that purpose.⁴

The deeper explanation of Obama's failure to "use his immense popularity" lies in the nature of that popularity and in relation to the current stage of capitalism. The truth is that capitalism—particularly of the sort that Obama clearly endorses—is incapable of moving beyond that stasis which is the result of domination by immense, intractable self-serving corporate power. Obama's campaign rhetoric was the result of a contradiction between the pallid idealism of the standard Democratic pretense of a robust democracy and its underlying dependence on a vicious capitalism that is committed to undermining any possibility of a truly democratic society. This much was immediately clear when Obama chose Summers and Geithner—holdovers from the Clinton policy of undermining political control over corporate financial power—to facilitate the foundation of his own subservience to these financial interests.

The Clinton administration had played a crucial role in removing a number of restraints that had long been in place to control the expansionist tendencies of the American banking system. Obama has followed Clinton's example by providing this financial oligarchy with immense sums of money that are unencumbered by fundamental controls. The vast amounts of money Obama received from the banking industry in support of his campaign were not magnanimous gifts. Such "contributions" have always been understood as bribes, to use the direct but unequivocal term that best describes them. Bribes are given in the expectation that something of value will be returned. And these claims to eventual reciprocation are being repaid by such simple devices as loaning money to banks at rates that

⁴ *Ibid.*

literally approach zero—well under the rates the banks will receive from the purchase of the government bonds that the original loans have made possible. Much of this profit can be siphoned off into investments that purchase the more profitable aspects of the economy. This does not preclude the fact that Obama actually believes in the appropriateness of financial control by these secretive and immensely powerful centers of power.

The empty reference to “change” as the central rhetorical device of Obama’s campaign oratory should have provided fair warning that matters were intended to remain the same. In short, it is not the case that Obama is a deeply principled advocate of democracy who has toned down his rhetoric and practice for the sake of personal advantage. Rather, any figure who does not vigorously confront the deeply anti-democratic power of corporate capitalism must obscure the fact that it will not tolerate genuine democracy, equality, and respect for the individual. His rhetoric was vacuous, because he is being stretched between two tendencies that draw him in opposite directions and leave him no center from which to engage.

Obama’s concession to “reality,” which Lerner and others refer to, cannot be understood as a merely personal deficiency. The Democratic party cannot move without challenging corporate power, and since it has not only done nothing to educate the public regarding the menace of this antidemocratic corporatism, but rather has added to the mystification which identifies corporations with rational progress, it cannot reverse itself by a sudden conversion of its identity and set off in a completely new direction. Nothing of ultimate significance can occur through the Democratic party without a groundswell of popular engagement for which no preparation has been provided.

Of course the Republican “party” as it now exists is not a party at all, but a sporadic series of obstructions designed to undo the Enlightenment. In fact, there is no aspect of the Republican party that cannot be arrived at by negating the fundamental aspects of the Enlightenment project: be it reason, science, secular authority, popular freedom, the legal containment of religious power, or respect for the autonomous transcendence of an educated citizenry. But while the Republicans, if only against their will, make their pursuit of their regression obvious, the Democratic party struggles mightily to obscure its commitment to the paralysis of social movements that would provide for genuine democracy and thereby undermine its own contradictory claim to legitimacy.

Obama’s vague indecisiveness is not a wholly autonomous expression of his personal limitations, a defect of his will. It is more a reflection of the contradictions of the party he represents, which cannot locate itself unequivocally either in its economic imperative—the defense of capitalism—or in its ideological pretense—the democratic pronouncements of liberalism. His meandering “will” cannot be separated from his meandering, contradictory “principles.” In the face of right-wing hysteria, Obama, as a representative of his party, which is a representative of the underlying contradiction just noted, cannot move decisively in either direction. Obama and the Democratic Party have a choice: they can fall back in astonished accusatory helplessness or insist on the necessity of a robust democratic praxis. However, they have done nothing to prepare the ground for this democratic embrace and cannot now leap over their own unmaking of the very democratic process they profess, hypocritically, to embrace.

What is the final disposition of our own will? If we are not to join in the crush of those who believe in denying the authenticity of the democratic imperative, what is our final posture? What we cannot do is to imitate the anti-democratic forces arrayed against us. Our task is to embody the ideals we wish to instantiate, to support democracy democratically. We can make use of law, though it is imperfect and often derived from bourgeois tendencies we find wanting. Our attitude toward liberal structure must be selective as we determine what mires us in the failures of the liberal facade and what permits us to advance to a new stage of development. There are progressive reforms and regressive reforms. The latter appear to advance our cause at the expense of strengthening the very system we abhor; the former take us further along the path to socialism. How to proceed in particular is a matter of selective inventiveness. It is a capacity we possess and must retain through constant use.