

The Trans-moralists

Author(s): Timothy Brennan, University of Minnesota

Preface

Timothy Brennan is Professor of English and Culture Studies & Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. He is the author of *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* and *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*.

This Position Paper was presented at a plenary session on "The State of Globalization Research in the United States of America" at the Fourth MCRI Project Team Meeting at the Munk Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto, 23-25 September 2005.

The Trans-moralists

When I was first approached by the plenary's organizers to consider the "academic environment for research and debate on globalization," and how this might differ between the United States and Canada, I took this to mean not how the research may differ, but the environment in which the research is conducted and received. I cannot be certain that the fear — and I would even say desperation — that many of us feel in the United States these days is not itself a global condition, or even an existential one, so let me concede from the outset that my observations may be tainted by a personal dimension. Nevertheless, I think there is a real sense of dread among US intellectuals who choose to speak out or criticize the current regimes of knowledge as well as power; but there is also — and this is just as important — an anger and clarity of focus that only comes with having one's feet to the fire.

We, in the United States, operate in a country in the throes of an undeclared "war" for oil and Mideast geopolitical advantage. As a result of a well-known act of unofficial terror on 11 September 2001 — whose links to wings of the US government are still unclear — meaningful displays of public dissent have been rendered all but illegal. The universities — including venerable older land-grant public research institutions like the one where I teach — have been largely de-funded by the state, which now provides only about 15 percent of its operating costs. The corporatization of the university extends right down to the level of individual departments (that "rent" their space from the university's central administration). University-based intellectuals, at any rate, are forced to work in an atmosphere of vitriolic attacks against the freedom of academic expression by proponents of a self-styled Republican "revolution."

This, I believe it is fair to say, is the general setting: the landscape of our malaise, so to speak, and its effects on people's willingness or ability to speak have been dramatic. I do not mean to suggest that every dissident intellectual space has been effaced or that there is not a new daring, even among authors who in earlier decades maintained an Olympian silence about the relationship of intellectual inquiry to brute politics as such, or that a variety of publishing houses have not issued, and even sought out, critical, oppositional voices. But it is very difficult for these voices to become a roar, or to acquire (as they say in that ugly but effective metaphor from journalism) "traction." And maybe it

would be useful for me to offer, as best I can in the time at my disposal, something of a diagnosis as to why this might be the case.

The central fact of American political discourse today is a startling convergence between left and right positions. On the one hand, the favoured and feted of serious non-fiction — those rare liberal academics, journalists, and authors with policy clout and routine access to the major media — have lately espoused positions that dovetail with the Bush administration's defense of torture and the suspension of habeas corpus. On the other, the so-called "radical" wings of academic theory as well as dissident subfields like post-colonial studies taught by professors who calls themselves "Marxists" and even in many cases "communists," are involved in arguing that empires no longer exist or that everyone, rich and poor alike, can now enjoy the fruits of a freewheeling cosmopolitanism exported by the United States, which is considered genuinely attractive because of its immense cultural productivity, inventiveness, and freedom. Here, the story goes, identities are given free rein, the consumer can luxuriate in the depthless image, and the "micrological" promises liberation from the empty and now meaningless terrain of the macro-political. For some, then, the United States offers itself up invitingly as a place where true intellectuals abjure power (and indeed have long since ceased to matter to power) and who therefore are able to carve out a militant anarchist space within the invisible pockets of a decimated civil society. Whether as active defense of imperial government or merely passive recountings of "governmentality," there is a daunting convergence so it is no exaggeration to say that many US intellectuals have lost their ability to tell the difference between a left and right position. This fundamental ambiguity is *sought* by them, and once found, is taken to be a great advance in thought.

In its stand on human rights, labour law, and the environment, for example, the Left can be said to be traditional and even "conservative" in the literal sense of seeking to conserve (forests, endangered species, unionization, or community values). In its stand on human rights and the environment, by contrast, the Right can be said to be radical and even "subversive" in that it seeks to uproot long-established rights and customs in the name of progress (what Aldous Huxley called a "brave new world" and what Nietzsche called a "revaluation of values"). Similar confusions occur in regard to the term "Liberal" — in which one might well locate the classic avowals of deregulation, unrestrained trade, and the abolition of welfare legislation (all positions of the historical Right). By the same token, the notion of the "individual" that the cultural Left has, for several decades, updated into its politics of the "self" and the "subject," have also informed the Right, since at least the post-Saussurian subject of history has willy-nilly been regarded in the singular rather than as a "collective."

The current moment, I want to suggest, represents a political-discursive watershed, and my own view is that it has not simply evolved or reached this state as a matter of an incremental shift in the map of meaning but rather that it has been forged, much like the term "terrorism" was crafted deliberately and with purpose for eventual use in the course of the last two or three decades. The sort of convergence I am talking about has, of course, been traced to some of its sources in the program of prolific ideologues like Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago, many of whom ended up in the Bush administration and the indefatigable writers of insty-books for the Heritage and Scaife Foundations. But such a convergence was also shaped by the aristocratic bohemianism of the radical individualist and fiercely anti-social sectors of the right-wing lineages of post-structuralism, seen for example in the Nietzschean revivalism of Gilles Deleuze and the Heideggerian panegyrics of Giorgio Agamben. The foreclosure of access to opinion-making media, a robust new discourse of revolutionary right-wing populism launched by the New Christian Right and the collapse of the United States' historical adversaries abroad have all led, under the significant pressures of professional ambition in a discursive environment now "brought to heel," to the current vectoring of right and left forces.

What I am proposing might be clarified by turning to an example, which although not the only possible one, is far from arbitrarily chosen. I am thinking here of the highly publicized, cross-over intellectuals, often with a foot in the university but showcased in a variety of media, who write breezy mass-market books with claims both to scholarship and philosophical depth, and who enjoy invitations as consultants to policy think tanks, corporations, and national governments. They form, in my opinion, an actual movement, citing each other and exhibiting many of the same features constituting a tendency. Writers like Niall Ferguson, Thomas Friedman, Michael Ignatieff, Alan Dershowitz, and Robert Kaplan have very effectively set a certain tone, and skillfully crafted a way of speaking and thinking that has created a public audience, above all among policy-makers. Our research on globalization enters this setting, and is to a large degree contained by it. Having mastered the same colloquial style characterized by passion and bluntness, these defenders of American military and economic conquest and expansion from ostensibly liberal quarters have set a moral tone that affects our work and its public reception with a strain of assertive American thinking (even among non-Americans like Ferguson and Ignatieff, both now based in the United States). The fact that two of the people on this list are not originally from the United States but have had close ties with the country professionally, and lived and worked there for extended periods of time, is itself part of an established pattern of imperial influence and statecraft, with the metropolitan center drawing to itself some of the best minds from the provinces who express themselves through the metropolitan imperium where their international difference has cachet precisely as a reminder of the empire's reach and its inexorable attractiveness to foreigners.

I wish we had the time to go through their books systematically, mapping the highly repetitive motifs, preference for classical sources, and modes of phrasing in each. If one were to examine, say Ignatieff's *Blood and Belonging* (1994) and *The Lesser Evil* (2004), Ferguson's *Empire* (2003) and *Colossus* (2004), Kaplan's *Ends of the Earth* (1996) and *Warrior Politics* (2002), or Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999), a pattern could be discerned that would make my earlier claim regarding the deliberate forging of the discursive environment more plausible. Echoing many of the Bush administration's stated agendas for the "new world order," this group distinguishes its programmatic calls for action under the improbable but ubiquitous sign of *ethics*. In the United States today, they are among the fiercest proponents of the ringing phrases of a new morality, a new moral vision, a new moral compass for the proper conduct of states — "new" because it allows for the suspension of morality in the name of order and "civilization," and so it is a portable morality that I would like to call the "trans-moral." In a moment, I want to examine Ignatieff's mobilization of this language of trans-morality, but first, let me point to some of the other features that allow us to characterize this discursive assault by the trans-moralists.

Needing to establish their philosophical credentials, they all, first and foremost, turn to antiquity. There is a rush to Rome and to the British Empire, a theatrical and liberating embrace of the past. We see a bold march, *à la* Nietzsche, into the time-tested strategies of ancient aristocrats who knew how to keep subjects in their place without the nagging obstacles of law or mores. Everything we need to know is already there in the "best Chinese, Greek, and Roman philosophers." Whether the lessons of the French revolution, Renaissance humanism, twentieth-century social welfare legislation, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or indeed, the Enlightenment are supposed to accompany or condition all this wisdom is never raised. One gets the sense, in fact, that the whole point of returning to this past is to be free of the lessons of modernity, and to stamp this freedom with the imprimatur of the classics.

The attempt to revive the virtues of the British and Roman empires (Kaplan and Ferguson are pronounced in this respect) or to deny that empires exist any longer (Ignatieff's and Friedman's

preference) — are positions that appear at odds, but are in fact complementary in the sense that the a priori goal in each is to characterize America's global hegemony, however derived, as troubled, well-intentioned, but universally beneficial. Each wrestles with the problems of torture, the killing of civilian populations, pre-emptive war, incarceration without trial and so on, defending such practices to various degrees and at various intensities, but in every case accompanied by an overcompensation (in the first three pages of Ignatieff's *The Warrior's Honor* (1998), for instance, he uses the word "moral" over a dozen times). And finally, there is in all of these figures' writings, an almost formulaic invocation of Carl Schmitt, the Nazi journalist, who popularized the thesis of the "state of exception" — that is, the allowable emergencies in which the sovereign power can suspend liberties in the name of public safety and "order." And with this move, the attempt is made, through various pirouettes, to fuse the concept of the pragmatic and the moral.

What must be said here, again parenthetically, is how striking it is that these equivocations in the service of torture and state-sponsored terror actually repeat and indeed refine the spurious legal briefs of the Bush administration's Alberto Gonzalez. Equally, and perhaps more shocking (given our own discursive location in the academy), is the resemblance between these equivocations justifying *action* and, at the other extreme, a few major currents within radical academic theory today that fall back on the same propositions about the "state of exception" to justify *inaction*. Also reliant on the scholastic authority as well as relevance of antiquity conveniently prior to modernity, these putatively radical thinkers quote the same Machiavelli, Polybius, Tiberius, and Sun-tzu to similar ends and find their way, just as often and in the same tenor, to the proposition that ethics is a new substitute for politics. I am not arguing that academic theory is identical to these middle-brow intellectuals of the new Right — there are, by contrast, subtle and important deviations. But I am arguing that they are complementary, and that the two ostensibly different, even oppositional, bodies of thought have converged. The new morality of the lords of humankind is, to put it another way, Nietzschean. Accordingly, the truth is not subject to an external tribunal; it is the rhetorical act that one can get others to believe. In the American imperium, both sides seem to say, it is time to wake up to our true nature, and refuse to be hindered by the call of the merely human.

I take Ignatieff to be the most persuasive, and ultimately tragic, member of this group. I understand that he has addressed the Liberal Party of Canada on at least two occasions, and may have political ambitions of his own. For the fair-minded reader, he is certainly easier to like than the others, pausing at times to destabilize his own notions, interrogate his integrity, and concede ground to other positions. He is, in this respect, much more classically liberal in an older Democratic party sense, and so his aggressive defense of US *Realpolitik* in Serbia, Israel, post-9/11 domestic affairs, and in Iraq, as well as his pained but clear acceptance of torture as a viable means to the ends of democracy make him, I would argue, a more potent stalwart of the larger tendency. His *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in the Age of Terrorism* (2004) is, in my opinion, a formidable obstacle to our work on globalization, and an illustrative case for the kind of points that need to be contested by scholars in the field. In other words I am saying that the ideology of the trans-moralists is not just another set of opinions circulating in the free exchange of knowledge.

Ignatieff's is less an argument than a public sharing of affections. Much of the writing operates on the level of the nostrum. For example, he declares that only democracies have a conscience, that exceptions to the rule of law save democracies rather than threaten them, that the violation of rights is allowable so long as there are formal bodies of adversarial review, and that terrorists do not operate on behalf of justice, but only exploit injustice for a violence that is its own end. He assumes without argument that the United States is a liberal democracy, that it is characterized by majority rule, and that any evils committed by democracies come from the "blindness of good intentions." Perhaps the

most revealing nostrum however is his statement that the constitution is "not a suicide pact." Actually, that is precisely what makes a constitution. The US constitution, certainly, confers the right to citizens to overthrow the government of the United States, by force of arms if necessary, when the government violates the constitutional charter. The constitution means nothing if it is not the supreme law, higher than the government that would seek for its own purposes to subordinate the constitution for its interests.

The setting of the new trans-moralism is a new imperial *Machtpolitik* in the United States itself — the re-assertion of right by might, and consequently release from the formal niceties of contracts, negotiations, and written standards of behaviour. We can perhaps see more clearly at this point that trans-moralism is founded upon the American ideology of the chosen people (originally derived from a sectarian Christian reading of the Old Testament) which, as is well recognized, is, older than the republic itself. The idea of a chosen people in the American context extends back into New England colonial times, and has been stoked to a high flame at a moment of imperial reassertion. The recent theoretical elevation of the "state of exception" thesis actually inverts the real relations at work, and is at best tangential to US power politics. It is not Schmitt's "state of exception" that should pre-occupy us, but the scriptural conviction about the *exceptional state* — "Israel" in the received Biblical model.

To conclude, there is a good deal more to be said about trans-moral intellectualism and religious anti-intellectualism in the American context, as well as academic ultra-intellectualism. But lest my opening reference to malaise creates the impression that I am involved only in a lament, I believe we can respond to these forces, and in fact, that our work must constitute such a response. We need, first, to refuse to temporize about the underlying symmetries of the process known as globalization and a US-centered imperialism. Second, we need to counter the fiction that the nation-state system is unrecuperable and should no longer even be considered an option in international law. We must reject today's all too common assertion of tribalist interests in the name of an amorphous (and always suspect) "stability" and above all, refuse to let authors with scholarly pretensions get away with invoking "democracy" as though it were a settled fact in Western societies.