

Archive: Defending American values at home and abroad

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Let me say first that I am honoured to be part of this event and to mark the life and career of Penn Kemble. [1] Carl Gershman is a hard man to say 'no' to.

When I was writing a book called *Democracy on Trial*, a friend of mine told me that the title sounded to him like something out of the World War II era when democracy fronted the 'dictators' – that my chosen title had a kind of mobilised ring to it. In the middle of the 1990s – the book was published in 1995 – we were in the midst of a dot.com bubble and we weren't paying a whole lot of attention – at least so it seemed to me and many others – to the troubling signs that were slowly accumulating. To be sure, bad stuff was going on in places like Bosnia, and Rwanda – but it all seemed fairly remote. There had been that incident at the World Trade Center in 1993... but we didn't connect the dots.

Six short years later, my title seems not so much quaint as all too apt. For we should all be concerned about whether democracy will be sturdy enough to best tyrants and murderous terrorists in the present and, alas, for years to come. Our situation is not an abstract one for removed philosophic consideration but a living, breathing, in-our-faces reality. In times such as these, we look to the great defenders of democracy in the past – and that, of course, is why we are here today – to honour Penn Kemble and to recall the legacy of Sidney Hook.

I came to this legacy rather late. For I hail from the provinces. I grew up in a little village in the arid high plains of Northern Colorado – Timnath, Colorado, with its population of 185 human souls. The world of New York intellectuals was about as far away from us as a world can be. What I knew about the world I got from

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books borrowed from the bookmobile which turned up on the Main Street – and only street – in our Village to bring books to rural kids who didn't have access to libraries. I read Ernie Pyle's dispatches from World War II [2], Dwight Eisenhower's Crusade in Europe, the autobiography of Gandhi, Martin Luther King's early works, Churchill's History of World War II and lots of other stuff by the time I was 12 or 13. So this far away world beckoned to me and I knew I loved my country – my immigrant grandparents had been spared a terrible fate as ethnic Germans living in Russia by having emigrated with their families when they were young children to America – and I believed she had been worth defending in World War II and was worth defending whenever enemies internal or external threatened.

No doubt these early views were a bit unsophisticated. I hope they have become more nuanced as I have grown older. But my basic commitment to a liberal constitutional order is unchanged – indeed, it has been strengthened over the years – strengthened by listening to stories told by the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina as they bravely confronted military juntas that had tortured and disappeared their children; strengthened by stories told me in South Africa about the fight to end apartheid; strengthened by what I saw and heard in the pre-1989 world in Czechoslovakia (as it was then) and Poland. It does indeed focus the mind wonderfully, as Samuel Johnson is said to have said about hanging, when you are with a group of peaceful protestors in the heart of Warsaw – trying to get as close as possible to the Cathedral where the great Pope John Paul II is saying mass. Illegal Solidarnosc banners were held aloft, for Poland was under martial law in 1983, and Solidarnosc chants echoed through the cobble-stoned streets in old Warsaw. There was a sudden invasion by the militia ringing the demonstrators, and you suddenly find the barrel of a nasty weapon stuck in your ribs. So much courage shown by so many in order to secure civic freedom and minimal human dignity. Or, better said, to guarantee a social and political order in which human dignity is honoured not spat upon.

I must say that these stories, and many others, of courage under circumstances Americans can only imagine, must be remembered and lifted up. So how to do that effectively in America? Well, I am of the era of the 'new left' not the 'old left' – though I left the 'new left' pretty much immediately. I tend to be a failure as a joiner. I attended precisely one meeting of Students for a Democratic Society, then forming on the campus of Colorado State University. I was a very young mother with children to care for and a full load of courses to prepare for and spending three hours wrangling over whether we were to have leaders or 'watch the parking

meters,' in Bob Dylan's cryptic phrase, struck me as a hopeless waste of time. I go it alone – and I did.

But one is never alone for you find yourself, willy nilly, often in amazing company. Some years later, having finally read some Sidney Hook – for his name never came up in group discussions I was part of – I suspected he would have had as little patience as I did for wrangling that was entirely self-referential rather than looking out at the world and being 'in it.' For had his council been heeded at the time, I'm sure he would have counselled that we think about the concrete, difficult, do-able and necessary tasks to sustain democratic society.

Well, fast forward to 1990 or thereabouts. I get a call from the *Encyclopedia Americana*. Would I consider revising and bringing up-to-date Sidney Hook's entry in *The Encyclopedia* under the heading 'Democracy.' This is a major entry, they told me, not one of the short ones. I agreed without needling. How often does one get to revise the work of one of the great ones? And I found that Hook's definition of 'democracy' was music to my ears, as democracy, for Sidney Hook, was not reducible to a set of procedural arrangements, as important as these might be, but was, ineluctably, a 'Moral Proposition.' Much to my relief, Hook's understanding of democracy – with which I had already been somewhat familiar – meant my task was easier than it would otherwise have been. For it enabled me to add material about the great moral-political movements of recent decades – Solidarity, Civic Forum and so much more. Hook had also addressed, in this *Encyclopedia* entry, the dilemma of what democracies can do confronted with 'Indigenous Antidemocratic Groups' – and I will say more about that in a few moments.

The theme of democracy as a moral proposition was one Hook struck again and again. Here are a few samples: In a speech on *The Social Democratic Prospect*, delivered in 1976 Hook wrote: 'For the Social Democrat, democracy is not merely a political concept but a moral one. It is democracy as a way of life.' That way of life, he continued, was one 'animated by an equality of concern for all human beings.' He then added that the point of democratic social arrangements is – from the standpoint of the person – to permit persons to 'develop themselves as persons to their fullest growth, to be free to live up to their desirable potentials as human beings.' So Hook had smuggled in a dimension political philosophers would call a 'teleological one' – there is a purposivity to democracy. It is 'going somewhere.' It fulfils ends that would otherwise go unfulfilled. In yet another discussion of

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Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy, Hook stressed not so much legal relations but ‘the moral ideals of democracy as a way of life...’

And, contra certain aspects of the 1960s counter-culture, among others, Hook insisted – this in a 1978 piece – that ‘Those who speak of government, the agency of organised society, as if it were an inherent foe of human freedom seem to be guilty of a fundamental error. They assume that freedom exists in a state of nature, that it is a natural good that comes with the environment, and that it is surrendered when human beings are organised under laws which necessarily limit some freedom of action. Unless one defines freedom as the right and power to do anything one pleases – which no one can consistently do who becomes a victim of the cruel or malicious action of others – this view of freedom is a myth.’ And then Hook brings in Aristotle – the thinker, along with St. Thomas Aquinas, associated with that teleological view I noted above – drawing in Aristotle’s insistence that human beings are animals designed – teleologically suited – to live in a polis, an organised society governed in some way.

For Hook, democracy was the best way – better than all others human beings had devised and experimented with over the centuries. It strikes me that, if there was a lacuna in Hook’s thinking, it was on the question of religion. In my revision of his *Encyclopedia Americana* piece, I added a discussion of religion – once again Solidarnosc but, most importantly, Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This was not a piece of prescience on my part – noting the importance of religion in the generation of those ideals that are constitutive of democracy – somehow discerning how profoundly important a version of religion, namely Islam, would be to future enemies of democracy. Rather, it was my recognition, based on the study of Western political philosophy, that you just could not separate democracy as a way of life and the premise of the human person from the story of Christianity in the West.

No, it was not prescience on my part but just a recognition of what our great democrats had long argued, including Jane Addams of Hull-House who became the subject of an intellectual biography I published a few years ago. For a panel on ‘Does Democracy Rely on Religious Presuppositions?’ – for this year’s American Political Science Association Meeting, I noted that Eleanor Roosevelt made this point explicitly in a now little discussed book of hers, *The Moral Basis of Democracy*, published in 1940 – when we were threatened by the tyrants as we are now threatened by what some – Christopher Hitchens, among others – are calling

'Islamofascism.' I note ER not because she was a great thinker – she was not – but she was a great democratic citizen and her views are typical of general views on the topic. American democracy, she declared, had its 'roots in religious belief' and 'the life of Christ was based on principles which are necessary to the development of a Democratic state.' Loving that Neighbor as thy self – regard for others – this, for ER, was the heart of the matter. There is hope for the future, ER insisted, only insofar as we 'base it on the Christian way of life.' Now this sort of thing makes us uncomfortable nowadays – for some good reasons and some bad reasons – which I'll not take the time to spell out. But I simply wanted to note that this is one nexus Hook did not explore.

If he had he would have noted the insistence in medieval theology – carried on down to us and embodied in protestors like Martin Luther King – that law cannot properly be law if it violates higher law – a law that transcends the positive statutory law of states. The goal is to bring that positive law into correspondence with higher law.

Higher law is porous – it does not dictate public policy. But it states, most importantly, that human dignity is not given by the state and the state cannot take it away. Given this powerful conviction, our medieval forebears went so far in some instances as to countenance tyrannicide, not just forbearance until the tyrant goes away. Certainly resistance to violative, tyrannical regimes. So that part of our heritage, in part because it runs so counter to the perverse version of Islam preached and practiced by al-Qaeda and their ilk, must be ongoingly emphasised. Too, the Western tradition has never been hospitable to theocracy, to the absolute melding of what we call church and state. Indeed, it was out of the contestation of regnum and sacerdotium in medieval centuries that we derive the importance of religious liberty and, as a correlative, the freedom of the state from take-over by any particular religious group or domination. At one point Hook, quite wisely it seems to me, opposes any monistic view of the state – as opposed to a plural view of democratic society. The institutional freedom of non-governmental groups is absolutely central to this plural view.

To summarise thus far: democracy is unabashedly a normative ideal – one that needs defending, not only against external foes but internal ones as well. This leads me directly to some reflections of the role of the public intellectual, a role Hook played with considerable honour and panache. In one of my recent books I note a fascinating and troubling development among those tagged intellectuals in our

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society – a development linked to the almost complete absorption of intellectual life into the academic life of the university. That is, the institutional bases for multiple forms of intellectual life, seem to have diminished. That, I suspect, plays an important role in a lamentable development. For somewhere along the line the view took hold that, to be an intellectual, you had to be against it, whatever it is. Marlon Brando from *The Wild Ones*. The intellectual as a negator. Affirmation is not in his or her vocabulary. It was not always so – as Sidney Hook clearly demonstrates. Throughout World War II, when the stakes were so high, American intellectuals signed on for the war effort. Our foreign policy enjoyed bipartisan support. As everyone fought fascism, liberal, conservative, moderate, even radical intellectuals and academics found common ground without fearing that they would be accused of betraying a lofty stance of dissent. Unfortunately, signing on to fight Stalinism was, for some, a rather different thing – again not, I'm happy to say, for Sidney Hook. The 'socialism of the gallows,' as Albert Camus put it, had to be opposed and opposed strenuously. Despite that, many on the left were reluctant to face the truth about the Soviet Union. The body count numbering in the millions was even higher than the Nazis had managed. Sadly, left-wing denial has resurfaced in the wake of 9/11 and the Iraq war.

Immersed in 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' and deconstruction, many of today's intellectuals – and many are self-styled 'public intellectuals' despite the fact that the language they deploy is exceedingly recondite and self-referential – believe that only negation will serve. All moralism must be opposed and calling democracy a normative ideal is moralism because any normative ideal is. To give you some idea of how this works, here's an example drawn from the life of Michel Foucault, one of the heroes of this movement of negation. Foucault had signed a petition protesting the treatment of Vietnamese boat people – perhaps I should say the circumstances that led to this phenomenon. He then faced a firestorm of protest from his own ranks. How could he be for this? He subsequently wrote the most convoluted, nigh unintelligible rationale for his actions you can possibly imagine. Why? Because he could not affirm fundamental human dignity – there not being subjects or persons at all in his philosophy. There were no normative truth claims so you cannot evoke those. You can't say: This is wrong. This shall not stand. This is not how people should be treated. Sidney Hook would have a field-day with this sort of thing, I suspect. This stance has also bred a disturbing sort of self-loathing that presents itself as critique but sends forth the unpleasant odor of what Nietzsche called resentment – I'm not a big fan of Nietzsche's but I think he nailed this attitude and dynamic. One's life and thought is built on resentment – on envy of the very

thing one loathes. Be that as it may, the incessant claim that America is as repressive as the regimes we oppose; that America is somehow the cause of what is happening; that America is the true terrorist and the most dangerous country in the world – on and on in this vein as we saw and heard during the anti-war (or allegedly anti-war) protests over this past week-end – is part and parcel of the contemporary academic arsenal – not in toto but in sufficient strength as to have a corrosive effect.

I often wonder: what happened to the robust conviction about the basic strength and decency of American democracy and that we must strive ongoingly to bring our practices into line with our principles? If you believe the principles themselves are just ‘arbitrary constructions’ – none of this will mean anything to you and you will do your best to ‘negate’ it. The life of a public intellectual like Sidney Hook was about affirmation as well as critique – what we endorse not just what we oppose. I’m not sure, of course, what Sidney Hook would have made of Operation Iraqi Freedom, but I can be darn certain that he would have agreed with my friend, Bronislaw Geremek, who was in jail in 1983 when I was in Poland, when he stated in a talk just two weeks ago at the Library of Congress, speaking of why he supported the Iraq War: ‘I don’t much care for tyrants.’

Well, neither did Sidney Hook. And if you believe there is no difference between the likes of Saddam Hussein and President Bush or Prime Minister Blair, if they are all tyrants somehow, you have nowhere to go at all. You are also in a condition of paranoid delusion...but we’ll not get clinical at this point.

I do believe that Sidney Hook would have signed on with an effort a number of us were part of – Carl is a signatory – I don’t know how many others in the room might be – and this is a statement issued on February 12, 2002, by a group of sixty academics and intellectuals, entitled, ‘What We’re Fighting For: A Letter from America,’ that outlined what we believed is at stake in the war against terrorism. We were concerned about the fate of five fundamental truths that, we insisted, ‘pertain to all people without distinction’: that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights; that the basic subject of society is the human person, and that the legitimate role of government is to protect and help to foster the conditions for human flourishing – and this could have come straight from the pen of Sidney Hook; that human beings desire to seek to know the truth about life’s purposes and ends’ and that freedom of conscience and religious freedom are the inviolable rights of the human person. Finally, the indiscriminate killing in the name of God is the greatest betrayal of religious faith.

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We associated these five principles with ‘American values’ because America is premised on some version of these truths – not that America alone is the bearer of them. We hoped that our statement would do two things: First, we wanted to demonstrate to our counterparts in other countries that American intellectuals and academics were not uniformly in the opposition where the struggle against terrorism was concerned. Second, we hoped to offer a conceptual framework within which to assess critically America’s efforts.

The upshot? The statement was completely ignored by the American elite media. Those who did comment domestically rose up and, as this particular company tends to do, denounced the statement as a pro-war celebration. In Europe our statement created a firestorm of angry protest. *Le Monde* had fits. Various German newspapers went catatonic. The Spanish were beside themselves. On and on. Jurgen Habermas even referred to this defense of universal norms – which is supposed to be his stock in trade – as horrible ‘Kriegspropaganda.’ Well, this sort of thing gets discouraging, of course. Fortunately, our statement prompted widespread response in the Arab world – much of it filled with venom, of course, including a direct response from bin Laden himself. But it has also led to an invitation to dialogue and the second meeting of what is called ‘The Malta Forum’ will be held in Casablanca in a few weeks, during which we will compare the resources available within Arab Islamic countries and Western democratic countries with a Christian heritage, respectively, on the role and purpose of law and government. I should add that, although the media ignored us, another group of academic intellectuals – the usual suspects – wrote a letter to European counterparts in which they denounced us and supported European attacks on America.

This leads me to my final question, one that haunted Sidney Hook, I suspect, and that should haunt us all and that is whether democracy is sturdy enough to survive – is democracy weakening in the West? How is such a complex system as democracy sustained over time? Some would place an emphasis on history and laws: this is the way we have been doing things since our inception or for many generations now; our basic laws guarantee and require such a structure; we have maintained our system through severe emergencies. Still one wants and needs something in addition – one might call this ongoing civic commitment on the part of citizens to the constitutional structure and normative ideals that make their own freedoms and ordered liberty and civic equality possible. Should that commitment wane, whether from external threat or internal rot, democracy as what Hook calls a way of life cannot survive. It would be a skeleton without a body.

So: civic formation. How well are we going at generating citizens? Those who can enact the civic capacities democracy requires and on which it relies. One of the glories of Western democracy historically has been its capacity to bring in diverse mixes of peoples – diverse racially, ethnically, religiously, and in nearly every other way in which people can be diverse – and to forge a ‘one’ out of this ‘many.’ And yet the ‘one’ didn’t demand of the ‘many’ that they lose their particular identities altogether so long as these could be expressed in civil ways consistent with the constitutive norms, rules, and practices of democratic civil society itself.

We know that some assimilationists in our own history went too far in their determination to scour democracy clean of all signs of particularity and difference. Those who had participated in democratic civil society for a generation mocked newcomers with strange habits. All of us with immigrant parents or grandparents have heard tales of humiliation. But we are also immersed in other stories – stories of resounding success as children and grandchildren were educated and went on to vocations their grandparents or parents had only glimpsed from afar. Yet this process of ongoingly regenerating citizens is assaulted by some in our midst as a dirty word as a multiculturalist ideology rages that dictates that we are separated identity clusters who basically cannot understand one another – we are doomed to bleat at one another across the vast differences that separate us whether these be gender, race, sexual orientation, on and on.

Even more stark, of course, is that dark underside that uses democracy to undermine democracy. To the extent Western democracy loses a sense of self-confidence about itself and its enculturating and civic mission, it ceases to engage in the robust making of citizens – and I think we see that in Western Europe now where little or nothing was done about promotion of officially sanctioned hatred of Western culture until something terrible happens – as in the UK – in which radical imams used the cover of religious freedom to recruit the young to carry out the deeds we saw on 7/7 and almost saw on 7/21. Characteristic of this deadly brew is anti-Semitism as a foundational attitude, really, loathing of democracy, contempt for anything ‘Western,’ scorning civil law soon to be supplanted by sharia, and so on. Democracies have often had a hard time with those who use the protections of democracy to work to destroy democracy, but as Sidney Hook insisted, we must figure out a way to deal with this – this is a genuine dilemma – especially should the numbers of ideological haters of democracy grow and democracies fumble badly on their enculturating task – and at shutting down the active generation of murderous ideologues.

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It is time for me to close – I suspect your patience is at an end. So let me say that I hear a cry for dignity from many places in the world today; the expression of hope that the arbitrary violence of warlords and tyrants might cease; that the murder of innocents might cease; and that fundamental human dignity and decency might pertain. This hope is tethered to the recognition that no system is perfect and democracy is no panacea. But as Sidney Hook recognised, it remains the earth's best political hope.

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Notes

[1] Penn Kemble (1941-2005) was a social democrat, a civil rights activist, and a campaign adviser to President Clinton, appointed deputy director of the USIA in 1993, taking over as acting director in 1999.

[2] Ernest Taylor Pyle (1900-45) wrote feature columns, primarily for Scripps-Howard newspapers. In 1944 he won a Pulitzer Prize for his stories about the ordinary soldiers fighting in World War II. He was killed in action in 1945 in the war against Japan.