

Democracy and America's War on Terror

by Robert L. Ivie, University of Alabama Press, 2005, 264 pp.

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Mr. Ivie, a Professor of Communications at Indiana University, here draws together a collection of essays united by several themes: the United States is a 'distempered democracy,' plagued by 'demophobia,' indeed nothing less than a 'republic of fear.' (Here, of course, playing off the designation by the Iraqi opposition of the terrors of life under Saddam Hussein.) Evidently Americans, whether they know it or not, live under a penumbra of fear, envy, hatred, and repression. It should be noted here at the outset that the 'war on terror' portions of the book only cover the last two sections explicitly: evidently the publisher decided to pump up reader interest by highlighting that theme. The cover of the book is a reproduction of a stern Uncle Sam, familiar to Americans from earlier days, including the war against fascism and militarism in World War II.

Rhetoric is important. No doubt about it. I don't think Ivie has to convince too many people of that. But focusing on political rhetoric – on the ways in which political figures revise and extend the available civic repertoire of a given society at a given point in time – needs careful and considered attention. That doesn't seem to be what is going on in this work. Instead, Ivie pummels the reader with his own form of wild rhetorical overreach – even as he chides those in public life he claims are up to the same thing.

Consider, for example, his extraordinary overuse of one standard feature of post-modern discourse. I refer, of course, to the all-purpose term 'the Other.' When 'the Other' kept popping up every other page (forgive me), I decided to take note. I may have missed a few other others but here is a list – mind you, there are 198 pages of text:

- p. ix. nondemocratic other,
- p. 4. domestic Others,
- p. 5. foreign and domestic Others,
- p. 8. foreign Others,
- p.16. the Other and the threatening Other,
- p. 28. fear of the Other and colonize the Other,

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- p. 29. control of the Other,
- p. 30. the irrational Other; containment of the Other; savagery of the Other,
- p. 31. control of the Other; the Other,
- p. 32. diverse others; external Others; internal Others; addressing the Other,
- p. 33. always threatening others,
- p. 36. experiences of Others,
- p. 38. alien Otherness; boundaries of Otherness; construction of Otherness; foreign (or even domestic) Other,
- p. 42. address the Other; foreign and domestic Otherness,
- p. 46. constructs the Other; threatening Others; brutal Other's affinity for...; hostile Others' willful...; identifying the Other; the Other's evil character. [This takes the jackpot of 'Othering' with 6 mentions on a single page.]
- p. 49. threatening Other,
- p. 50. primitive Other,
- p. 89. domestic Other; foreign Other,
- p. 90. transform the Other; foreign Others,
- p. 92. foreign Others,
- p. 117. threatening Other; an Other that...
- p. 122. non-democratic Others; foreign Others; non-democratic Others; sacrificial Other,
- p. 126. distempered Other; reacting to Others,
- p. 127. Othering,
- p. 129. extreme Othering,
- p. 131. Others,
- p. 135. marks the Other,
- p. 137. evil other; the Others' enactments,
- p. 139. evil Other,
- p. 144. foreign Others,
- p. 148. foreign Others,
- p. 149. extreme Othering,
- p. 159. Alien others; agonistic Others,
- p. 171. addressing the Other agonistically,
- p. 181. agonistic Others,
- p. 182. foreign Others,
- p. 186. vilification of Others,
- p. 187. menacing Others,
- p. 195. The Others' threatening visage; the Other; the Other; the nondemocratic Other.

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A veritable Babette's Feast of others, othering and otherness. So what's the problem? Here we bump up against a nearly ubiquitous feature of post-modernism, namely, the dreary overuse of an exhausted vocabulary. What was once fresh – say, 20 years ago – is now stale from overuse. What once promised – or held forth the promise – of new ways to analyse complex phenomena has now become a way to avoid treating complex phenomena complicatedly and with rigor and nuance. A particular rhetoric substitutes for argument even as the author – Ivie in this case – puts forth the claim that rhetoric is the golden key to unlock all manner of often hidden and even repressed phenomena. The upshot is systematic overuse of a particular vocabulary that obscures more than it reveals. This, in turn, gets Ivie into a number of tight spots that he doesn't acknowledge or even, apparently, recognise. His own uniformly inflammatory rhetoric, including wild-eyed mischaracterisations of the views of those with whom he disagrees, invites growing mistrust of his fulminations and allegations as one reads along – even if one has opened the book with some positive inclinations, as I had, given my own long-standing attunement to the importance of our descriptive and evaluative vocabularies.

Ivie's basic thesis – averred from beginning to end – is that liberalism cannot be trusted. What liberals are about is stifling real, authentic, 'participatory' democracy – hence demophobia. This fear, even hatred, of democracy is a feature of the American republic from its inception. Necessary to this caging off of democracy was a 'culture of fear' and this culture, inviting both 'heroic' and 'paranoid' dreams, shows just how thin the democratic ethos really is. Or, better said, how thin the liberals believe it to be – hence the need to build up various representative institutions to protect 'the people' (allegedly), but (really) to protect a controlling interest-driven elite from 'the people.' Now this thesis is as old as the hills, of course. And a thesis that has been around for a long time is bound to contain a kernel of truth. But Ivie believes this pretty much exhausts the subject. So much so that he even heaps scorn on the 60 year effort to secure woman suffrage, alleging that this effort was driven primarily by an expedient urge to secure the republic against the unwashed by giving 'middle class women' the vote. (p. 45) This grotesquely unfair characterisation takes one unsavoury feature of the movement for woman suffrage – the ways in which some at certain points pandered to racist and anti-immigrant sentiment – and makes it the entire thing. Many woman scholars, myself included, have pointed out this sorry fact. But no serious scholar would mistake it for the whole – thus demeaning the decades of activism, sacrifice, sheer hard work, and civic courage involved in the campaign for woman suffrage.

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What for Ivie is a kind of toss-away – of course, the Suffragists were also demophobes – is indicative of the whole. I should note that Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement is conspicuous by its near total absence in Ivie's discussion of demophobia – presumably because it would put pressure on his thesis overall. That is, it makes it easier for Ivie to declare that millions of Americans remain 'disenfranchised.' Enfranchisement here loses any secure meaning. It is simply untrue that 'millions of Americans' are excluded from the vote – a canard that does not hold up under closer examination. In the last presidential election, the African-American vote, as a percentage of the whole, was higher than it has been for decades, for example.

In his eagerness to shoot down the 'stabilizing metanarrative' of political order, Ivie has, paradoxically, offered precisely such a narrative as a vehicle for his own efforts. There is the 'demophobic republic-of-fear' metanarrative within which all else – all phenomena – are shoehorned. Whatever criticisms can and should be made of the 'deliberative democracy' theorists of American liberal scholarship – and there are indeed many legitimate criticisms to be made – loses all force because everything is treated with such caustic dismissal. And because he offers no real alternative. Discussions about how comedy should replace a certain stern tragic view because comedy leads us to view people, not as 'vicious' but as 'mistaken,' do not get us very far when we deal with the likes of the attackers of 9/11 or 7/7. There is nothing comedic about that and arguing that these folks were just somehow misguided is itself laughable.

Readers are no doubt most interested in what Ivie has to say about the war against terrorism. Again, he has a number of entirely legitimate concerns. A 'war against terror' seems hopelessly diffuse and open-ended. Some of the rhetoric coming out of Washington in the early days after the plenary jolt of 9/11 to the body politic can be construed, if one is offering the most negative and cynical interpretation possible – Ivie's stock-in trade – as overdrawn, trafficking in binary opposites, and all that. The interesting question is what rhetorical repertoire finally came to prevail; how it tamed some of the earliest reactions – if indeed it did, and so on. Ivie ignores altogether President Bush's efforts to calm, not rouse, the public in his insistent distinction between Islam and Islamist fanaticism. Many of us think that was his finest hour to date – including many critics of the President. This falls entirely by the wayside in Ivie's tirade against all American presidents, pretty much, with unreserved scorn being heaped on Eisenhower, Carter, Reagan, and both presidents

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Bush. Notably missing in the discussion of the Reagan era is any discussion of the great freedom and democracy movements of Central Eastern Europe – all those millions of would-be citizens risking jail (or worse.) Nope. They disappear. All we have is Reagan's Cold War rhetoric, mirroring that of our 'Other.' But didn't things change? Were not ordinary folks involved? Havel and all the others are MIA in his account.

So the Bush Administration is following a well trod path of systematic demophobia and ongoing reproduction of a 'republic of fear' in its war against terrorism. The 'experts' Ivie turns to are always those with the most dyspeptic and even conspiratorial view of things, like Noam Chomsky. Talking about 'blowback' – a ludicrous concept – is no substitute for serious analysis of the inability of any country to control utterly what follows when it acts, or fails to act, in a given situation. ('Blowback' has also become a way to tacitly blame the victims when human beings die in terrorist attacks – they are victims of 'blowback' which means their own government is finally responsible.)

Again, let me emphasise that there are genuine debates to be had about when it is appropriate to characterise certain deeds or persons as 'evil.' It is not serious to dismiss this and call instead for a 'comic corrective to humanity's tragic inclinations...' (p. 131.) (Along the way in his discussion of terror, I should note that there are a few real howlers – just plain falsehoods – as, e.g., the claim that the deaths in the Oklahoma City bombing were caused by 'Christian patriots.' There was nothing "Christian" – even remotely so – about Timothy McVeigh. He was a rabid libertarian, scarcely a Christian philosophy, who, before his execution, left as his final words a poem he had copied called *Invictus*, penned by an atheist or, at least, an agnostic. 'I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul' is not the sentiment of a Christian.)

One expert is cited favourably as arguing that terrorist acts are derived from a 'reasoned hatred' and this means one must tend to the contexts out of which terrorism arises. (p. 135) But, earlier, Ivie himself has debunked any explanation for terrorism focusing on poverty and the like – context is diminished as he stresses the animating rhetoric's instead. So which is it? The primary point he wishes to score is that tedious notion that George Bush and Osama Bin Laden somehow mirror one another and this invites a cycle of 'terror and counterterror.' What the 9/11 attackers were engaged in was 'performance violence' and 'political theatre.' (p. 137) And such acts should be evaluated within that sort of framework. What

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to do about terror? Ivie's answer is that America should really get democratic and overthrow its 200 year republic in favor of an authentic democracy. What the institutional features of such a polity would be is less than clear. Earlier Ivie has displayed a pretty serious case of polis envy in extolling the glories of ancient Athens – despite its 'exclusion of women from citizenship, the prevalence of chattel slavery, economic disparity between a small wealthy class of landowners and the poor working masses of subsistence farmers, and an imperialistic militancy.' (p. 51) These 'serious shortcomings' to the contrary notwithstanding, Athens offers a 'corrective to the present belief that direct democracy is impossible.' (p. 51)

But how a huge multicultural republic is, somehow, to model itself on the Athenian demos is frustratingly underdeveloped, to put it mildly. It also seems odd to say that Athens lacked an 'entrenched governing elite' given Ivie's earlier list of characteristics of ancient Attica. Somehow the deliberative assembly that drew 'six thousand of Athens's twenty thousand to thirty thousand citizens' to make policy can be our corrective today. What institutional forms would make this possible are never discussed yet, somehow, this is the model for an expansive 'cosmopolitan citizenship' – Ivie's concluding suggestion – in our own era. Finally, his suggestion that a 'more democratically robust perspective of agonistic pluralism' is some magic bullet to help us deal with al-Qaeda and its ilk is rather less than persuasive. (p. 149) There is, as I indicated earlier, a serious discussion to be had about the pluses and minuses of a 'war perspective' where terrorism is concerned. But this book, alas, offers nothing of the sort.

One last comment. Ivie's treatment of authors is quite awful. His method of working is to present their views, or their alleged views, by citing single words or a few words or a phrase by the author but placed inside his narrative of their views. The upshot, as I know from his treatment of Paul Berman's work, my own, and that of others, is a distortion of the author's argument and intent. I even 'learned' to my astonishment that I believe evil can 'be eradicated by means of a just war.' (p. 182) This is something new to me – no Augustinian could possibly believe any such thing. When I speak, in *Just War Against Terror*, of ethical restraint and justification where the use of coercive force is concerned, noting that one must 'stop the spread of evil' if good is to flourish, the reference point is to interdiction. You cannot make nice with those trying to kill you at a given moment in time. You need to interdict the behaviour first. Perhaps something one can call 'peace' will follow at a later point. The notion that if we just redescribed what was going on and stopped vilifying 'Others,' sunny avenues of possibility would open up, is

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rather extraordinary when one is dealing with those who have pledged themselves to your wholesale destruction – men, women, and children. Ivie also attributes to me positions of others that I note as worthy of consideration. Were this his manner of working unique to my book it would be vexing but not a fatal flaw. That, sorry to say, isn't the case. I defy anyone who has read Paul Berman's book *Terror and Liberalism* to see in Ivie's cursory and derogatory discussion anything remotely resembling a fair treatment. So it goes. Another disappointing entry.

Jean Bethke Elshtain is the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics at the University of Chicago. Among her books are *Just War Against Terror. The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (Basic Books, 2003.) An extended interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain can be found in issue 1 of *Democratiya*.