

The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy: Political Thought Since 9/11

by John Brenkman, Princeton University Press, 2007, 205 pp.

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It is a bitter irony that the tragedy of the September 11, 2001 attacks, in which some 3,000 people lost their lives, has been overshadowed by the many tragedies of their aftermath. Consider just those perpetrated by the United States. The American government has curtailed the civil liberties of its citizens. It has flouted national and international law to detain and torture individuals around the world. It has stoked nativist sentiments and become less tolerant of political dissent. Perhaps worst of all, it defied world opinion to invade an unrelated country, and did so with such hubris and incompetence that it locked itself into a civil war that every day kills soldiers and civilians and exacerbates the very conflict it was meant to resolve.

Tragedies create victims. But, as John Brenkman astutely observes in *The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy*, victimhood can also beget tragedy. It was a narrative of grievance that Hitler rode to power, the consequences of which still fuel the sense of victimhood that drives fringe Israeli settlers to attack Palestinians today. And, of course, it is a sense of victimhood that motivates Islamic extremists, including the 18 men of September 11, 2001, to attack the West.

After that day it was possible, suddenly, for Americans to imagine themselves as victims. The nation thus felt entitled to self-defense and even to vengeance, blithely unaware – indeed, at times wilfully ignorant, Brenkman argues – of the tragedies it was perpetuating on itself and others. Brenkman's image of 'a wounded, half-blind leviathan thrashing about in geopolitical seas' (p. 9) is all too apt.

Cultural Contradictions seeks to understand the spiral of tragedies since September 11, 2001 through the lens of political theory. It is a timely and important project, but perhaps a quixotic one. Brenkman adeptly employs analytic political thinkers – Kant, Hobbes, Arendt, and others – to expose the flaws in political leaders' and intellectuals' responses to September 11. These efforts are certainly worthwhile since, 'One role that political thought ought to play in the political life of a

democracy is to broaden and enrich the capacity for judgment' (p. 19). Would that decision-makers had been able to read this book circa 2001.

But as George Fletcher has noted in his *Romantics at War*, there is something else at play in the events of the last half decade, something that does not lend itself to reason-based philosophies. Fletcher calls this, floridly, Romanticism, which we might summarise as the non-rational impulses that motivated the attacks of September 11 and all too often guided the responses to them – passions of destruction, tribalism, vengeance, righteousness, and a messianic sense of mission. Brenkman and the writers he employs are aware of these forces, but too firmly rooted in the Enlightenment tradition of reason to have a political theory of 'Romanticism.' And so *Cultural Contradictions*, for all its insights, ultimately fails to reach as far as the reader might hope.

I.

Brenkman's main task is to confront the neoconservative conception of power, democracy, and military force with Great Thinkers. Take, for instance, the Bush Administration's faith in military force, which, to neoconservative thinking, is the most important component of power and the key to achieving policy goals ranging from homeland security to democracy promotion. Against this simplistic assertion Brenkman chooses to deploy Hannah Arendt, who took the view that power is the ability 'not just to act but to act in concert' (p. 38). In this formulation, power emerges from and is legitimised by collective action, and so discord – violence – in fact represents a breakdown of power. Thus, the Bush administration's largely unilateral use of military force following September 11 was not an expression of power in the Arendtian sense, but rather a crisis of American might. Indeed, the failure of the American military to achieve the ends it sought – e.g. a victory in the war on terror (whatever that might mean) or a democratic Iraq – supports the view that, absent the legitimacy of collective agreement, raw military force is a hollow sort of power.

If this type of analysis seems like overkill – intellectual shock and awe – it is. Though students of theory, neoconservatives have produced an ideological and policy-oriented literature that neither aims for nor achieves the kind of theoretical rigor that interests Brenkman (or Arendt). This might be a problem for Brenkman if neoconservative policy had borne fruit, but, viewed in early 2008, the weakness of the theory corresponds all too well to the failure of the policies. And so at times

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it seems Brenkman is, to mix metaphors, shooting straw-men in a barrel with overwhelming force. However, there are at least two reasons why these sections are the most important and compelling of the book.

First, neo-conservatism's arguments are far from dead. An unreflective confidence in the 'goodness' of the United States and a corresponding tendency to see enemies as 'evil,' a view of U.S. hegemony as good per se, a faith in the effectiveness of military force, and a general disregard for multilateralism all live on in the platform of the Republican party and elsewhere. Indeed, they are all-too-recurring themes in the history of American foreign policy. Sadly, the arguments Brenkman makes now will likely be needed again in the future.

Second, it is refreshing to see neoconservative arguments confronted at the level of normative theory, not just in policy debates. Here Brenkman's use of Arendt is particularly satisfying. Neoconservatives tend to cite Arendt with approval as a critic of totalitarianism and a witness against evil, and so it is welcome to see her deployed against them. Liberals have been too willing to let neoconservatives appropriate ideas and figures from the liberal tradition for decidedly illiberal ends, and so it is gratifying to see Brenkman 'reclaim' Arendt in this way. [1]

II.

Another illusion Brenkman would like to burst is the facile contrast of Hobbes, the hard-headed pursuer of the national interest, and Kant, the fuzzy-headed peacenik. He shows that theses like Robert Kagan's famous 'Kant / Europeans / Democrats are from Venus, Hobbes / Americans / Republicans are from Mars' fall apart under a serious reading of the two philosophers.[2] While Kant believed that international law and democratisation would *eventually* lead to world peace, he clearly thought the process would be long and bloody, with plenty of back-sliding. [3] And Hobbes, Brenkman rightly argues, believed that humanity was not inevitably doomed to a war of all against all, but rather could achieve security by agreeing to be ruled by a sovereign.

But so eager is Brenkman to upend the utopian-realist caricature that he stretches too far, even declaring Hobbes the 'unacknowledged prophet of humanitarian intervention' (p. 154) because he imagines the sovereign ending violence between individuals. While Hobbes saw the sovereign as the bringer of order, there is certainly a difference between submitting to the sovereign to save oneself from violence and

imposing sovereignty on another to save him from it. Here Brenkman joins Kagan in a trap he notes earlier in the book, applying Hobbes's views to relations between states when the philosopher was of course writing about the formation of the state. When we speak of a Hobbesian foreign policy or a Hobbesian world we are using the domestic realm as a metaphor for the international.

Moreover, if we allow ourselves to make this extrapolation from the domestic to the international, a crucial distinction between Hobbes and Kant survives Brenkman's efforts to show their similarities. Both Hobbes and Kant suggest that human beings can overcome violence through political organisation, but the former insists that only the Leviathan can achieve this stability, while the latter believes in a liberal, rule-based order. This is, strikingly, the major difference between the views of neoconservatives and those of liberal internationalists like Anne-Marie Slaughter or John Ikenberry. [4] Whereas the former would have the United States impose a Pax Americana of democracy and prosperity on the world, the latter think those goals can only be achieved in a pluralistic international order of liberal institutions and law.

III.

Brenkman also has criticisms for the Left, principally intellectuals, whom he seems to believe underestimate the threat of Islamic extremism while overstating the danger posed by U.S. military action. Behind the knee-jerk pacifism of thinkers like Chomsky, Brenkman sees Giorgio Agamben's dark view of the sovereign as the declarer of the 'state of exception.' This idea refers to the ability of the state to suspend the rights of its citizenry in the interests of communal survival. At its most extreme the concept applies to the mass murder perpetrated by the Nazis (and indeed Agamben draws directly on fascist thinker Carl Schmitt to make his argument), but it is not difficult, in these days of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, secret prisons, and military tribunals, to see how the state of exception describes the United States of George W. Bush.

Still, Brenkman is surely right when he warns intellectuals on the Left against criticising every action the state takes to defend its citizens with force as another slip toward totalitarianism. The question, of course, is where to draw the line, and here Brenkman does not offer any clear principles to guide policy. He insists that democracy and liberalism can provide safeguards against the excesses of the state, and of course they do. But the ease with which the Bush administration manipulated

fear to overcome the occasional objections of a pliant Congress, a deferential judiciary, and a toothless multilateral order casts doubt on the effectiveness of these institutions as currently constituted. Until they improve, liberals like Brenkman cannot lightly dismiss Agamben's warning.

Yet, at times Brenkman seems disturbingly cavalier about American power. Consider his stance on the Iraq war: 'I do not think that the invasion of Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein was immoral or illegal. It was, however, ill-advised and ill-conceived, and the failure to secure civil order in Iraq was unconscionable' (p. 16). Brenkman does not quite say that the war would have been fine if we had just got it right, but he comes close, and this stance undermines his critique of Agamben. Surely the most important lesson from the Iraq war is not that the United States should wield its power more competently, but rather that it should be much more reflective about both *how* and *why* it wields that power. In other words, it is dangerous to seduce ourselves with fantasies of competence, and even more dangerous to let fear and victimhood convince us of our righteousness. But Brenkman has no Great Thinker to lead us away from the trap of arrogance and hubris. This is again the non-rational realm, the realm of Fletcher's Romanticism, and one we must learn to confront if tragedies like September 11 and its aftermath are to be avoided.

Our best hope lies in a renewal of domestic and international political institutions, in governance structures strong enough to protect us from threats, but not so strong as to threaten us themselves. This is the classic dilemma of political liberalism, and one that our outmoded policy instruments are struggling to solve in an increasingly interconnected age. We need liberal and cosmopolitan institutions of global governance that enable states to control terrorism through coordinated policing action and, when necessary, the controlled use of force. Such an international system has been theorised most compellingly by Jürgen Habermas and envisioned in more concrete forms by thinkers like David Held or the liberal internationalists. [5]

Brenkman discusses these ideas toward the end of *Cultural Contradictions*, but misses an opportunity to add to them constructively. Instead, he seems to have reservations about their feasibility. He may be right; liberal cosmopolitanism may not be realisable in practice. But – unless Brenkman has a better suggestion – this does not mean that we should not strive for it in principle. I doubt there is a nation in the world that lives up to the utopia envisioned in its constitution, but most are the better for aiming at it.

IV.

That said, even the most committed cosmopolitan must recognise that September 11 dealt the project, and liberalism in general, a challenge it has yet to surmount. Our domestic and international institutions failed. They did not stop even a relatively liberal society like the United States from giving in to victimhood, fear, and righteousness. Since that day we have learned, again, that liberal constraints on political power become vulnerable when the rationality on which they are based is undermined.

The question thus becomes how we can better insulate our institutions from our own irrationality. This is a large and worthy task for political theory, one that, Brenkman might have noted, Arendt's ideas on public discourse and Habermas's enormous expansion of them have much to contribute. I will make only one suggestion on the subject here: we need to better understand and employ the politics of responsibility, guilt, and even shame. Consider Germany. The country's remarkable transformation from the tyrant of Europe to the motor of a liberal and cosmopolitan continental order derives at least in part from its (late but) direct confrontation with the history of the Holocaust. Such a result was perhaps inevitable given the extremity of its crimes, but it remains a mystery why Germany was transformed by its experience of guilt, while other countries with blood on their hands (and few are innocent) remain untouched by the crimes of their past.

The United States of George W. Bush certainly needed to be reminded of the devastating consequences of its military power before it invaded Iraq. Instead, it displayed 'a dangerous disregard for the prospect of tragedy that...inevitably accompanies politics when it turns to violence as a means for achieving its ends' (p. 22). Blinded with a sense of victimhood and righteousness, the United States did not *want* to recognise the tragedy inherent in its actions.

Brenkman is right to excoriate the country's' leaders for this wilful ignorance, but he stops short of telling us what political theory can do about it. The pressing issue now is how we as a body politic can remember what we have wrought in Iraq the next time we are tempted to unleash our military might. Institutions that encourage reflection and discourse, that provide a clear accounting of the war, its consequences, and our complicity in them, can help in this regard. These may not be political institutions, but rather social practices, civil society groups, or even just courageous journalists, filmmakers, and authors (Gunter Grass, recent revelations aside, seems a possible model). [6] Taking responsibility is an uncomfortable and

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politically unpopular act. But it is perhaps the only way to free ourselves from the chain of tragedies that followed from September 11 by ensuring that, next time, wisdom measures the passion of our response.

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Notes

- [1] Similar uses of Arendt have appeared in the academic literature. See for example Owens, 2007.
- [2] Kagan 2003.
- [3] Kant 1970.
- [4] For a statement of the latter's views, see Ikenberry and Slaughter 2006.
- [5] For examples see Habermas 2001, Held 2004, Ikenberry and Slaughter 2006.
- [6] A spate of recent films on the Iraq war are beginning to serve this purpose.