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Review of "The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11"

Book Review | *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11*

Maximiliano E. Korstanje

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***The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11.* Richard J. Bernstein. London: Polity Press, 2006. 225 pp. \$19.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-074563494-4**

Rooted in the belief that evil as metaphysical construal can be examined and explained by philosophy, Richard Bernstein explores the more important facts that characterized the 20th century at the time the World Trade Center attacks jolted him at the end of his project. It is also not surprising that, since such a tragedy, political discourses of evil as well as the manipulation of religious beliefs have been his most important concern. Under this perspective, *The Abuse of Evil* focuses on how religion and patriotism converge in the re-construction of evilness; to be honest, this represents one of more interesting and insightful books that we had never read in relation to moral implications of mythical conflagration between good and evil.

In the introductory section, Bernstein unravels the mystery of suffering, contrasting the omnipotence of God with an involuntary inception of evil. The question as to whether Lucifer can be born from a God who unconditionally loves his sons still remains unresolved for a major part of theologians and philosophers today. At a first glance, one might think of evil as the social construction of works in contrast to good, while others see in this the fact that proves God's inexistence, or at least the pre-requisite that His omnipotence should be questioned. Taking as an example an interesting previous broader project of Arendt, with respect to the figure of the holocaust in Auschwitz, Bernstein argues that evil can be defined as *an intention of trivializing the essence and transcendence of human beings*.

The upshot of this is that corruption of social institutions surfaces whenever societies give further predominance of their goals than their necessary ethical steps to achieve

them. One of the strategies of totalitarianism to gain more power consists in monopolizing the manipulation of spontaneity and unpreparedness, which characterizes real life; both are subdued under the logic of rationality and utilitarianism. As given in the previous argument, external events are often interpreted depending upon a social imaginary founded with respect to political values of a privileged aristocracy. In totalitarian regimes, extermination of corporate bodies is accompanied with destruction of individuality and spontaneity, transforming human personality in a simple issue. The trial against Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem not only reminded us to what extent ordinary people with banal interests can often commit appalling crimes, but also stressed the importance of how responsibility and premeditation are aprioristic dissociated conceptualizations disseminated in one or another direction depending on the ends of the involved rulers. Although the history of the 20th century has been witness to other genocides, it was not before September 11 that Mass-Media corporations put their efforts in enhancing the personage of Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein as exponents of an extreme evil whose goals were aimed at destroying the pristine American way. These types of depictions were intended to emphasize and simplify the World in two bipolar opposite realities: Muslim villains who pursued the ruins of the United States and American heroes who unconditionally fight against them in what we have known as “a preventive war.”

But things not always are as they appear; taking his cue from James’s pragmatism, Bernstein addresses how some corporate groups manipulate the roots of religion and politics, looking for their own benefits instead of communitarian well-being. Whatever religions traditionally create, what can be considered as the concepts of evil and good, beliefs are gradually shifted according to situational needs and contexts of involving societies. Under such a context, totalitarianisms surface whenever a minority with enough resources tries to naturalize a set of previous ideological beliefs imposing an unquestionable moral absolute on the rest of society’s members. For that reason, unlike how Huntington erroneously put it, we are not experiencing a Clash of Civilizations, but an unpredictable Clash of Minds instead. This, of course, seems to be a clear example that very well synthesizes what we have already addressed in early chapters. Huntington set forward a model that precludes religious beliefs as being pivotal factors to explain the recent escalation of violence in Middle East.

Under this perspective, Bernstein admits that the goal of philosophy should be the criticism of particular points of view focusing on the convergence of praxis and ideas. With this background in mind, the author examines the inception of Pragmatism in Dewey, James, Pierce and Holmes in accordance to the United States Civil War during 1861-1865. Truthfully, in moments of uncertainty, anxiety and fear, people need an enhancement of security inclining on the refuge of moral absolutes; emphasizing the importance critical philosophy might put a lot of resistance to these types of totalitarianisms. The contributions of pragmatic scholars argue that metaphysical beliefs should not be divorced from social practices.

Following this, philosophy, as an academic discipline, owes an immense gratitude to pragmatic philosophers who have contributed very well to breaking the monopoly on knowledge of Church, State and Market, and even the existent academic philosophy. In addition, pragmatism shed light on the significance of democracy as circumscribed to pluralism of thoughts and multiculturalism. That way, Bernstein's assessment points out that our realm, as we can perceive it, constitutes itself as an overt universe, wherein chance can be combined with contingency as well as luck with adversity. In turn, one fact that people have to live with is that sadness, risks and illness are no less affordable than other much more pleasant instances such as feats, prosperity, happiness, and stability.

The social imagination in moments of war is characterized by a lack of flexibility with respect to the building of otherness and cultural diversity. Recent conflicts against terrorism do not give rise to the possibility of negotiation by involved counter-parts. Not only in the United States but also in Middle East, Mass-Media corporations replicate a sinister political discourse emphasizing the triumph of good over evil. Of course, both are convinced that God backs unconditionally its own cause. In consequence, discrepancies in regard to the correct pathway are frequently interpreted as a form of weakness, doubt and sin.

As Bernstein puts it, "both parts are strongly convinced that God is supporting their cause. By moving away from central doctrine is interpreted as a sign of weakness and vacillation. By the way, there is a subliminal discourse concerning sexual issues: masculinity features such as roughness, brutality, determination, and strengthens are valorized in detriment of other most likely attributed to femininity as sensibility and indecision" (86). As a result of this, the dichotomy between what seems to be right and wrong facilitates things for seemingly-minded followers reducing their fright of uncertainty. The question why threats nowadays are deemed as more dangerous than other times works as an ideological mechanism that prevents a deeper cross-national dialogue and understanding.

Following the argument previously discussed, Bernstein debates a fundamental issue raised by other scholars surrounding the limitations of pragmatism in the study of evil's emergence. Based on their own prejudices, R. Niebuhr and J. Diggings viewed in pragmatism a lack of the fertile resource to examine evil's influence in social fields. Following this criticism, Bernstein explains that "Fallibilism" is a term used by pragmatic philosophers to denote the contingency in our decision-making process combining tolerance of frustration with unpredictable or unexpected causalities concreteness. In fact, lessons of pragmatism let us understand that consequences of our own acts are inevitable. To put this brutally, Bernstein accepts that the beginning of political conflicts is linked to the merging of different realities with the end of creating an image of enemies strong enough to threaten everything our own civilization

valorizes. Bernstein remarks, “the expression relating to war against terror is pretty deceitful. Terror appears not to be an enemy system of tactics and strategies aimed by many collectives with diverse ends on mind. However, all those who are eager to label enemies as wicked or par of the axis of evil are reluctance to know why the rest of World get on well with terrorism ...” (102-103).

In chapters four and five, Bernstein addresses how corruption of politics and religion may emerge in democracy. Following previous essays of Arendt and Dewey, the upshot is that universal suffrage does not suffice to maintain a democratic atmosphere unless an independent wisdom can debate such ideas and concerns on equal terms with others in public spaces. It is not surprising to note that democracy is more than a ritual accomplished every four years but a style of life. In accordance to this view, power does not surface as a pathway towards voluntary domination characterized by a hierarchal orders; rather, it refers to necessary abilities human beings should develop for improving jointly their own environment.

It is important to mention that Bernstein does not lose sight of limitations that show Arendt’s examination of political issues, but he does not forget her contributions in the study as to how the introduction of “absolute binomials” in politics corrodes the basis of sociality and tolerance in the pathway towards a broader cultural diversity. Rather, one of contradictions of totalitarianisms is that under the name of fraternization among civilized nations, there is an underling need related to the censorship of emerging and “uncivilized voices.” Paradoxically, in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, Bernstein clarifies that George W. Bush’s administration not only looked for expanding the soul of freedom and democracy by means of military interventions, but also he strongly believed that God supports such a crusade. Of course, the belief in a major part of American officials that “they are on the correct side” appears to be unquestionable whether we dwell on the examination of recent policies taken against Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

The manipulation of fears works as a political effective instrument to visualize an enemy that hides hypothetically in the darkness. Not only does behavior of this nature not resolve the conflict, but also it constitutes a fertile source for a potential geopolitical expansion and preventive war. Far from being a product of the Middle East, as popular wisdom says, fundamentalism was born in the core of United States as a pre-milenarism movement in the end of the 19th and 20th centuries, as a reaction to liberal Protestants who liked to adapt the most innovative ideas of biology and science to religion. Contrasting creationism with evolutionism, Fundamentalism was a response to the advent of Darwinism, which defied the biblical classical posture that emphasized that humanity had been created by God. Underpinned in the proposition that Darwin’s legacy constituted a sinful influence for education of next generations, in 1910 the brothers Milton and Lyman Stewart released a bunch of brochures entitled *The Grounds: A Testimony of Truth*. These pamphlets disseminated within the tight

Christian Circles vindicated the infallibility of Bible in conjunction with an authenticity of miracles, virginity of Maria and Christ's resurrection.

A couple of years later, milenarists such as Curtis Lee Lewis, a Baptist journal editor, argued that fundamentalists, who were committed to the Lord's word, were committed to declare themselves to fight for the restoration of basic grounds of faith. Nowadays, even though the linkage of Bush's administration with fundamentalist doctrine would be unquestionable, this is not the point. Bernstein considers that the fundamentalists reserve unconditionally for them-selves the rights to accomplish the plans of God. To be precise, this is the type of absolutism that corrupts not only religion but also politics inside United State and beyond. When this happens, all who are in disagreement with rulers are catalogued as ambassadors of evil paving the way for declination of pragmatism, tolerance, negotiation and Fallibilism.

Richard Bernstein's work explores the corruption of politics and religion as a new form of generating political loyalty and hegemony. At the dawn of a new millennium characterized by the ambivalent feelings, anxiety, fears and uncertainty, it is noteworthy that reflections of this nature are extremely needed. In response to the advent of authoritarian tendency, democracies should be more than careful with respect to the increasing weakness and declination of their institutions. In brief, *the Abuse of Evil* not only presents a fundamental book fruitful for anthropologists, psychologists, politicians, philosophers and sociologists concerned about the psychological effects of 9/11, but also an interesting essay that examines philosophically the roots of milenarism in politics and religious issues.