PROLOGUE TO DEMOCRATIC DISSENT IN AMERICA

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Abstract

This essay considers the problematic of dissent being rendered oxymoronic with democracy in the United States under conditions of a weak democratic culture and an aggressive prosecution of the war on terror. It examines obstacles to democratic dissent in the U.S. and potential resources for rehabilitating it, sketching a preliminary map of the theoretical and cultural ground to be covered in a resistance to the further militarization of global politics. Suggesting that democracy is dissent, and democratic dissent is rhetorical critique, the essay argues that extant political culture might be rearticulated to dissent by language critiques that produce persuasive re-descriptions and symbolic merging.

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19 the public Vol.11 (2004),2, 19 - 36

Democratic dissent was rendered oxymoronic in America after 9/11 under the sign of a timeless war on global terror. Indeed, dissent as a form of political activism was placed strategically by the rulers of the security state on a continuum of lawlessness leading to terrorism, a continuum in which protest was perceived as disloyal, as the unpatriotic act of the enemy within, as a threat to the safety of the polity – in short, as anti-democratic. The police, authorized by secret courts, might spy on, harass, and incarcerate dissenters on behalf of a state that would curtail civil liberties while prosecuting a war in the hallowed, but hollowed, name of freedom and democracy. In the words of U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, speaking to the Senate Judiciary Committee just three months after 9/11, "those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty" while criticizing the administration's methods of fighting terrorism at home and abroad provide "ammunition to America's enemies" and "aid [to] terrorists" (quoted in Lewis 2001). By this Orwellian logic, dissent terrorizes democracy whereas political quiescence promotes peace and security.

Such logic not only confounds democratic politics but also rationalizes state terror in response to a state of terror. State terror is legitimized as counter-terror and anti-terrorism rather than condemned as terrorism redux and reduplicated. Jude McCulloch, in an act of immanent critique, has observed the fallacy of this prevailing discourse from his Australian vantage point as a lecturer in police studies at Deakin University. "The history of state terror," he notes, "illustrates that counter-terrorism is used to punish, intimidate and disappear politically inconvenient citizens. In the 'war on terrorism' politically inconvenient citizens will include peace and anti-war activists ... [A]nti-terrorism is the new McCarthyism" (MuCulloch 2002, 59). This is the degraded condition of political discourse practiced by the United States and its "democratic" allies to exploit popular fear and mute criticism of a crusade against evil rather than address the root causes of terror, including a misdirected U.S. foreign policy.

Configuring democracy and dissent into a political incongruity, a contradiction of terms, is rhetorically strategic to dividing the world inextricably between good and evil, us versus them, in a deadly dual for global domination. Not since the Cold War has an American administration articulated an apocalyptic vision backed by such a massive commitment of military might, huge expenditure of economic resources, and wanton sacrifice of human life. By presidential decree, everyone must decide whether they are allies or enemies of the United States in a global war to eradicate terrorism. No shades of grey, no differences of perspective, no room for dissent can be abided if freedom is to endure and democracy is to prevail. The boundary must be drawn fast and firm between righteous truth and wicked persuasion. Thus, the domestic dissenter symbolizes democracy's foreign threat, its enemy Other, a traitor to the people and their cause. Or so an empowered elite would have the public believe rather than suffer even a modicum of democratic self-rule.

Accordingly, one might conclude that unmaking the oxymoron of democratic dissent would be tantamount to striking at the rhetorical Achilles heal of a discourse that suppresses the actual practice of politics in the very realm of the political. The political is the realm of antagonism endemic to human relations, as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau emphasize, a realm marked by a basic condition of

struggle, contested opinion, and "undecidability" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, xi). Politics is the process of articulating and taking contingent decisions in a context of irreducible difference, conflict, and division through "persuasive redescriptions of the world" (Torfing 1999, 302). That is, by "the elaboration of a language providing us with metaphoric redescriptions of our social relations" we might achieve a revised, expanded, and provisional hegemony of interpretation and political motivation short of insisting on consensus "in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces" and contrary to enforcing an ideologically constructed reality of "fully constituted essences." (Mouffe 1993, 57; Torfing 1999, 116). Indeed, social division "without any possibility of a final reconciliation" is inherent to "the very possibility of a [pluralist] democratic politics," which in turn requires a lively dynamic between consensus and dissent (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, xvii, xiv; Mouffe 1996, 8). Politics, in short, is an "ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual" (Mouffe 2000, 101). The central question of democratic politics is how to tame and diffuse antagonism in human relations, not eliminate it, how to articulate strategically a practical but partial unity in a pluralistic context of conflict and diversity, by transforming sheer enemies into legitimate adversaries, i.e., by achieving what might be called a fluid condition of consubstantial rivalry. Thus, by this account, the "aim of democratic politics is to transform antagonism into agonism" so as to establish an "us/them" relation "compatible with pluralistic democracy" (Mouffe 2000, 103, 101).

This vision of agonistic pluralism makes dissent not only compatible with democracy but also represents it as a rhetorical practice endemic to democratic culture, a resource for addressing antagonism productively on the shifting terrain of conflicted political relations. Yet it is a vision in remission, if not entirely dormant, a radical notion of democratic practice difficult to grasp and trust in America, perhaps no more than a fantasy. What, we might ask, are the contours of resistance to democratic dissent in the United States and the cultural resources for rehabilitating its good name? In what framework might we place dissent in order to see better the obstacles to accessing its democratic properties and potential? What are the challenges to overcome and the opportunities for affirming dissent within a *sensus communis* that currently is appropriated against dissent to the detriment of democracy? This is the question I wish to begin considering here as a prologue to additional investigation, sketching for now a preliminary map of the theoretical and cultural ground that must be covered much more thoroughly if we are to resist a further militarization of global politics. What might we expect to encounter in such a journey through this tangled terrain?

A Lesson Difficult to Learn

As already briefly noted, democratic dissent in a period of war or crisis is as alarming to the purveyors of prevailing opinion as it is critical to a nation's political welfare. This is especially the case when the democratic nation in question is as powerful as the United States and prone to denigrating anti-war dissent as unpatriotic and disloyal. The most common complaints about critics and protesters alike throughout U.S. history include accusations that they abuse the very freedom the nation is fighting to preserve, that they undermine public morale and political

authority when it is most required, that they put the lives of American soldiers at further risk, that their criticism of political leaders aids and abets the enemy, and that their resistance ultimately prolongs the war. Often dissenters are accused of being enemy agents and sympathizers, dismissed as dangerously unrealistic isolationists and naïve pacifists, or characterized as irresponsible agitators exposing the country to the twin perils of chaos and tyranny. None of these de-legitimating themes amounts to an affirmation of democracy or, more specifically, to an expression of confidence in democracy's stamina, its genius for managing divisive political relations, or its dependency on dissent for continuing vitality. Fighting wars in the name of democracy is one thing; practicing it in times of crisis is altogether another. Resistance to dissent, even relegating dissenters to the political margins while curtailing civil liberties on the whole, functions to defer the nation's democratic impulse in perpetuity, that is, until that mythical moment of universal peace and total security finally arrives but which always remains just beyond the grasp of living history.

In the periods between wars Americans have often reflected on the lessons to be learned from the excesses of the preceding war, including the cost of suppressing democratic dissent and violating civil liberties. After World War I, in particular, the cause of protecting political rights received a significant boost in the public's consciousness as a result of some of the most egregious violations of civil liberties perpetrated during and immediately following the war, including an espionage act which allowed the Postmaster General to ban from the mail any seditious materials that encouraged insubordination or otherwise impugned the government, a sedition act which criminalized any disloyal or abusive language about the nation's form of government, its constitution, and its institutions, the American Protective League and a number of other vigilante organizations encouraged by the government to inform on citizens, and the infamous Palmer raids on suspected radicals during a Red Scare in the U.S. triggered by Russia's Bolshevik revolution. Not only were German books burned and banned during the war, German teachers and musicians fired, German ideas suppressed, and speaking the German language punished, but in the sheer absurdity of war fever even sauerkraut was renamed "liberty cabbage."

Out of this onslaught on the Bill of Rights grew the American Civil Liberties Union and an emergent precedent of Supreme Court dissenting opinions that evolved into a fleeting majority position of the 1950s and 1960s which temporarily bolstered civil liberties. Yet each war or crisis has brought with it renewed violations of civil rights and displacements of democratic practices, including the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, Cold War blacklisting and political intimidation during the McCarthy era of guilt by association, and exclusion of the press from direct reporting on U.S. military action in Grenada, Panama, Kuwait, and Kosovo followed by the strategic embedding of reporters in the second war on Iraq. Indeed, threats to civil liberties and the curtailment of political dissent after 9/11 may yet develop into the most damaging assault on democratic values since the founding of the republic, reducing American citizenship to the consumption of "freedom fries."

The lesson Americans find most difficult to master is that vigorous dissent and debate are especially critical in times of national crisis in order to keep ambitious

governments honest. Without open debate, governments tend to exaggerate the danger to the nation, target unpopular groups for vilification and repression, enact preexisting political agendas under the cover of national security, and generally spawn a culture of secrecy and suppression that fosters poor decision making with regrettable consequences. Already under the prolonged and pervasive emergency of fighting global terrorism, the Bush administration has taken several dangerous steps to shore up the purported vulnerabilities of an open society. The USA Patriot Act and consideration of a Patriot Act II may be the most invasive legislation passed or contemplated since World War I. The legislation creating the Homeland Security Department increased information gathering on citizens and decreased citizen access to government information previously provided by the Freedom of Information Act. The TIPS program proposed to muster citizens into a national self-surveillance corps, just as the administration's Total Information Awareness program would integrate private-sector and government data bases into a unified monitoring system. A policy of preemptive wars to maintain global military dominance was initiated with the invasion of Iraq. All of this occurred under a condition of limited debate and marginalized dissent and with the broad-based approval of a public that remained basically uniformed of the negative consequences of these untoward initiatives because of an overly quiescent press and remarkably subdued opposition party.[1]

The risk now facing a democratic nation sans a strong ethic and robust practice of dissent is extraordinary, for the open-ended condition of crisis that has been articulated as a prolonged and invasive war on terrorism could last long enough to institutionalize supposedly temporary encroachments on freedom well beyond the present perception of a global emergency. A permanent diminishment of liberty and democratic vigor could be the ultimate legacy of a largely uncontested political agenda that unwisely seeks to increase government secrecy, unfetter law enforcement, and deploy U.S. military power actively in support of an aggressive policy of unilateralism and preemption. The strongest and smartest government, on the contrary, is that which is made transparent by democratic dissent. In the appropriately partisan words of Republican Senator Robert A. Taft, spoken just after Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, "criticism in time of war is essential to the maintenance of any kind of democratic government" and to the prevention of "mistakes which might otherwise occur" (quoted in Leone 2003, 18). But why has this proved to be so difficult a lesson to remember?

A Motive to Remember

Perhaps the difficulty of assimilating the lesson of fettered dissent is a function of how Americans routinely speak and think of politics as problematically irrational and perplexingly rhetorical, presuming instead that politics can and should be clearly, cleanly, efficiently, and reliably rational and thus by implication entrusted to qualified elites rather than to ordinary folk. Perhaps this old habit of mind about the discourse of politics fixes expectations so firmly, dichotomizes choices so definitively, and diminishes faith so profoundly in the public's capacity for enlightened practical reason that censorship and conformity just seem more prudent in moments of perceived crisis than risking an unruly cacophony of voices. Maybe the myth of privileged rationality overpowers the public's memory of, and imagi-

nation for, collective self-rule. Possibly this very myth can and should be transformed to bolster our democratic imaginary and rhetorical resolve.

If it is the case, as Nancy Chang and others insist, that strengthening "our commitment to the First Amendment and the democratic values it embodies becomes all the more essential" when the nation's security is threatened (which is precisely the point at which government and society at large are most inclined to curtail freedom of speech), then it is especially important to understand what is at stake when democratic dissent is curbed and to explore how the agonistic edge of vigorous dissent can be sharpened to address more effectively the present crisis of terrorism under prevailing conditions of division and diversity (Chang 2002, 92). This is a task which might benefit considerably from reexamining the confluence of politics and rhetoric.

A politics of dissent constituted in a rhetorical discourse of identification may be the purest expression of the democratic idiom and the most constructive vehicle for managing hierarchical relations among consubstantial rivals. By speaking in this way of specifying differences within similarities, we might expect to gain added purchase on the unwarranted production of overdrawn and threatening images of domestic and foreign Others, that is, on propagandized caricatures that stifle dissent by associating difference with deviance and malevolence and that thereby demand consensus and quiescence as a mark of allegiance, loyalty, and virtue. From this vantage point, we should be able to see how democratic dissent can be otherwise privileged by constructing rivals as concurrently divided from and identified with one another, that is, as simultaneously adverse and complementary, associated and dissociated, similar and dissimilar in varying degrees.

At this confluence of rhetoric and politics, we might better grasp how constructing appropriately flexible boundaries of intersecting attitudes and attributes rather than rigid and exclusive categorical distinctions of identity and difference enables dissent to perform the crucial function of holding delimited perspectives accountable to one another. And then we might be better motivated to remember the value of democratic dissent and the price of political quiescence. An appropriately flexible rhetoric which purports to correct error by critiquing a prevailing perspective is far more conducive to managing the human divide constructively than a rigid rhetoric of good versus evil.

This is necessarily a brief rendition of a currently underdeveloped appreciation of dissent which emerged in my forthcoming book on *Democracy and America's War on Terror* (Ivie in press). I discuss there the rhetorical idiom of democratic deliberation as compensatory to the present administration's undemocratic discourse of evil. Understanding the interface of democracy and rhetoric, I suspect, is crucial to appreciating democratic dissent as the construction of productive relations of difference in times of national crisis. Dissent understood within a rhetorically inflected conception of agonistic pluralism is better positioned to move from the margins of liberal democratic practice toward its vital center, not in the sense of standardizing a given set of political opinions or rigidifying ideology but instead as the measure of democracy's strength and vitality and as the means of constructively engaging diversity rather than containing, curtailing, marginalizing, or even eliminating it. By this reckoning, the aims of democracy would be better realized in abandoning the myth of "rational" deliberation and universal reason which presently hobbles

dissent and makes its lessons too hard to learn and too easily forgotten. Rhetoric can provide alternative, and I think better, modes of deliberating differences productively in the realm of the contingent, modes that do not bracket power and that instead facilitate agonic exchanges to enhance decision making without diminishing dissent. But is American political culture a viable candidate for a rhetorical transplant of this kind?

Rhetoric in a Weak Democracy

Whether the legitimacy of dissent is diminished or enhanced depends largely on the condition and characterization of democracy within a given political culture. Political dissent outside of a democratic culture (broadly conceived) is considered destabilizing, subversive, and even revolutionary. It functions in an undemocratic context as an illegitimate expression of power contrary to the will of prevailing political authority and thus is routinely suppressed as a threat to order, security, and the general well being of the people and the state. Within a thin or relatively weak democratic context, dissent is more or less tolerated, depending on circumstances, but is treated essentially as an outlet or luxury rather than a necessity of good government and as something therefore that should be curtailed during dangerous periods of national crisis.[2] Within a strong democracy, however, dissent would be privileged even in circumstances of war.

But strong democracy remains an unrealized ideal of our time. A deep suspicion of collective self-rule has troubled the American republic from its founding. As Robert Dahl observes, "A substantial number of the Framers believed that they must erect constitutional barriers to popular rule because the people would prove to be an unruly mob, a standing danger to law, to orderly government, and to property rights." As Dahl also notes, the American citizenry throughout its history has supported orderly government over the temptation of demagoguery, contrary to the Framers' pessimistic expectations and their elitist fear of democratic distemper (Dahl 2001, 24-25). Experience aside, this legacy of demophobia still haunts the nation's collective psyche and continues to foster a deep distrust of dissent. The presumption of a critically deficient and inherently irrational citizenry requires elites to deliberate among themselves on behalf of the people and in the spirit of universal reason. More democracy in the form of popular dissent would only exacerbate the inherently fragile condition of an easily confused public. Even Jürgen Habermas' highly influential vision of a reconstituted public sphere, based on a revival of eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals and committed to what Robert Wiebe calls an "eerily detached rationality," presumes a dispassionate citizenry receptive to rational argument and is therefore considered hypothetical and ideal rather than practical and realistic within the historical trajectory of American political culture (Wiebe 1995, 4, 261).

To the extent that popular dissent operates overtly within the realm of rhetoric instead of in a rarified world of privileged rationality, it is deemed a danger to public health by political elites who, from their own necessarily delimited and self-interested perspective, would transcend rhetoric in the service of universal reason. Their conceit aside, no political discourse is non-rhetorical, and no particular construction of rationality is universal despite pretensions to the contrary. The political is by definition the arena of contested aims and opinions, and the rhetori-

cal is by default the discourse of this realm of contingencies through which relations of power are articulated, judgments fashioned, decisions derived, and actions taken (Farrell 1994, 39, 48, 76, 99, 142, 146).[3] Nevertheless, political elites profess to deliberate rationally on behalf and in place of the people, masking their own rhetoric even from themselves.[4] Within America's weak democratic culture, rhetoric operates covertly among elites in the guise of rationality rather than overtly among the people as a viable mode of political deliberation and judgment. This clearly is a strong constraint against articulating a rhetorically robust democratic practice.

Yet, if things rhetorical go well, dissent "makes room for a more tolerant politics" by recognizing "that a society is oppressive and closed if all major questions either have an answer or are considered irrational, absurd, taboo" (Bleiker 2000, 45). Tolerance and its ugly converse, repression, are indicative of the political problem revealed in the presence or absence of democratic dissent. The heart of the matter is achieving a lively politics of contestation and identification in a context of difference and division or what Mouffe has called "an explosion of particularisms and an increasing challenge to Western universalism"(Mouffe 1993, 1). Liberal democracy in its conventional reading displaces pluralism by relegating the most contentious differences to the private sphere, just as corresponding elitist models of rational deliberation valorize consensus despite an irreducible condition of "undecidability" in which the persistence of competing perspectives and identities makes a final resolution of conflicted positions impossible to achieve and unadvisable to attempt (Mouffe 1993, 5-6, 81-83, 104-107; Mouffe 2000, 7-8, 18-22, 32, 49, 56, 83-84, 130, 134-35). This irreducible condition of undecidability represents a counter-pressure on the otherwise strong constraint against privileging overtly rhetorical dissent and deliberation.

Liberal democracy typically seeks to minimize difference and division rather than to engage constructively in agonistic politics. Conflict, from this engrained perspective, is something to overcome and contain, not the continuing circumstance of divisive social relations that gives politics purpose and that defaults to antagonism, vilification, and victimization unless it is addressed productively. A well-functioning and strong democracy requires a contestation of differences and vigorous debate over real alternatives, a healthy mix of dissent and identification, i.e., "collective identities" created around "clearly differentiated positions." Healthy democracy is a function, as Mouffe argues, of agonistic pluralism in which adversaries "share a common symbolic space" but compete with one another to organize this common space differently. Among democratic adversaries, decisions on contested positions remain provisional rather than final (Mouffe 2000, 13, 100-5, 113-18).

Privileging dissent would serve a purpose far greater than diffusing pent up political pressure in a pluralistic polity. Dissent can articulate alternatives to prevailing policies and points of view from the perspectives of agonistic (not antagonistic) Others within a contested but shared symbolic space. It can work against countervailing tendencies of political alienation and victimization in order to maintain the viability of a given political order by resisting its reification and calcification and by providing degrees of flexibility for adapting to changing circumstances. It can sustain the productive tension that liberal democracy requires in order to meet the exigency of pluralism in a global information age. Yet when dissent oc-

curs, as it did worldwide in massive demonstrations against America's impending invasion of Iraq, it is all too readily reduced by ruling elites to a political irrelevancy. George W. Bush imperially dismissed such dissent by reducing it to mere confirmation that "democracy is a beautiful thing" in which "people are allowed to express their opinion," short of influencing his decisions, of course (Stout 2003).

Although the body politic as currently constituted seems disinclined toward raising its rhetorical consciousness, tensions exist that nevertheless are increasingly difficult for political elites to manage under the pretense of universal reason. Even conventional political wisdom, as articulated recently by Cass Sunstein, dictates that society needs dissent. Dissent, he argues by mustering evidence primarily from studies in social psychology, helps to avoid the unchecked inflation of blind, ideological thinking, extremism, and polarization which together ruin good decision making. Groups make better decisions when they encounter dissent rather than succumb to conformity. Extremism and poor decisions are the bitter products of minority voices being silenced, even self-silenced, and dissenters withdrawing from active participation in the business of the polity (Sunstein 2003). Moreover, as Roland Bleiker observes, "no political system, no matter how authoritarian, is ever able to dominate all aspects of society" just as "no form of dissent, no matter how radical, is ever entirely autonomous from the political practices it seeks to engage or distance itself from." Dissent, he continues, necessarily arises out of "existing webs of power and discourse," and thus must be considered as part and parcel of everyday democratic politics (Bleiker 2000, 39, 269). Thus, it would seem plausible, even though difficult, to transform America's weak democratic tradition into a more rhetorically robust culture of constructive dissent. How might such a transformation occur over time?

A Rhetorical Exigency for Strong Democracy

The incentive or exigency for converting America's weak democratic culture into a stronger and more overtly rhetorical practice may already exist. That incentive is the arrival of a presidential republic, which represents a perversion of rhetorical democracy but also a goad to resist the establishment of a regime of governance by crisis. This is a watershed development that might ultimately diminish or enrich democracy in the United States depending on how the nation responds.

The rhetorical presidency evolved throughout the twentieth century toward expanding executive authority into a full-fledged presidential republic.[5] As one student of this phenomenon, Gary Gregg, observed in 1997, "We have gone far toward creating a presidential republic. Many have seen the president as a white knight doing battle with the forces of evil, both domestically and internationally, in the name of the American people and their values and beliefs." Even as others warned against "investing too much in 'Caesar' and becoming too reliant on executive benevolence, the general trend over the last century [was] in the opposite direction" (Gregg 1997, 1). The risk to democratic culture was made palpable on 9/11 when crisis became the ubiquitous shadow of presidential rule and terror was articulated by executive fiat into a permanent and pervasive state of warfare that penetrated all walks of life and tainted every political issue, domestic and foreign.[6]

Yet, the very transformation of the rhetorical presidency into a presidential republic occurred in the context of an evolving rhetorical republic, thus providing a

wider context that may well prove to be a resource for combating the perversion of post-9/11 presidential rule. As I have discussed elsewhere, Frederick Dolan and Thomas Dumm overtly challenged the anti-rhetorical bias of political science in 1993, arguing that the United States by then had already become not just the feared rhetorical presidency but even more radically "a republic of words" wherein the problem of governing amounted to the problem of governing representations, "of reinterpreting the phantasmagoric mix of images and tonalities, claims and counterclaims, that shape political discourse in the United States today." In such a republic, they argued, there is no "master discourse unquestioningly shared or respected by all." Even "national security" is a trope, an image of vulnerability and sign of national identity that would convince Americans to believe, in the words of David Campbell, that they "are always at risk in a dangerous world." Danger, Campbell emphasized, is an effect of interpretation, not an objective, knowable condition; that is, not all risks are interpreted as dangers, but "the ability to represent things as alien, subversive, dirty, or sick has been pivotal in the articulation of danger in the American experience" (quoted in Ivie 1996b, 166-68).[7]

We may be inclined to attribute the emergence of the rhetorical republic largely to the profusion of electronic media. Indeed, we may even wish to speak instead of the existence of an electronic republic and its impact on democracy in the information age.[8] Rhetoric, nevertheless, is practiced more overtly and acknowledged more readily in such a republic where the choice is between better and worse kinds of rhetoric, not between mere rhetoric and sheer rationality, and where in principle it can be more difficult to close debate with an authoritative declaration of truth. This potential for openness and accountability amounts to an opportunity, not a guarantee, that democracy will be strengthened by dissent.

As an immediate case in point, the rhetorical conduct of the present administration confronts Americans with the choice of conforming or dissenting. It practices a rigid rhetoric of good versus evil in a world marked by radical divisions, a world now interconnected by the electronic media and by a global economy in which differences have been compressed and diversity must be addressed now rather than ignored or suppressed.[9] For many Americans, the terrorism of 9/11 presented a rare and meaningful opportunity for a people that bowled and shopped alone to come together as one nation in opposition to an evil adversary. That, at least, was an initial impulse that the president's apocalyptic rhetoric would perpetuate. It is a rhetoric that personifies evil in the image of nineteen hijackers, Osama Bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein. It is a discourse so hyperbolized that it cannot mask its own rhetorical character even as it demands assent and defies dissent. And it is a rhetoric that cannot be ignored as such, a rhetoric operating within a rhetorical republic in which the people may either succumb to propaganda and demagoguery or may choose to speak up and listen to alterative points of view. In short, it is a blatantly rigid rhetoric that may or may not prod the nation into a richer and more flexible rhetorical practice of democratic dissent and consubstantial rivalry.

Censorship, silence, and submission to presidential governance by terror and by the threat of terror is a stark alternative to democratic dissent in a rhetorical republic. Thus, if an exigency for strong democracy already exists, how might strong democracy be articulated into existence? How does a rhetorical republic become a rhetorical democracy and thus a more democratic republic?

Articulating Strong Democracy

The challenge of enriching U.S. political culture, as a project of constructive critique from within, must be addressed as an exercise in liberal democracy which strives to balance two competing discourses, or rather to correct the persistent imbalance between a dominant discourse of liberalism and a subordinate discourse of democracy. This imbalance of power between liberal and democratic discourses, as Russell Hanson so ably explains, has marked and marred the American republic throughout its history (Hanson 1985). Dissent understood as rhetorically agonic and as an exercise in agonistic pluralism would move conceptually from the shady margins of liberal democracy toward its vital centre, thus rectifying the imbalance between a liberal discourse of individualism and a democratic discourse of inclusion and equality without eschewing liberalism, per se. A better balanced compound of liberal democracy that combined the protection of civil liberties and individual rights from governmental encroachment while promoting equality and collective self-rule would yield a more productive tension than the historically liberal distrust of democracy that reduces rhetoric to demagoguery and the demos to a distempered mob. Thus, any move toward rhetorical democracy should be understood as a move toward democratizing liberalism, toward articulating a more balanced democratic republic – as a course correction rather than a radical redirection.

That said, the question of how to respond to the exigency of strong democracy can be approached as a matter of rearticulating political culture, which can be addressed both in general and specific terms. At the first level of analysis, rearticulating culture is understood broadly as a formal strategy or set of strategies for thinking imaginatively, freshly, or somehow differently about reified, literalized, naturalized, conventionalized, or otherwise privileged formations of discourse operating within a life world. It suggests a general poetics of metaphorical *ingenium* or a system of heuristics for rhetorical invention akin to Vico's conception of cultural production.[10] In this vein, Laclau and Mouffe speak of discourse as an "articulatory practice" and of metaphors as "nodal points" or, in Torfing's paraphrase, as "privileged discursive points that partially fix meaning within signifying chains." Thus, Mouffe searches for "metaphoric redescriptions" of social relations as the key to rearticulating hegemonic formations (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105; Torfing 1999, 989; Mouffe 1993, 57).

Similarly, Bleiker understands language in the context of popular protest as a boundary-crossing and transgressing practice with "transformative potential." Through language critique, discourse can be turned "from a system of exclusion to a practice of inclusion, from a method of domination to an instrument of resistance." Two strategies in particular are identified for this purpose: appropriating the meaning of existing concepts and creating new concepts. In the first instance, key terms such as "queer," "hegemony," or "power" are redeployed creatively and strategically from negative contexts to positive usages. In the second instance, new liberating terms, such as "world politics," are developed and deployed to replace older constraining terms, such as "international relations," so that, in this particular case, political boundaries might be more easily traversed where environmental issues, for instance, transcend state boundaries. By these general means, language critique might hope to achieve a strategic disenchantment of troublesome con-

cepts within an existing discursive formation or set of language games, a disenchantment that follows from refusing to define terms monologically, univocally, or even too smoothly and seamlessly so as not to silence conflicts and contradictions but instead to "think in fragments" (Bleiker 2000, 46, 225, 229-32).

Mouffe's basic notion of metaphoric redescriptions and Bleiker's two strategies of redeploying and creating conceptual terms are kindred spirits of Kenneth Burke's general approach to rearticulating the symbolic relations that constitute political culture. For Burke, cultural categories are rearticulated as an exercise in "perspective by incongruity," which is achieved through "symbolic bridging and merging." The motivating force of a given perspective or orientation, according to Burke, is articulated in a complex hierarchy of interdependent but also competing and diverging terms, wherein a master term or metaphor provides an integrating tenor for a set of contributing or qualifying terms, each of which adds to the line of development its own sub-perspective. Shifts of perspective are achieved by elevating a contributing metaphor to a more substantial position within the hierarchy of terms that together constitute the orientation in question. Such metaphorical shifts can be achieved via any number of boundary-spanning rhetorical strategies, which produce the desired but jarring effect of fresh perspective by means of planned incongruities and linguistic impieties. Speaking of a "trained incapacity," for instance, or of "militant nonviolence" juxtaposes conventionally contradictory terms in order to revise their relative value and to suggest new ways of seeing and acting.[11]

The rearticulation of troublesome or otherwise unserviceable cultural categories, as illustrated in these three separate but converging approaches, comprises a general strategy of productive language critique. Applying this critical heuristic directly to the challenge of transforming a historically weak democratic discourse involves a second, more exacting level of analysis. At this second level of language critique, specific terminologies of democratic pluralism and dissent must be engaged in their particular contexts of application and defacement, distinguishing between cynical and sincere, hollow and substantive, or otherwise troublesome distortions that confound and diminish democratic motives and practices.

For instance, the Bush administration's discourse of preemptive war on terror, supposedly in defense of freedom and civilization, is based on an opposition between Islamism and democracy. Accordingly, coerced democratization of rogue states is represented favorably as the key to national security and world peace. Susan Buck-Morss, however, would have us think past the self-perpetuating cycle of terror and counter-terror by critically engaging such a hard and fast opposition between "the discursive field of 'Islamism'" and an indigenous discourse of democracy. Toward that end, she critiques the reduction of Islamism to terrorism, arguing that Islamism is itself a multifaceted critical discourse rather than a monolithic ideology of militant violence. Like liberalism, she maintains, "Islamism frames social and political debates without preempting their content." As a framing discourse, Islamism "is the politicization of Islam in a postcolonial context, a contemporary discourse of opposition and debate, dealing with issues of social justice, legitimate power, and ethical life in a way that challenges the hegemony of Western political and cultural norms." Again like liberalism, Islamism can and has been appropriated across the political spectrum "from terrorist networks, to right-wing

authoritarianism, to neo-liberal centrism, to left-radicalism, to secular-state egalitarianism, to guerrilla warfare. The political impact of Islamism, far from monolithic, has been reactionary, conservative, democratic, revolutionary, conspiratorial," depending on its specific contexts of interpretation. These "political variations and historical complexities," however, are effaced by stereotypically opposing an evil Islam to everything Western, good, and modern (Buck-Morss 2003, 2-3).

Specifically, Buck-Morss finds within Islamist discourse the resources of a political language that can support goals of "global peace, economic justice, legal equality, democratic participation, individual freedom, [and] mutual respect." Moreover, she argues, this is a discursive field that can with effort be translated and extended creatively to enrich a truncated Western imaginary and exercise the otherwise rigidified conceptual frame of globalization that overlooks disastrous environmental and social consequences of free trade and economic interdependence. Her dissent from the cultural confrontation presumed by a triumphal discourse of good versus evil and its "insensate scenario of unlimited warfare" aims to "imagine alternative forms" by exposing Western hegemonic discourse to non-fundamentalist Islamic principles of "socioeconomic justice and essential human egalitarianism." The West might learn to appreciate the work of Islamist feminists operating within contemporary Iran, for instance. Drawing on an Islamist discourse that articulates respect for women (in contrast to the Western commodification of women as sex objects), Iranian women are advocating "legal equality, divorce reform, reproductive rights, equality in the workforce, and social recognition as political advocates, members of parliament, professionals, and producers of culture and the arts." These women are the avant-garde rhetors of a progressive, reformist Islamism. They are struggling to rearticulate political culture from within in an attempt to dissociate Islam from an oppressive patriarchy (Buck-Morss 2003, 10-12).

"Terrorism will disappear," Buck-Morss concludes (perhaps a bit too absolutely), "because non-violent ways of communication and debate are possible" within and between cultures, not because democracy is coerced by military intimidation and transplanted by invasion based on the simple mentality that "you are with us or against us." That, however, is not a point the American public is encouraged to contemplate or deliberate. "By attempting to silence Islam as a political discourse, by reducing it to a religious practice," Buck-Morss observes, "Bush is in effect closing off public discussion of how the many varieties of Islamism are challenging and extending the discursive field of political resistance." At bottom, to treat criticism of either/or, friend/enemy, good/evil dichotomies as unpatriotic is to make democratic debate impossible and to retreat into a hardened and hopeless opposition of fundamentalisms (Buck-Morss 2003, 15, 27, 42, 65, 106). Critiquing the language of fundamentalism, on the other hand, fosters democratic pluralism and is thereby appropriately deemed patriotic in a global public sphere.

Similarly, the dichotomous language of good versus evil can be critiqued usefully for the way it has deterred dissent and debate over the character of terrorism and, by extension, reinforced the unexamined presumption that freedom and democracy are at issue. As Michael Mann notes, it became nearly impossible after 9/11 for Americans to raise questions about or "to distinguish between different types of terrorism" because "terrorism was evil, period." Yet, making a distinction be-

tween two types of terrorism is critical, Mann argues, to enhancing American security.

While all terrorists share the strategy of attacking civilian targets, the vast majority of terrorists are national terrorists who see themselves as freedom fighters attempting to liberate their land from "alien oppressive rule," whereas relatively few terrorists resort to attacking abroad those whom they perceive to be "allies of their local enemy." Accordingly, U.S. efforts should be aimed at international terrorists rather than national liberation movements because, as Mann observes, international terrorists are the ones attacking Americans, because they are fewer in number and much weaker than national terrorists who can fight effectively as guerrilla forces on their own home territories, and because fighting national terrorists, which diverts and defuses American resources, works counterproductively to spawn additional international terrorists from the ranks of "freedom fighters" who become increasingly convinced that America's indiscriminant war on terror amounts to an attack on Muslims.

International terrorists, Mann insists, do not strike the U.S. because they hate American culture, democracy, or wealth but instead because they hate an American foreign policy that targets Muslims. As long as Americans continue to conflate distinct forms of terrorism, they will remain linguistically imprisoned in the false dilemma of either abandoning their culture, democracy, and wealth or killing terrorists indiscriminately. Ironically, this amounts to a dichotomization of choices that sacrifices freedom and democracy immediately while producing future international terrorists at an even faster rate than before America declared war on terror.

Following Mann's immanent rhetorical critique, it is possible to see that American freedom is not necessarily at stake and that transplanting democracy is not a sure solution to terror or a reliable means to universal peace. Instead, enhanced national security would seem to require a refocusing of U.S. foreign policy to concentrate on defeating a relatively vulnerable al-Qaeda (which "consists of Arab exiles too weak to take on their own states") and other international terrorist organizations actually targeting Americans. This does not imply that the U.S. should continue to ignore underlying conditions of terrorism, only that it should re-craft its current foreign policy so as not to further exacerbate the problem. Such a recrafting could also reinforce a more balanced and less paranoid perspective on terrorism that respects American civil liberties, including dissent, by "demonstrating that democracy can subject violence to the rule of law" (Mann 2003, 159-60, 162-63, 185-86, 190).[12]

The Stakes Are High

What, then, can be anticipated for democratic dissent in America based on this prelude to the subject? The answer, I think, is that nothing is for certain, but the stakes are high. Although dissent is inherent to strong democracy and good decision making, that is a lesson all too easily forgotten under the prevailing myth of privileged and universal rationality and its corresponding distrust of rhetorical deliberation. Under the rule of this founding myth, democracy remains weak and the demos quiescent, the presidential republic rules by crisis, and democratic dissent is rendered oxymoronic. Coercion supplants persuasion under a regime of

preemptive warfare and reciprocal terror wherein complexities are reduced to sheer simplicities and fundamental oppositions, even though the increasingly interconnected world has evolved to a compelling state of radical diversity. The exigency of acute pluralism and deep divisions in an economically and electronically compressed world demands a profoundly democratic response that transcends false dilemmas and transforms simplistic dichotomies between good and evil.

Within a consciously rhetorical republic, democracy is dissent, and democratic dissent is rhetorical critique. Such a republic can be constituted only by its own discursive means, that is, by rearticulating extant culture within the existing resources of liberal democracy's *sensus communis*. A reconstruction of this kind would proceed metaphorically through strategies of symbolic merging in order to bridge unserviceable divides and to develop fresh perspectives from planned incongruities. The promised fruit of these persuasive re-descriptions and the more serviceable perspectives they produce would emerge from carefully cultivated language critiques deeply embedded in the terminologies and contexts of present usage, such as critiques of a total opposition between Islamism and democracy and of a conflation of terrorisms that militarizes democracy. But nothing is for certain, even though the stakes are so high, the exigency for deepening democratic culture is so immediate, and the rhetorical means are so readily available.

If the twin constraints of rule by crisis and elite rationality prevail over the exigency of democracy, the U.S. is doomed to suffer what Benjamin Barber has aptly called "an empire of fear inimical to both liberty and security," an empire that "leaves no room for democracy" (Barber 2003, 18, 32). A rigid rhetoric of good versus evil is a recipe for war, continuous, open-ended, preemptive warfare in the name of democracy but not democratically motivated. The alternative of democratic dissent features an appropriately flexible rhetoric for articulating a positive peace that is a transformation of war rather than the mere absence of war – a rhetorical discourse of agonistic pluralism, consubstantial rivalry, and militant nonviolence. Accordingly, the heavy burden of proof in an alternative world would be properly returned to those who advocate preemptive war at the expense of self-rule, for "preventive war and democracy are simply self-contradictory" in Barber's estimation (Barber 2003, 141). In such a world, the oxymoronic relationship would exist between war and freedom, not democracy and dissent.

The choice between a culture of conformity and a culture of dissent will determine as much as any other single decision whether the U.S. squanders the resources of empire, loses its democratic soul, and forsakes the promise of positive peace. Will America evolve a strong democratic culture or will it fall prey to presidential rule by crisis? My larger purpose isn't to predict the outcome but instead to tap the potential of a latent democratic imaginary for responding constructively to the extraordinary challenges of our time. This prologue to democratic dissent is but a sketch of the cultural work that lies ahead, but hopefully suggestive enough to goad additional consideration and to point further discussion in a fruitful direction. Like Bonnie Honig (2001, 122), I think there is much to be gained by considering how a democracy might learn to address "foreigners" better in order to pluralize its attachments.

Notes:

1. An extended critique of the structural dimensions of the failure of the fourth estate to meet its reportorial responsibilities is available in McChesney 2004. Also see Kellner 2004.

2. For a now classic distinction between thin, or weak, democracy and strong democracy, see Barber 1984.

3. In Farrell's words, "rhetoric has always been ... the worst fear of idealized reason and the best hope for whatever remains of civic life" (Farrell 1993, 1).

4. For an example of one elitist realist masking his own rhetoric in the name of reason, see Ivie 1996a.

5. For a discussion of the concept and emergence of a rhetorical presidency, see Tulis 1987.

6. I am drawing here from some of the language and themes of a section on governance by crisis that I contributed to Bostdorff et al. 2004).

7. See also Dolan and Dumm 1993; Campbell 1993.

8. See, for instance, Grossman 1995.

9. For a critique of this rhetorical practice, see Ivie 2003.

10. Toward this end, it is instructive to read Vico (1744/1999) in conjunction with Vico (1711-1741/1996).

11. Burke1954/1965; Burke 1945/1969, 503-17. Also, for a related discussion of Kenneth Burke on metaphor, perspective, and motive, see Ivie 1989.

12. In addition to focusing on the defeat of international terrorism, Mann argues that the U.S. "should denounce terrorism and state terrorism equally, and accompany this with its best conciliation services, backed by material incentives for those willing to compromise" (Mann 2003, 189).

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