

Notes on Cultural Renaissance in a Time of Barbarism

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We live in a time of imperial-driven destructive wars in the name of 'democracy', savage exploitation in the name of 'emerging world powers', massive forced population displacement in the name of 'immigration' and large-scale pillage of natural resources in the name of 'free markets'. We live in a time of barbarism and the barbarian elites employ an army of linguistic and cultural manipulators to justify their conquests.

The great crimes against most of humanity are justified by a corrosive debasement of language and thought - a deliberate fabrication of euphemisms, falsehoods and conceptual deceptions. Cultural expressions are a central determinant in class, national, ethnic and gender relations. They reflect and are products of political, economic and social power. But just as power is ultimately a social relation between antagonistic classes, cultural expressions are also mediated through the lenses, experiences and interests of the dominant elites and their rebellious subjects.

Even as the writers of the barbarous elites have fabricated a linguistic world of terror, of demons and saviors, of axes of good and evil, of euphemisms which embellish the crimes against humanity, so have new groups of writers, artists and collective participants come forth to clarify reality and elucidate the existential and collective bases for demystifying the lies and creating a new cultural reality.

In the face of elite barbarism, a cultural renaissance is born. Revelations of crimes are made through journalistic investigations, plays and songs. Affirmations of integrity, social solidarity and individual rejections of the monetary enticements strengthen moral commitment in the face of ever-present threats, assassinations and official censure.

The great crimes of the imperial powers and their local clients include the massacres and daily death counts, propaganda, which pronounces every victim a criminal, and every criminal a savior. The political delinquents have not, do not and cannot silence, deafen or blind a new generation of critical intellectuals, poets and artists who speak truth to the people.

There are several themes which are essential in the advancement of the emerging cultural renaissance and our challenge to the reign of barbarism: These include the politics of language, conceptual misconceptions and intellectual courage in everyday life. The great conflict is between the power of the mass media and collective solidarity, and the false association of class with high and mass culture.

The Politics of Language

The corruption of language is a prescription for complicity in political crimes. Corruption of language takes the form of euphemisms concocted by propagandists, transmitted through the mass media, echoed in the pompous language of academics, judges, and translated into the gutter language of the sensationalist yellow press. Monstrous crimes against rural communities perpetuated by the police state are described as 'pacification'; reduction of salaries and social services are described as 'stabilization'; and the elimination of labor legislation protecting employment from arbitrary firings and weakening of trade unions is described as 'labor flexibilization'.

Human rights advocates defending victims of military violence are called 'accomplices of terrorists'; systematic state and paramilitary violence is called national security; opposition to military and political linkages to death squads is called terrorism; large scale counter-insurgency plans designed and funded by foreign imperial powers are labeled measures for 'national salvation'.

There is also the pretext of providing a pseudo-scientific neutral terminology to inhuman acts - destroying thousands of communities and displacing millions is described as 'liquidating subversive elements' and likened to the extermination of noxious insects.

Euphemisms are a form of collective anesthesia - to tranquilize the population not directly affected by state violence. The imagery evoked by euphemisms is always portrayed as benign to obscure the malignant reality. To 'pacify' suggests a 'pacifier' and allows a parent to gently calm an infant and eliminate its irritable cries. 'Pacification' of a people means the opposite: the violent eruption of military forces into a tranquil community that causes screams of pain and shudders of death.

Stabilization in the mouths of state authorities means to reduce trade and budget deficits by lowering wages and salaries while retaining subsidies and tax-exemptions for the ruling class. Stabilization for big business and the banks means de-stabilization for the working class and the poor: the loss of health services, increases in the prices of basic commodities like food and transportation and the loss of employment leading to family break-ups, children leaving school, single parent homes and rising rates of suicide and alcoholism.

The dress rehearsal for any political and social transformation is linguistic clarity - speaking and writing in a language in which words and concepts evoke the reality we live, especially the differential class impact of specific policies. The unmasking of euphemisms is not a job for linguists but for all committed intellectuals and artists.

Language and the Left

Too many times the left fails to elucidate the meaning of euphemisms - resorting to the lazy device of hanging quotation marks around the targeted phrase. The quotation marks are meant to indicate irony and criticism or rejection of the euphemism - but they are just as obscurantist as the euphemism they seek to discredit. For example, many writers deal with authoritarian or police state regimes which claim to be democratic by simply putting quotes around 'democracy' - as if the quotes are self-explanatory. The critics fail to take the time and make the effort to elaborate a more precise term, which captures the cognitive meaning of the political system. The resort to quotation marks has a long tradition of abuse on the left, an abuse that serves to undermine the pedagogical purposes of educating the popular classes and providing a new and useful political vocabulary.

More recently, especially among intellectuals who have a pretence of communicating or leading the working class and peasantry, they abuse popular understanding by swearing. When using 'swear words' intellectuals abdicate their responsibility to widen the vocabulary of the working class or peasant activists. When workers or peasants resort to swear words, much depends on the context and tonality to determine meaning. The same swear word can be a denunciation or a term of affection, depending on the context. But when there is a political vocabulary that is more precise and varied, the pseudo-populist intellectual should introduce and define its meaning instead of pretending to establish rapport on the basis of the most limited and simplistic level of communication: vulgarity.

The intellectual playing down to the workers and peasants doesn't raise their understanding; instead it reduces the literacy of the intellectual.

The other side of the coin is the problem of the exoticism of the intellectual: The use of an unfamiliar, abstract language derived from highly specialized texts, which fail to connect to the concrete realities and struggles of the workers and peasants. The task for intellectuals is to take complex ideas and make them comprehensible - to illustrate ideas from everyday practice. It is easier to write for other intellectuals than it is to take the effort of explaining the content and meaning of a concept to the popular classes. But that is what must be done without condescension or over-simplification.

Conceptual Clarity: Between Democracy and Barbarism

Conceptual perversion is the opium of the intellectual apologists of state terror. What are the concepts, which are most often perverted? What are the most frequent acts of perversion? How and why do these obscene activities take place?

The most frequent concepts subject to perversion by state power are democracy, citizenship (or citizenry), civil society and free elections.

Democracy, as it is used by foreign and domestic apologist of the terror state, reduces democracy to a set of electoral procedures, competition by two or more competing parties and legislative and executive institutions based on the elections. The most essential elements of democracy, the freedom to speak, organize, assemble and protest are excluded; death squad, police and military violence resulting in systematic assassination, kidnapping and disappearances undermine the entire context leading up to the election. In other words, state terror undermines the political context for free elections, for competitive parties and critical candidates. The widespread and intensive use of force and violence in the run-up to the elections determines the consequences of the elections: alternation of leaders within the narrow confines of the ruling oligarchy. Electoral procedures subject to state terror and systematic assassinations and intimidation are clearly incompatible with any substantive conception of democracy. The systematic physical elimination of political opponents and the psychological intimidation of the mass electorate define a police state.

Associating state terror and political threats with democracy is a gross perversion of the very foundations of the democratic process: the freedom to choose to run for office and to pursue alternatives to the existing system. Some writers refer to death-squad-democracies - states in which state-promoted death squads condition electoral processes. The irony of this expression - the linking of opposites is a reminder of George Orwell's phrase 'slavery is democracy'. Likewise, some speak of imperial-democracy to refer to the US in which

domestic policy is democratic while the imperial foreign policy dictates the harsh rules of violence and dictatorial regimes. These hyphenated terms however are static conceptions; empire building, especially in periods of defeat and domestic unrest can lead to the usurpation of dictatorial executive power – imperial democracy becomes an imperial police state.

Another concept, which has been corrupted by the apologists of state power, is civil society – namely the social classes, organizations and associations that are independent of the state. The apologists of state terror, who call for the defense of civil society, refer only to specific elite civil organizations and obfuscate their intimate inter-relations with the police state. Their virtuous civil society excludes the independent peasant associations and class-oriented trade unions. While speaking in defense of civil society, they defend the police state engaged in the assassination of civil society leaders as constituted by independent jurists, lawyers, peasants, workers, students and others. The decimation of civil society in the name of civil society describes a state of barbarism – the barbarous state under the façade of competitive oligarchic electoral politics.

Citizenship and the Barbarous State

The full or partial exercise of civic virtues is a perilous undertaking in the barbarous state. The record is clear in Colombia: 3 million forcibly displaced rural citizens, 40,000 citizens killed by the paramilitary and military, tens of thousands of citizens forced into exile or into hiding. For many citizens the decision to continue to fully exercise their civic duties, exercising their social rights to organize civic action and their political rights to question arbitrary oligarchic rule is fraught with danger, on a daily basis. For many others, the more prudent citizens, they choose to operate within the institutional parameters imposed by the oligarchy, using Aesopian language, to voice their dissent against state violence. Presidents of barbarous states who publicly denounce citizens exercising their civic rights are writing a death sentence – usually exercised by sicario-motorcyclists shooting trade unionists going to work, human rights lawyers leaving their offices, peasant activists tilling their fields.

The everyday exercise of civic virtues in a state of barbarism is a heroic deed. Civility, in the face of death threats emanating from political leaders with immunity is a virtue that can only be attributed to the citizen. Civility is not embedded in the political system; it exists despite and against the barbarian state. Under extreme conditions, civic consciousness can include non-voting or abstention. These can be considered meretricious acts particularly where the oligarchs control the political process and voting only serves to provide a veneer of pseudo-legitimacy to the barbarians in power. Where political alternatives emerge, free of oligarchic control, citizens may choose to exercise their political rights to assemble and collectively decide to break with the system and apparatus of violence.

Political Tragedies or Political Criminality?

Many progressive writers and artists, when writing of the lost potentialities of countries with great human and material richness because of misrule, speak of political tragedies. This is a serious misconception, which misconstrues the nature of tragedy and the abuse of political power. A political tragedy exists, in the classical sense, when well-intentioned rulers with flawed characters inadvertently commit acts of horror – family killings -- or plunge their countries into devastating wars over slight pretexts; out of individual pride (hubris).

The barbaric acts of violence of the oligarchic rulers are not the result of individual flaws;

they are products of collective, deliberate, systematic acts of pillage, exploitation and the usurpation of small land-owners. The acts of war are against the communities in their realm. The reasons for war are not personal slights, but the defense of indefensible privileges, illegitimate power and great concentrations of wealth.

The systematic long-term, large-scale violence of a succession of oligarchic rulers against their citizens and the impoverishment of a potentially rich country is not a tragedy. It is a political crime, or more accurately a crime against humanity. When we speak of political tragedies, let us speak of ancient classical Athens or Shakespeare's Hamlet, not contemporary Colombia, a state where the narrative is more akin to the genealogy of the Mafia.

Tragedy speaks to good rulers who through excess pride commit a political crime. The audience of a tragedy identifies, at least at the beginning with the ruler and their apparent virtues and benign rule. As the ruler moves inexorably to their fall, the audience is repulsed by the crime, but as justice is meted they experience a catharsis – a sense of civic virtue redeemed, even a feeling that political absolutism, even exercised by a once virtuous ruler, has been duly punished. A sense of citizen ambiguity regarding the human condition, even among those occupying the highest sphere of politics, remains in the public consciousness.

In contrast, contemporary oligarchic rulers begin their tenure in office as homicidal delinquents. Their very electoral campaigns are plagued with murder, mayhem and massacres. Upon becoming heads of states, there is no ambiguity: The Presidents' closest associates are oligarchs, their Congressional supporters are elected by the illicit funds of narco-traffickers and the rule is imposed by guns and machetes of paid assassins.

Criminal acts of rulership continue in perpetuity with no redeeming virtues. At no point in time does the audience – the citizens – express any emotional identification. On the contrary, as the crimes multiply, their emotional indignation and repudiation grows more intense. With the system of justice so thoroughly corrupted and the mass media complicit, the people find no publicly expressive redemption – no sense of justice emerges because, unlike the Greek or Shakespearean tragedies, there is no end to the horror. Political criminality that permeates the contemporary barbarous state will not emerge from an elite redeemer.

Colombia: Heroes in Everyday Life

Many are the literary critics and large is the public that looks to celebrities in film and sports and Nobel Prize winners as their virtual heroes and heroines. I must confess however that my heroes and heroines are neither saints nor notables, not even the great critics and world-renowned intellectuals in the US or Europe.

The most admirable are those Colombians who work steadily with great energy and purpose in pursuit of the civic virtues of class solidarity with the victims of the barbarous state and affirm their civic dignity through their defense of human and social rights. Cultural celebrities and intellectuals — notables especially in the North — have their world reputations to protect them from the predator states when they criticize injustice. For them it is an occasional grand moment – a press conference, a public meeting, signing a petition. These small acts have meaning and carry some moral weight.

But, to me, they shrink in stature faced with the everyday acts of courage and solidarity,

which engage trade union activists – beverage and farm workers, coal miners –and human rights lawyers and professionals in the face of daily acts of murder and threats of death. There is a great moral distance between putting your life on the line every minute of the day, as do Colombian peasants active in their movements, and the academics who speak from the protection of the ivory towers of prestigious universities in Europe and North America. The latter actions, because of their celebrity status, may pressure the barbarous state to release a victim of torture – and that is not insignificant especially for the individual in question. The temporary lessening of intimidation provides a moment of relief but once the celebrities, the Nobel Prize winners turn away to their other professional pursuits, it is the workers, peasants, the activists and social movements which have to face the life and death threats and challenges in their everyday work, in their families and neighborhoods. Their virtues of solidarity and civility, of militancy and their consequential beliefs are what inspire me to believe that barbarism is neither omnipotent nor is it our destiny.

Despite the pompous pronouncements by experts and critics of mass communication who proclaim the power of the mass media, we know that millions everywhere defy the media messages. They organize popular protests, uprisings, general strikes despite the fact that every mass media is against the mass action. Against the mass conformity of the mass media, the spirit and traditions of class, family and community solidarity have been far more successful than the media experts admit. In Venezuela every major private mass media monopoly denounced President Chavez and supported a coup against him – and yet he was reinstated in power and elected three times each time by a larger majority.

The truth is that the barbaric state is vulnerable, tactically powerful because of money and arms but strategically vulnerable: No institutions, even those that buttress a police state, can stand in the face of a sustained cultural and political resistance that exposes its deceptions, its criminal acts, its corruption and depredations. The President of the United States and his most loyal client in Latin American can still engage in mass murder but nobody believes their lies and deceptions: When their justifications for brutality relies solely on their control of force they have already lost the political struggle.

To further their political demise and above all to ensure that another barbarous oligarch does not replace them, a profound cultural revolution must accompany the rupture with the political past. The passing of barbarism requires a cultural renaissance; in which the best of art, language, dance and music is not defined by class boundaries and taboos.

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