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*The Left at War*

Michael Bérubé

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## **Moderation and Its Discontents: Liberalism, Totality, and the Limits of Centrist Prudence**

**Andrew Pendakis**

*Michael Bérubé's Left at War*, is an analysis of the habits and prospects of Left thinking in America since September 11. It is also a book about the continuing relevance to that left of not just Stuart Hall, but Cultural Studies more generally. Its specific focus is the ideological temperament of what it calls the "countercultural" (3) left, a segment primarily identified with the "Z-counterpunch" (27) matrix, but sometimes elastic enough to include anti-liberal academic Foucauldians and other darkly indexed postmodernists (3). For Bérubé, the social theories produced by figures like Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky no longer shed light on our moment's least tolerable injustices and instead largely obstruct effective political perspective in an hysterical, anachronistic locutionary mode better fitted to the system-smashing 1960s. Nowhere is this more evident, he argues, than in these thinkers' response to America at war. Busking clumsy Marxist orthodoxies about the relationship between culture and power, they transform every American military intervention into an act of sheer imperialist brutality, reduce popular enthusiasm for war to deception and false consciousness, and ritually invoke media conglomerations shadily manipulated by a homogeneous, self-interested, and wholly sovereign ruling stratum. Such rhetoric, says Bérubé, divides truth in such a way as to render its fragments preciously hoarded secrets: illusion becomes the prerogative of the many and reality the arduous bounty afforded those few brave enough to follow Chomsky through the veil.

As a form of sociological description this paradigm, argues Bérubé, is simply false, screening out entirely the topsy-turviness of postmodern cultural production. Though

he roughly concedes (and laments) the political economy of information in America, and admits that media outlets often reflect uncritically official government positions, he contests the adequacy of the propaganda model to the present conjuncture, just as he resists the suggestion — popular among leftists — that the United States is a democracy in name only, Republicans and Democrats minutely differentiated heads on the same always-gorging oligarchic dog. Vulgar economic determinism displaces the genuine relative autonomy of the political, exaggerating the unanimity of public discourse and ignoring the tenuousness, heterogeneity, and struggle which characterize any project of governance. The most egregious misstep of these discourses, he contends, concerns their inability to recognize the changed dynamics of American foreign policy in the aftermath of Kosovo. Intervention in the Balkans, Bérubé insists, was motivated by genuine “humanitarian” concern, involving a geographical region in which the United States had no significant economic stakes or clear strategic investments. Kosovo, then, “clearly demonstrates the complexity of geo-political life, the conflicts within various factions of the West’s ruling classes, and the extent to which political debate cannot be brutally reduced to the economic plane” (113). According to Bérubé, American military intervention abroad should no longer be understood through the anachronistic lens of crypto-imperialism — oil and blood prettied up as rights to vote and own — but as an ideologically ambivalent terrain on which authentically emancipatory left-liberal universalists and neoconservative (nationalist) realisms wrangle over the terms, limits, and tenor of engagement. Fettered by the requirements of ideological consistency, this “Manichean” leftism closes itself to the responsibility of empiricism, replacing anomaly — reversals of policy on the part of the American government — to say nothing of nuanced geopolitical explanation with the monotonous cruelty of imperial force (15). It is from this angle, says Bérubé, that Chomsky argues himself into blatantly illogical quarters, the 9/11 attacks morally equated with Clinton’s bombing of Al-Shifa or traced back monocausally to CIA blowback and the mujahedeen. All of this, it would seem, to secure the comfortable causal anchor of an original sin — America.

Before I go on to address Bérubé’s primary argument, I want to stop and quickly make an aside about the relationship between style and thought. If a book about politics is to convince or interest us, a certain polemical economy is of the utmost importance. Bérubé’s book wholly lacks this difficult eye to the flow and texture of an argument. This is in part traceable to the difficulty he seems to have coordinating the relationship between a proposition and the examples chosen to enliven or illuminate it. The reader consistently finds herself in the foggy mid-section of a chapter, disoriented by a series of exemplary excerpts which do not seem to grip or relay a point made on a higher level of generality and instead flatten outwards onto a mess of empirical details fastidiously denounced or praised. The conversations he chooses to enter also tend to be overburdened by their own inter-citational natures, creating hideously long chains of reference that strain a reader’s belief in his selectiveness and obscure rather than accentuate his argument:

But because the object of the game here is to stake out a position to Lott's left by citing the correct African American intellectual (Brennan sees Lott's A. Philip Randolph and raises him a Lani Guinier: one can only respond by seeing Brennan's raise and countering with Manning Marble, Adolph Reed or Robin D.G. Kelly), Guinier's work on voting rights gets a dismissive gestural subordinate clause so that we can get on to the important work of associating her with Janet Reno and the horrific siege of Waco. (22)

The problem, here, is that Bérubé is called on to position himself at each moment in the signifying chain, stopping to adjudicate assessments of assessments (up to and including an opinion on "horrific" Waco!), rather than tightly following the imperatives of a necessary rhetorical task. There is a polemical claustrophobia in all of this — a sense of needlessly cluttered volume, but also unintelligently economized energy, points that are microscopically finessed at junctures irrelevant to the macroscopy of the whole. Bérubé at times appears to be returning punches with a length of memory and precision that borders on pettiness or vendetta. At one point he takes the time to respond to a statement posted to a thread on his blog; at others, trivially contradictory statements are used as evidence in a scintillating logical crime, proof of deep fatal inconsistency, and delivered in a winning tone which leaves the reader wondering just what else is at stake in these exchanges. An argument which relies so heavily on the machinery of brute contradiction strikes an interlocutor as somehow inherently famished, its misdirected bluster the plumage of choice for those too weak or disoriented to grip the strong directly at the throat. Perhaps the strangest habit of the text is a tendency to hyper-stipulate: "Let me be clear about my citation of Heath and Potter: I am not claiming that Noam Chomsky somehow patterned his political commentary and his rhetorical style after a science fiction movie that came out in 1999" (83); and "Again, let me take a moment to state the obvious: I am not suggesting that the left should have responded to 9/11 with a series of brilliant cartoons" (92). Pre-empting implausible misreadings in a tone thought to be frank (but which is really just overly fastidious) only sharpens the reader's sense for a paranoia or nervousness structural to the book as a whole — a hiccup or failure at the very heart of its targeting system.

These stylistic grumblings aside, Bérubé's book raises a number of questions that bear some close scrutiny. Central to this work is his analysis of "hard left habits," a comportment he sees expressed paradigmatically in paranoid countercultural invocations of the System (2). The presumption of insidious, self-transparent intention on the part of a "ruling class," the latter's sociological homogeneity and effectivity of action, as well the notion of capitalist culture as unequivocally manipulated by the requirements of production (a veil behind which exploitation stalks): all of this is exposed by Bérubé to the standard neo-Gramscian critique, "false consciousness"

replaced with protocols of persuasion and linear verticality, direct domination replaced with complex horizontal patternings of power and powerlessness. I think it is fair to say that none of this is controversial to scholars working within the purview of contemporary Cultural Studies (and in fact borders on disciplinary truism). The problem, however, seems to arise when this necessary re-conceptualization attaches itself to a wholesale abandonment of our sense of structure — of coherent, inertial tendency, the full weight and speed of things as they are, the hold on the virtual of drifting, entrenched actuality — to which the concept of system gives rise. Capitalized it is, of course, arch parody; abandoned it becomes instantly indispensable. Bérubé's attempt to shed light on the tactical uselessness of System-rhetoric is politically relevant and probably requires a good deal of attention; that said, the ease with which such a critique merges into an acceptance of existing social and economic structures, replacing theoretical urgency with a relaxed empiricist cognition of the complicated is well-known to any close reader of *The Economist*. Moreover, it remains the case that the idea of transparent, malevolent intention, homogeneous control, and absolute public passivity, can be subtracted from the concept of system without in the least way affecting its functionality. One doesn't need an outside — be it a self-grounding *cogito* or even a firm distinction between the true and the false — to insist on the ideological monotony and sameness of American public discourse, nor does this sameness need to be affirmed away from an eye to the tiny distinctions; rather, it is enough to point out the incredible range of alternative interpretive options — ranging from eco-feminisms to classical social democracy, from anarchisms to contemporary variations on council communism — screened out (and thus negated in advance) by the dominant discourses (be they Democratic or Republican or whatever). Simultaneously, the fact that ideology is never controlled from a supreme or homogeneous point of enunciation does nothing to dissipate the narrowness of a cultural context in which popular culture often spontaneously operates within the discursive tenor and consistency of the economy (to say nothing of its logistical imperatives).

Refusing the old image of the cave-dwelling masses as well as the audience reception theories articulated by its critics does not *de facto* leave us somewhere between the two, happily content in the knowledge that truth lies somewhere in the middle. In fact, one can affirm agency on the part of the subject without for a second declaring the context in which it is enacted and deployed free *tout court*. There are better questions one can ask here. Has a subject been exposed *systematically* to critical conceptions of the cultural practices in which they are affectively engaged? Has the virtuality that constitutes the heart and horizon of human subjectivity — a position sustained from Rousseau and Marx to Heidegger and Foucault — been honored in the conditions encountered by a subject on its way through the multiplicities of experience? In other words, have its schools *measured up* to the burdens and possibilities of ontology? Only on the basis of an affirmative answer to these ultimately Hegelian questions

can we begin to speak about freedom (given that the latter is not mere happiness nor the *a priori* simplicity of doing what one wants to). Certainly, there is freedom and limitation in every human gesture; the question, the great political question of our time, is what kind of society can best lay down the conditions for the production of *relatively* self-determining subjectivity. All subjectivity is, of course, residual, partial, inherited, and so on; the question lies in our ability to envision pedagogical and cultural arrangements that maximize the tension of an education, as well as social relations which grant time and space to an auto-production of the self. To echo the still utterly relevant Sartre: how can subjects, amidst the always tenuous and tentative constriction of ontological ignorance, and with no guarantee of success, *relatively choose themselves*? This is the question. A society in which retirement is disappearing as fast as youth employment, in which funding for the humanities is as scarce as noncommodified social spaces, in which labor precarity and competition secretes a certain mundane dread into the open potentiality of being alive, only very dubiously meets this standard. Nor, even were we to concede it possible, would Bérubé's social-democratic utopia: prosperity and employment for all are still poor substitutes for a genuinely dialectical freedom which presumes both without deifying either.

It needs to be said that a great deal of Bérubé's polemical work is done for him by the cultural immediacy of middleness itself. Positioned between the twin "Manichaeisms" of Bush and Chomsky, Bérubé avoids associations with the center as slough by discriminately attacking his flanks while at the same instant escaping ascriptions of dogmatism through the slippery zone of a middle thought to be smarter *a priori*; from this angle, and in distinction to the "tunnel vision" of the poles, the center gains a certain legitimacy that is wholly structural, the outcome of an untheorized phenomenological association with a thinking that is "in the round," *there in the middle of things*, rather than locked up blind by ideology. Our notions about the agility and intelligence of the centrist are already fully encoded here in the spatial imagination of a middle that must simultaneously intuit two enemies at the same time (rather than the cliché of the political ideologue who thinks in nothing but caricatures of one obsessional enemy). Unlike the poles, which transmit their traditions linearly through parties, old boy's clubs, and secret societies, the center (so the story goes) must forever triangulate its own content, spontaneously discovering itself in the rationalized here and now of reality. In other words, the act of taking leave from the poles, this sojourn out of extremity and binarized ideology and into the empirical variety of the world as it is (or still might be through sensible reform) repeats all of the old errors of every philosophical realism even as it shores up its persuasiveness on the back of a post-Marxist cultural suspicion of precisely such exits. The efficacy of this gesture is only increased by its resonance with the putative Gramscianism of Bérubé's intervention: to the left exists the old elitist corpse of false consciousness, the vanguard distance of a truth reserved only for the few, while on the right a twin phenomenon appears: neoconservative mendacity inflected by Leo Strauss's

governing Platonic lie. Not only, then, does the middle contain things themselves, finally discovered beyond the illusion of ideology, it also, happily enough, contains the people as well, ordinary folk and the commonsensical notion they have of their own pleasurable freedom. For Bérubé, the “hard left” desires nothing more than its own peripherality, wedded as it is to the pleasure of the margin and a deep contempt for all things mainstream, just as the neoconservative right anti-democratically declares war against the overwhelming resistance of majorities. Which is to say that in speaking from the middle one also speaks from the place of the people, the place, that is, *where everybody already is*. Everybody, but also nobody, for the radical centrism practiced by Bérubé is also framed as a seldom-practiced art and the exception to a boringly heeded rule.

It is precisely this structure of matching Manichaeisms which allows Bérubé to posit his welfare liberalism as the only left position acceptable to a person of sense. By tethering any stance left of Richard Rorty to the same terrain occupied by Chomsky, Bérubé obscures the entire gamut of contemporary post-liberal positions for which concepts like false consciousness or ontological class interest are simply no longer relevant. However, one should ask: why write a book on the binary habits of Left theory at a moment in which those habits have never been less germane? Why target the rhetoric of anti-imperialism when means have been found (in Hardt and Negri, for example) to think Empire apart from the moral geography of colonizer and colonized, as well as the bad equation of America with primordial evil? Given, for example, that neither Slavoj Žižek’s re-deployment of the concept of ideology or Giorgio Agamben’s notion of spectacular democracy rest on some stable distinction between appearance and essence, nor any clear functionalist sociology, why focus on media theorists whose primary texts were written in the 1970s and whose works are still dominated by these problems? Is Žižek, then, part of what Bérubé calls the Manichean Left? Fredric Jameson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Wendy Brown, Alain Badiou? Though I think Bérubé’s critique of Žižek’s anti-liberalism is fundamentally correct and that the Marxist imagination lives or dies with the fate of its capacity to invent a theory of politics — one which draws on, rather than eschews, rule of law, constitutionality, possessive individualism, etc. — it nevertheless remains that his attempt to connect the critique of capital with reductionism plays an old game whereby the project of abolition is always already a kind of simplification, a fairy tale flush with comforting goods and evils as well as fantastical arrivals at an end to tension. The desire to *address* the dispensability of capital needn’t be simple, any more than the rhetoric of market complexity is complicated: what seals the meaning of the exchange here is the popular equation of nuance with negotiation and of abolition with a logic of moral abnegation premised on ignorance, reflex, or terror.

It should be said that Bérubé’s division of the left into orthodox and democratic factions reflects not only a distinction between two different ways of thinking about popular agency, but also two distinct interpretations of political structure. For the



Manichean left, “there are no anomalies in world affairs, no reversals of policy...the empire has no choice but to behave as an empire” (xx). On one side exist left ideologues who forever discern, amidst the variety of the real, the same monotonous economic legality, politics turned again and again on the dull spit of money, class, and power; on the other, liberal empiricists open to glimpsing within the present forms of mutation and contradiction capable of breaking with the history of capitalist imperialism. If there is a vantage point, however, from which Bérubé’s critique of left structuralism appears convincing, the danger lies in this tangential correctness displacing the broader landscape of its blindness. The bi-valence, here, lies predominantly in the way “foreign affairs” perpetually vex and derange left critique, Reaganite murder in El Salvador balanced out and annulled by some mirroring Soviet atrocity, calls to heed ecological limits and structural poverty diluted by the ethical immediacy of whatever new American intervention we are called upon to express our opinion. Any coherent post-Gramscian Marxism has to concede the theoretical possibility of a congress or president which acts on the basis of some abstract humanitarian principle in direct opposition to economic interest; this is not to suggest that such an intervention can be justified, nor that such operations stand to succeed, only that in the black box of American governmental intentionality the possibility exists for some entirely new ethical axis to appear.

Bérubé, in this sense, is right to suggest that however interpenetrated by interests and money, and however in the pocket of business campaigns and candidates may be, it remains technically possible for radically new cultural standards to appear within the political elite of any given state structure. To deny this is to erase all of the gains made by Althusser’s conception of the relative autonomy of the cultural sphere. Whether or not, however, such a possibility is probable is an entirely different question and one which returns us to the ontological status of the tendency or law in Marxist theory. Tendencies are not composed of deterministic necessity, but represent the probable, almost assured trajectory of a system organized around a given set of structuring coordinates and relations.

This insistence, however, on the possibility of sectoral mutation — revolutions of the part, rather than the whole, as it were — may command a certain grudging assent in the domain of American foreign policy (addled as it is by an almost impenetrable moral complexity and knottedness), but becomes positively disastrous in the context of ecological considerations. For Bérubé, there is simply no necessary contradiction between, for example, the imperatives of infinite economic growth and the fragility of a physically finite ecosystem, just as the rebirth within the United States of social democratic ideals hinges for him on a simple change in the winds of governance. In other words, though Bérubé seems to know neoliberalism exists, he misconstrues it as a linearly reversible change in policy rather than a mutation within the nature of the global totality itself. And in this he wanders into the bad utopianism he associates precisely with Žižek’s injunction to “be realistic, think the impossible.” If we can at

least speculatively admit that there is something adventitious, something structurally errant about the logic of foreign interventions, the possibility of a swerve or deviation, a one-off that arrives at humanitarian ends via inhumanitarian means, we should simultaneously admit the incommensurability, the enormous requirements of the newness that any sustained reconfiguration of a domestic or global economy would imply, as well as the full weight of the tensions exerted on such a possibility by the existing dispensation (cultural habits, financial arrangements, interested resistance). Whether it be in the name of the fragile terrestrial whole or the erased incomes of an American (or global) middle class, any such change would be far less linear than any military deployment (whatever fractal chaos such an intervention implies) and involve a pragmatics, a political *modus operandi* very far from the liberal welfarist coordinates proposed by Bérubé. It is in this light that his impatience with incantations of American duopoly should be placed; though we should heed his call to the virtualities inherent in parliamentarianism, eschewing the notion that states are implacable machines without multiple use values and effects, his persistent invocation of a Democratic Party still available to radical transformation should be responded to with the same incredulity we reserve for new year's resolutions.

Bérubé's call to an internationalism premised on ungrounded yet universal human rights will no doubt fail to convince those for whom a Rousseauian or Marxist critique of law remains the final word on rights-based politics. Certainly, concerns about the verticalism and structural hypocrisy of such systems — regularly adjudicated from above in the interests of a propertied few, often subtended by predictable forms of brutality and force — remain precious critical amendments to a language of rights that frequently extorts consent on the basis of mere proximity to common sense and power. However, those invested in the fortunes of a genuinely emancipatory politics — one oriented towards globally systemic change — should embrace with caveats Bérubé's proscriptions, taking cues from Hegel's insistence on a critique that dialectically sublates rather than frontally eschews existing normative systems. What would it mean for Bérubé to follow to the letter the universalist spirit of the liberalism he avows? If, as he insists, the content of right extends beyond its dominant Lockean mode (emphasizing personal freedom from arbitrary violence and non-consensual government, as well as the sovereignty and inherent fecundity of property) at what point does Bérubé's affirmation of a global social democracy begin to enter into critical tension with his avowed liberalism? What if this much-vaunted "right to protect" were extended to include victims of structural violence and immiseration (rather than reserved for flagrant, exceptional acts of state repression)? The liberal tradition has always limited its concept of domination to the spectacular immediacy of violence and theft. It is, in this sense, a tradition hamstrung by its taste for the obviousness of atrocity, for the lucid/morbid intentionalities of crime, one unable at this point to think or manage the slow-motion horrors of phenomena like ecocide or unemployment. Would Bérubé consent to logically extend his humanitarian

interventionism into this less-literal, less-spectacular domain of violence, this zone where pain, hunger, and death ensue but at a snail's pace and beyond the moral Etch-A-Sketch of dictators and genocide?

*The Left at War* is an important book, if only because it forces into contiguity conversations long sequestered by the standard parochialism of the disciplines. Bérubé's profile, perched at the leftward edge of the center, activated by a broadly "respectable" public visibility, the stylistics of the text (accessible, argumentative, almost journalistic in tone), as well as the wide-sweep of its polemics (pulling in enemies from a genuine range of positions), makes it a book readable across the usual, miserable trenches. It stands to be read by conservatives, centrist liberals, cultural theorists, Marxists, IR scholars, policy makers, as well as many of the Manicheans he routinely dismisses. The text's usefulness, however, is more the by-product of the rarity of its conceit than it is the sustained labor of a conceptual synthesis or bridging. Bérubé's attempt to bring discussions about American foreign policy onto the terrain of cultural studies is genuinely provocative and interesting, but it resembles a mechanical binding of opposites rather than a full-scale intermeshing or testing of their logics and consequences. His book is not, as one sometimes thinks it might be, a critique of the illicit institutionalization of the division separating geopolitics and culture; it does not, for example, disassemble the statist presuppositions of IR theory with the methods of cultural critique, nor does it flush out the latter's own tendency to avoid contact with the organizations, practices, and documents of transnational "foreign policy" with the former's global, institutionalist scope. Rather, it is one book about Chomsky and Iraq followed by another about Stuart Hall and the culture wars. Though it's unclear that we were in need of another survey of Stuart Hall's necessary work — and this is precisely what the latter half of the book is — the value of Bérubé's text lies mostly in its function as material point of contact between ideological lines of sight which rarely meet. It is primarily in the pleasure created by the thought of an improbable future reading of Hall by Fukuyama that the book should be recommended.

