

The Phantom Left

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The American left is a phantom. It is conjured up by the right wing to tag Barack Obama as a socialist and used by the liberal class to justify its complacency and lethargy. It diverts attention from corporate power. It perpetuates the myth of a democratic system that is influenced by the votes of citizens, political platforms and the work of legislators. It keeps the world neatly divided into a left and a right. The phantom left functions as a convenient scapegoat. The right wing blames it for moral degeneration and fiscal chaos. The liberal class uses it to call for “moderation.” And while we waste our time talking nonsense, the engines of corporate power—masked, ruthless and unexamined—happily devour the state.

The loss of a radical left in American politics has been catastrophic. The left once harbored militant anarchist and communist labor unions, an independent, alternative press, social movements and politicians not tethered to corporate benefactors. But its disappearance, the result of long witch hunts for communists, post-industrialization and the silencing of those who did not sign on for the utopian vision of globalization, means that there is no counterforce to halt our slide into corporate neofeudalism. This harsh reality, however, is not palatable. So the corporations that control mass communications conjure up the phantom of a left. They blame the phantom for our debacle. And they get us to speak in absurdities.

The phantom left took a central role on the mall this weekend in Washington. It had performed admirably for Glenn Beck, who used it in his own rally as a lightning rod to instill anger and fear. And the phantom left proved equally useful for the comics Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, who spoke to the crowd wearing red-white-and-blue costumes. The two comics evoked the phantom left, as the liberal class always does, in defense of moderation, which might better be described as apathy. If the right wing is crazy and if the left wing is crazy, the argument goes, then we moderates will be reasonable. We will be nice. Exxon and Goldman Sachs, along with predatory banks and the arms industry, may be ripping the guts out of the country, our rights—including habeas corpus—may have been revoked, but don’t get mad. Don’t be shrill. Don’t be like the crazies on the left.

“Why would you work with Marxists actively subverting our Constitution or racists and homophobes who see no one’s humanity but their own?” Stewart asked. “We hear every damn day about how fragile our country is—on the brink of catastrophe—torn by polarizing hate, and how it’s a shame that we can’t work together to get things done. But the truth is we do. We work together to get things done every damn day. The only place we don’t is here [in Washington] or on cable TV.”

The rally delivered a political message devoid of reality or content. The corruption of electoral politics by corporate funds and lobbyists, the naive belief that we can somehow vote ourselves back to democracy, was ignored for emotional catharsis. The right hates. The

liberals laugh. And the country is taken hostage.

The Rally to Restore Sanity, held in Washington's National Mall, was yet another sad footnote to the death of the liberal class. It was as innocuous as a Boy Scout jamboree. It ridiculed followers of the tea party without acknowledging that the pain and suffering expressed by many who support the movement are not only real but legitimate. It made fun of the buffoons who are rising up out of moral swamps to take over the Republican Party without accepting that their supporters were sold out by a liberal class, and especially a Democratic Party, which turned its back on the working class for corporate money.

Fox News' Beck and his allies on the far right can use hatred as a mobilizing force because there are tens of millions of Americans who have very good reason to hate. They have been betrayed by the elite who run the corporate state, by the two main political parties and by the liberal apologists, including those given public platforms on television, who keep counseling moderation as jobs disappear, wages drop and unemployment insurance runs out. As long as the liberal class speaks in the dead voice of moderation it will continue to fuel the right-wing backlash. Only when it appropriates this rage as its own, only when it stands up to established systems of power, including the Democratic Party, will we have any hope of holding off the lunatic fringe of the Republican Party.

Wall Street's looting of the Treasury, the curtailing of our civil liberties, the millions of fraudulent foreclosures, the long-term unemployment, the bankruptcies from medical bills, the endless wars in the Middle East and the amassing of trillions in debt that can never be repaid are pushing us toward a Hobbesian world of internal collapse. Being nice and moderate will not help. These are corporate forces that are intent on reconfiguring the United States into a system of neofeudalism. These corporate forces will not be halted by funny signs, comics dressed up like Captain America or nice words.

The liberal class wants to inhabit a political center to remain morally and politically disengaged. As long as there is a phantom left, one that is as ridiculous and stunted as the right wing, the liberal class can remain uncommitted. If the liberal class concedes that power has been wrested from us it will be forced, if it wants to act, to build movements outside the political system. This would require the liberal class to demand acts of resistance, including civil disobedience, to attempt to salvage what is left of our anemic democratic state. But this type of political activity, as costly as it is difficult, is too unpalatable to a bankrupt liberal establishment that has sold its soul to corporate interests. And so the phantom left will be with us for a long time.

Politics in America has become spectacle. It is another form of show business. The crowd in Washington, well trained by television, was conditioned to play its role before the cameras. The signs —“The Rant is Too Damn High,” “Real Patriots Can Handle a Difference of Opinion” or “I Masturbate and I Vote”—reflected the hollowness of current political discourse and television's perverse epistemology. The rally spoke exclusively in the impoverished iconography and language of television. It was filled with meaningless political pieties, music and jokes. It was like any television variety program. Personalities were being sold, not political platforms. And this is what the society of spectacle is about.

The modern spectacle, as the theorist Guy Debord pointed out, is a potent tool for pacification and depoliticization. It is a “permanent opium war” which stupefies its viewers and disconnects them from the forces that control their lives. The spectacle diverts anger toward phantoms and away from the perpetrators of exploitation and injustice. It

manufactures feelings of euphoria. It allows participants to confuse the spectacle itself with political action.

The celebrities from Comedy Central and the trash talk show hosts on Fox are in the same business. They are entertainers. They provide the empty, emotionally laden material that propels endless chatter back and forth on supposed left- and right-wing television programs. It is a national Punch and Judy show. But don't be fooled. It is not politics. It is entertainment. It is spectacle. All national debate on the airwaves is driven by the same empty gossip, the same absurd trivia, the same celebrity meltdowns and the same ridiculous posturing. It is presented with a different spin. But none of it is about ideas or truth. None of it is about being informed. It caters to emotions. It makes us confuse how we are made to feel with knowledge. And in the end, for those who serve up this drivel, the game is about money in the form of ratings and advertising. Beck, Colbert and Stewart all serve the same masters. And it is not us.

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