

EDITORIAL

THE POLITICS OF GOOD AND EVIL

In several articles of this volume of Redescriptions the sovereignty of the moral order and the politics of good against evil are contrasted with the truly political. The politically potent concepts of “good”, “right”, “bad” “wrong” and “evil” function seemingly unpolitically, and yet their power can never be underestimated. The articles in this volume show that reading politically various textual events, in which the uncontested nature of the good moral order serves as a precondition, reveals the multifunctional role of the concepts involved.

In politics “good”, “evil”, “right”, and “wrong” unavoidably also have a theological dimension. Intertwined there is a conceptual connection to the given Law that supposedly grounds the community in monotheistic contexts. Even in lay politics, in which the appeal to religion is not overt, the theological overtones resonate through the moral conceptual discourse. In hegemonically Christian cultures, quite often, the hidden appeal to a higher norm through “good” and “right” strengthens the uncontested facade of a political appeal. In a multicultural world, and in the multicultural Europe, this creates a truly political situation.

In her article Chantal Mouffe touches upon the political consequences of the discourse of the “human good” by critically examining several recent proposals towards global democracy. These proposals are often offered in the name of universal moral justice. As virtuous as such proposals evidently may seem, Mouffe is right in exercising critical insight into and pointing out the profoundly anti-political nature of such endeavours. The idea of a globe governed by truly human good and human rights bypasses the decisive differences and antagonisms in conceptions of what good consists of.

Instead of a global order based on human rights Mouffe advocates a pluriverse, which recognizes the existence of several moral orders as well as relations of hegemony and conflict among them. As she poignantly observes there is a danger of a total hegemony in an order in which one power takes over the position of the decision maker over the criteria of what is “human” right and good. This is all too evident in the current situation of a unipolar world in which the United States willingly acts as the possessor of the knowledge of what is good and what is, indeed, Evil.

It is exactly this American “evil” that Jodi Dean examines, as well the very political nature of it. She notes that in American history there is no single or constant discourse of religion, or the use of “evil”, but religious language inhabits the political register in multiple, changing, and inconsistent ways. In the speeches of the presidents of the United States, which constitute the primary focus of her investigation, she is able to show that “evil” has been used for various purposes. Dean’s analysis reveals, among other things, that religious controversy and disagreement are far more prevalent in U.S. history and politics than anything resembling a unified Christian doctrine.

Dean notes that the word “evil” has long been present in the presidential addresses, and it has been in various uses. The shift of “evil” from a statement about the object to a sign of a subject, an ontological evil, is a particularly interesting one, and only occurs fairly late in this history. Before that, for example during the Depression, and for Roosevelt and Truman, evil was first and foremost poverty. In the Cold War rhetoric, in Eisenhower’s speech, for example, “evil” connects to the opposition of freedom and slavery. J.F. Kennedy, L.B. Johnson, and G.Ford all cannot avoid using the word, but it is Reagan whose rhetoric not only connects “evil” to myriad issues, but also ontologizes it, providing a forerunner for the “Evil” we encounter today in George Bush’s presidential addresses.

Dean exercises a political reading of religious language, which never signifies in a stable manner. The moments during which religion itself, or arguments based on religiously significant issues, become the point of controversy, are never clearly distinct from those, in which a political reading of religious language rather manifests culturally sedimented layers, which have been mobilized politically.

Overt argumentation in politics in terms of religious values is, clearly, far more prevalent in the United States than in Europe. The interventions of religion in civil life, and the percentages of citizens that go to church, are counted in enormous numbers in the United

States when viewed from a Northern European perspective. Argumentation in terms of ontologized “Evil” remains foreign to Nordic countries, as well as religious overtones when such issues as abortion or, even more generally, gender hierarchy and sexual order are discussed. At least this is what is generally considered to be the case.

However, a closer look at Protestant Northern Europe shows another face. Deep religious undercurrents in the seemingly lay politics manifest at certain points of rupture. Many of us remember, for example, that when the law of same-sex marriage was first debated in Finland in 1996, the normally completely lay discussion suddenly changed its tone and references to the Bible were regularly heard in the general debate. Some political discussions seem to be more prone to call for explicit religious overtones than others, but it may be a misconception altogether to believe in the lay nature of the Protestant North. Religious language is an option for politicking in these countries as well.

Pasi Ihalainen’s article in this volume takes up a recent occasion in Finnish parliamentary politics, in which the role of religion understood as the foundation of the political community became explicit in the discourse. He provides a useful introduction to understanding the hidden, though mighty role of the Protestant church in defining the political community in Sweden and Finland through the centuries. According to him the concepts of “Swedish” and “Christian” were intimately linked to each other, as were national and religious identities, from early on in the Swedish Empire, and he points out that no decisive break from the Lutheran tradition has occurred in Finland.

On the basis of an analysis of parliamentary discussion on the bill on the Prayer Day declaration in 2003 he concedes that there is currently a considerable minority of Finnish parliamentary politicians who are strongly committed to the inherited Lutheran identity of the nation. Many among this minority find it inconceivable to distinguish between Finnishness and Lutheran confessional identity. Even the majority, when redefining the Finnish institutional identity in modest ways, pays lip-service to the old church-built national identity.

The debate on the bill in Parliament gave rise to an unusually intense controversy over the interpretation of the constitutional role of the President, traditional values, the relationship between church and state, freedom of religion, and toleration. According to Ihalainen the debate also concerned the institutional national identity of the Finnish state, and it illustrates that institutional Lutheran national

identity has a strong hold in Finland, particularly when compared to other countries with a Protestant public church, such as Britain, the Netherlands or Sweden.

Ihalainen's point in the article is to demonstrate how well religion-based interpretations of a political community can be preserved over centuries within a homogenous political culture and how difficult it can be to redefine them within a far more secularized and increasingly multicultural society. He is right there, and points to potentially similar problems in terms of national democratic debates as Mouffe does within the framework of global democracy.

If politics is, as Chantal Mouffe and many other significant thinkers consider it to be, about disagreement which is open ended and with no horizon of the Right answer at the end, then there hardly is anything as paradigmatically unpolitical as trying to base political community on a pre-given Law and to make political judgements in terms of absolute religious or moral Law. As, paradoxically, those religion based concepts - "good", "bad", "right", "wrong" - which carry their seemingly absolute meanings, are nevertheless a significant element in political discussion, it remains ever more intriguing and crucial a task to distinguish the various politics that are performed through their use in particular cases.

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