

Chapter 1

The Spirit of Liberalism: What is Liberalism? What is the Left?

Posted on October 31, 2016 by Outis Philalithopoulos

The following series is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters in the story to people in real life is entirely intentional, and their dialogue is typically cut, with only insignificant modifications, from books, articles, or interviews. When substantive remarks derive from a source not mentioned explicitly in the text, the source is described at the end of the episode in which they appear.

By Outis Philalithopoulos, who met an untimely end five years ago, and now “wears the chains he forged in life” as an economist.

I had imagined that this new existence would be like working for the NSA, with official clearance to watch over my loved ones and enemies. But I continue to see through a glass darkly – mostly only confused impressions, and recently a sense of impending doom lying heavily upon the United States. Once in a while, though, clearer images slip through the veil, like letters washing up on the woeful banks of the Acheron. So it was that I found myself perusing a February article by philosopher John Holbo in the influential blog Crooked Timber. He began with a question that got my attention:

What is liberalism? What is conservatism?

Then he noted:

If you are interested in getting answers to these questions, you (probably) want the answers to do two things for you:

1) Give you the best possible version of this thing. What is the best liberalism/conservatism could be, as political philosophy? [...]

2) Give you insight into what’s going on in real politics. What constructions of liberalism/conservatism, as philosophies, give me the best handle on what’s going on in the US election cycle, say?

Holbo pointed out that #1 and #2 are not the same thing, and trying to do both at once creates confusion. For example:

Suppose you think the best, most defensible philosophical conservatism would be G.A. Cohen’s conservatism.

Intellectually, that might be rather fine, yet useless for getting a grip on real U.S. politics. You can’t make sense of the Republican candidate line-up by measuring relative degrees of departure

from what [Cohen] thinks conservatism ought to be.

True, I thought to myself, conservatives don't measure up to their ideals. Fortunately, describing people like me – liberals, progressives, the Left, whatever you want to call us – is easier. Corey Robin gave a straightforward definition in his 2011 *The Reactionary Mind*,

Since the modern era began, men and women in subordinate positions have marched against their superiors in the state, church, workplace, and other hierarchical institutions. They have gathered under different banners – the labor movement, feminism, abolition, socialism – and shouted different slogans: freedom, equality, rights, democracy, revolution.

Then I had a disturbing thought. Isn't Robin's definition a textbook example of #1? It is "the best, most defensible" idea of what liberalism could be: a patchwork of causes throughout history that in retrospect I want to identify with, while leaving on the cutting floor everything else that has called itself "Left."

What would happen if someone were to define us progressives by #2? By our actions and our actual effects upon the world, and not by our language or our ideals? Was that where Holbo was going? I braced myself as I continued to read the article.

But I reached the end, and after flipping through the 207 comments by what seemed to be mostly university faculty, I relaxed. While considerable effort had gone into attempts to define the unattractive, non-ideal reality of conservatism, the only new definition of liberalism offered was:

To me being left wing means not killing (lots of brown) people, being critical of power and authority and trying not to be a (selfish) dick.

Sounded good to me. Clearly most of these well-educated people agreed that Robin's definition was basically correct, with real life only slightly messier than the ideal. Maybe for liberalism, #1 and #2 are more or less the same thing.

Then again, I thought with a twinge of unease, they are mostly liberals like me. Maybe I should seek what might be painful truths.

I had an idea about where to start looking, and I flitted up a shadowy hill, where there huddled a bespectacled spirit with hunched shoulders.

"Allan," I began.

Allan Bloom squinted at me. "Do I have the pleasure of meeting a fellow elitist?"

"What?" I asked, startled. "No, I was hoping you could tell me why liberalism is evil."

He chuckled.

“Don’t hold back,” I implored him. “I can handle the truth.”

“A corrosive ideology has taken over the American mind,” he began. “By now, almost everyone, especially in the universities, believes that truth is relative. They treat this relativity as a moral postulate, as the condition of a free society. To them, the real danger is people who think they are right, and the solution is not to correct mistakes and really become right – it is not to think you are right at all. The Left of today does not believe in itself or in what it does.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, bowing, and went to ponder his words.

It was exciting to think of myself in Bloom’s terms. Was I one molecule of a transhistorical acid that was eating away at all truth in the world? I thought about myself and my Left-oriented friends. Did we believe that sexual repression, the Iraq War, overt and subtle racism, anti-immigrant bias, and gender stereotyping were absolutely wrong? Yes.

Did we believe in ourselves? Of course.

With relief but also a hint of disappointment, I concluded that even the brilliant Bloom had not succeeded in painting a convincing portrait of what, if anything, was evil about liberalism. Back to Robin’s definition, I thought to myself, and there things would have ended if not for...

“OUTIS!” bellowed a voice. I whirled around.

“Polyphemus,” I said uncomfortably. “I thought we had agreed that I had nothing to do with that burning stake...”

“NO!” interrupted the Cyclops. “I come here for YOU, not the accursed son of Laertes. I have a QUESTION!”

“Yes?” I asked.

“You have thought a little about your identity, o No-Name, and what it means to be a liberal. But what if being a liberal means neither being the leaven of the world, nor yet being a dark agent of the Apocalypse?”

“What do you mean?” I said quickly.

“What if 21st century liberal culture is simply one society that happens to be influential in this time and place? A culture in which idealism and grandeur are mixed with wretchedness and compromises and contradiction? One that does not stand astride history but has been produced by history and has not escaped it? What if, in a word, it is a culture like other cultures?”

“Ridiculous!” I burst out. “You’re saying there’s no difference between us and the ancient Greeks, who had slavery? Or the 19th century British Empire, whose missionaries laid waste to India? Or the Eskimos, who had rigidly defined sex roles that oppressed women?”

“Console yourself with these facile mantras,” sneered Polyphemus. “You are the only one of us to speak of sameness.”

“Of course I understand that liberal culture of today has a history,” I muttered. “Of course I don’t think we are some sort of elect, better than all other cultures that have other lived, except of course...”

I stopped. Polyphemus laughed.

“You are a droll one, doughty Outis,” he remarked. “If Bloom had made a more persuasive case that progressivism were a monstrous contagion destroying all that is good, you could have accepted it. What you cannot accept is that it might be human.”

“I can accept anything!” I snapped.

“Really?” The Cyclops looked at me skeptically. I nodded.

“Very well,” Polyphemus. “If you truly wish it, a path will be provided that you can tread, seeking whatever truth you may. You will be haunted tonight by three spirits.”

* * *

In the next episode, Outis meets a Spirit whom he fails to recognize, and travels back into the past of liberalism.

Sources: The second Crooked Timber definition is from comment 71 to the Holbo article linked above. Allan Bloom’s long paragraph is made up of sentences from *The Closing of the American Mind*.

Chapter 2

Liberalism Past: Not Being an Idiot

Posted on November 1, 2016 by Outis Philalithopoulos

By Outis Philalithopoulos, who met an untimely end five years ago, and now “wears the chains he forged in life” as an economist.

In our story so far, a cyclops challenged Outis to discover possibly inconvenient truths about liberalism, and proposed the help of three Spirits.

Through the gloom, there sounded the deep, hollow, melancholy note of a bell.

I turned, and there stood a strange figure. It seemed rather aged, and yet the face, and the smooth, hairless head, had not a wrinkle in it. The arms were very long and muscular, and the feet were bare.

“Are you the Spirit, sir, whose coming was foretold to me?” I asked.

“I am!”

He spoke with a French accent, in a voice that was even and clear.

“Who and what are you?” I demanded.

“I am the Ghost of Liberalism Past. My name is Michel Foucault.”

“Oh,” I said. “Should I know that name?”

“What?” the Spirit exclaimed, with a flash of pride. Then he sighed.

“I suppose,” he said, “it is better if my phantom no longer casts its shadow upon the world, as if I were some sort of great Astrologer surveying an atemporal sky, telling people what is good and what is not.”

“But you were famous?” I asked, feeling bad that I had hurt his feelings.

“Oh, sure,” he said with a trace of self-mockery. “Noam Chomsky once said that he had ‘never met anyone who was so totally amoral.’ I tried to teach people about madness, medicine, and sexuality, but most wrote me off as this radical anarchist with an absolute hatred of power.”

“And that wasn’t true?”

“No!” he exclaimed. “Power is not always repressive.”

I struggled to understand. “By power, do you mean government? Or one social group oppressing another?”

“These are only a few particular instances of power,” Foucault explained. “Power is anything that tends to render immobile and untouchable those things that are offered to us as real, as true, as good.”

“That sounds kind of... bad,” I replied.

“Listen, listen,” Foucault replied. “How difficult it is! I’m not a prophet. I’m not going to tell people, “This is good for you, this is bad for you!” I try to analyze a real situation in its various complexities, with the goal of allowing refusal, and curiosity, and innovation. Is it clearer, now?”

I shook my head. “I find your world confusing. It’s like there are no points of orientation...”

Foucault gazed at me mildly. “Perhaps, in time...” he murmured. Then he clasped me by the arm. “Rise! And walk with me!”

I took a step – and found myself outside a snowy yard covered in red brick.

“What?” I stammered. “Here is where I wrote my thesis...”

“You remember it, then?” inquired the Spirit.

“Remember it?” I cried. “I could walk this campus blindfolded.”

“Let us go in, then.”

We walked through the doors of the Kennedy School of Government, into the midst of a boisterous crowd of students. Seconds later, they fell silent, and the president of the Young Democrats announced the speaker. It was Al Franken, presenting his book *Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot*.

I hadn’t heard Franken’s name in a while, but something tugged at my memory. I looked questioningly at Foucault.

“1996,” was his only response, as laughter echoed from the audience. Franken had begun speaking.

I soon found myself nodding along with Franken’s words. Franken pointed out that Limbaugh had “tapped into the resentments of the ‘angry white male,’” mentioning his “studio audience of rabid – but extraordinarily straight-laced – right-wing yahoos.” He went on to talk about some of the crazy religious people he had met while touring the country.

“By now, you may be thinking I’m showing an anti-Christian bias,” Franken suggested, grinning.

“Nonsense! Need I remind you that I married a Roman Catholic, whom I met in college, despoiled and then convinced to renounce the Pope?”

The crowd roared with laughter. I joined them, although something about that word “despoiled” rubbed me the wrong way. Franken added that Limbaugh believes feminists think all heterosexual sex is rape.

“The thing is,” Franken said, “I know a lot of women, almost all of whom consider themselves feminists, and I know of only one who actually holds this belief. And we’ve been married nearly twenty years.”

As the room rocked with laughter, my jaw dropped. Making light of the victims of marital rape? What was Franken’s problem?

Franken said that at one point, when Limbaugh had not been famous, he had been so poor that his wife had made him go file for unemployment. Franken addressed Limbaugh directly.

“I swear, you must be the biggest pussy on God’s green Earth. My God, you are a sad, sad creature, aren’t you? Sort of a she-male?”

I was sure Franken was right and Limbaugh was a horrible person, but how could he not see how problematic his statements were? Reinforcing gender normativity? Negative references to female anatomy? Why wasn’t anyone in the audience besides me concerned?

Most likely people were concerned, but felt too marginalized to say anything.

Franken had meanwhile moved on to the big picture. What was the fundamental issue with guys like Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich and Pat Robertson?

“You know what I dislike most about these guys? They’re always so certain. They’re always 100 percent sure of what they’re saying.” He paused for a split second. “This is why I like being a Democrat. When we see a complicated, intractable problem, we have the only really genuine, authentic human reaction you can have: we’re confused.”

I stared at Foucault. When Allan Bloom had claimed that liberals are terrified of people who think they are right, I had assumed he was describing a colony on Neptune. Maybe he was instead talking about people like Franken and Foucault. Foucault smiled back at me.

Franken started to discuss various controversial issues.

President Clinton’s crime bill paid for a lot of new prisons, and that’s good.

Riiight.

I have no problem frying a murderer. In some cases I'd even waive the cruel-and-unusual punishment. That is, as long as we know we have the right guy.

Right. What kind of progressive/liberal was this guy, anyway? Wait, what was that about a "national Ponzi scheme currently scheduled to implode in a spectacular fiscal nightmare"?

Pete Peterson, a co-founder of the Concord Coalition, did hit a home run with a very sobering speech about what will happen if we don't reform social security.

Okaaay.

Franken talked about watching Pat Buchanan speak to members of the Reform Party. He counted six standing ovations, "although it's hard to count when you're cowering under your seat." The biggest ovations had come on the crowd's "red meat issues," such as NAFTA and the 1995 Mexican bank bailout, on which Buchanan had said:

Politicians of both parties sold us out in Washington, D.C. They took Citibank and Chase Manhattan and J.P. Morgan and Goldman Sachs off the hook, and they put us on. Well, [...] when I get to the White House, NAFTA will be canceled!

To me, the speech sounded like something Matt Taibbi would say. Why did it frighten Franken so much?

An uncomfortable subject that's not discussed enough is black on black crime. Jesse Jackson had the courage to talk about it in terms that most people can identify with. He said it pains him that when he's walking down the street at night and hears footsteps, he's relieved if it's a white man and not a black man. I know exactly what he means. I was leaving NBC late one night and heard some footsteps. When I turned around, I saw it was Jesse Jackson, and it scared the living daylights out of me!

The audience thought this was hysterical. Why hadn't the real progressives organized to deplatform this guy?

Franken returned to the topic of anti-establishment, anti-free trade Americans in his final windup.

Some of them were crackpots, sure. But I thought about Hank from Michigan, a retired autoworker who was worried about jobs moving overseas. I thought about Louise from Washington state, who was scared for her children because wages for non-college graduates have fallen 20 percent in the last twenty years.

I thought about how our political system appeals to the worst, not the best, in us. And I thought about this book.

Maybe, I thought, I'm on the wrong track. Maybe I'm sowing the very seeds of distrust that I so decry. Perhaps, I thought, I should throw away the 200-plus pages of cheap, tawdry, mean-spirited (yet accurate) bile, and start over on a book whose humor heals rather than wounds.

Then, as we flew over Manhattan, it occurred to me that my book was due in a week. Then we flew over my daughter's private school. And then my son's orthodontist. Followed by the bank that holds the mortgage on my apartment.

And as the plane banked its wings, a stream of light pierced the window, bathing my face in the orange glow of the sun setting over the American continent. And I thought to myself, "You know, Rush Limbaugh is a big fat idiot."

"He sells out his principles to maintain his cushy lifestyle and then brags about it?" I wondered incredulously, as laughter and applause reverberated around me. "Allez, viens," Foucault said, beckoning.

A long line of students waited to talk with Franken, who beamed and autographed copies of his book. A rather earnest-looking young man and woman were walking towards us.

"Did you like it, Outis?" she asked with an accent a bit like Foucault's.

"It was hilarious," the young man said. "But Corinne, did you..."

"Yes, it was good," she said. "Rush Limbaugh really is a negative person and it's scary that there are so many insane people in your country. But..."

"Oh, yes," said the young Outis. "The talk over in your department..."

"I know you're not thrilled about it," Corinne began.

Outis said, "The way they talk..."

Corinne completed the thought. "It can be hard to understand. And honestly..." and her voice lowered, as if she were afraid of being overheard, "a lot of postmodernist scholars are just BS artists who spout the jargon to get good jobs."

The young Outis nodded. Corinne continued with some passion. "But sometimes people just use that as an excuse not to listen to the important things they say. And this speaker's different."

"I suppose she's not very well known...?"

Corinne eyes danced. "Well, you are an economist..."

“But that doesn’t mean I’m a complete illiterate,” Outis shot back. “Come on, I’m familiar with a lot of postmodernists – Derrida, Stanley Fish, Judith Butler, Edward Said...”

“But you’ve never heard of her,” Corinne finished. “Well, maybe she isn’t as chic as some of the others, but she’s very smart – and clearer than most of them.”

“Sure,” Outis said uncertainly.

Corinne frowned.

Outis took on what he doubtless assumed was a cunning expression. “I’d be more excited to go if afterward we slip out for a walk down the Charles.”

She smiled cunningly back at him.

I looked desperately at Foucault. “Spirit,” I cried. “Show me no more!”

* * *

In the next episode, Outis becomes more certain that postmodernist liberalism was not a myth after all.

Sources: For Foucault, see this interview. At one point, the interviewer remarks, “I have to admit, I find myself a bit lost, without points of orientation, in your world [...]” All Franken statements are verbatim quotes from Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot (1996).

Chapter 3

Liberalism Past: the Secret Murder of Postmodernism Posted on November 2, 2016 by Outis Philalithopoulos

By Outis Philalithopoulos, who met an untimely end five years ago, and now “wears the chains he forged in life” as an economist.

In the previous episode of this series, the ghost Outis was guided by the Spirit of Liberalism Past to 1996, where a younger Outis had gone to hear a popular liberal speaker. Afterward, his girlfriend Corinne was eager to catch a talk by a postmodern scholar she held in high esteem; eventually, Outis agreed to come along.

The speaker was a critical theory/political science professor named Wendy Brown, and she was presenting themes from her recent book, *States of Injury*.

I tried to keep from glancing over at where Corinne and the young Outis were sitting. But my mind kept wandering, and Brown’s style hardly aided my efforts to stay focused on her lecture.

The first ten minutes of her talk were spent explaining why her book had not been written, the boundaries it would not respect, how not only the first description she gave of her book but also the second were “disingenuous,” with such a cascade of negations that her prefatory remarks alone contained 2 no’s, 2 neither’s, 9 not’s, and 6 nor’s.

To me, it all started to seem hazy, but my ghostly companion must have been enjoying himself. A person listening to Brown might have imagined that human thought was one colossal debate between Marx, Nietzsche, and Foucault, with Max Weber and Jean Baudrillard in supporting roles. Meanwhile, the unappeased menace of Catharine McKinnon lurked on the horizon.

But then, something in what Brown was saying started to sound familiar:

Postmodern power is often characterized as decentered and diffuse even while it incessantly violates, transgresses, and resituates social boundaries; it [...] irrigates through networks rather than consolidating in bosses and kings [...]

We are today very susceptible to simply getting lost [...] insofar as being lost means being without (fixed) means of orientation [...]

Brown was describing a disorienting world without clear standards of truth. But did she mean that the world was naturally like this, as Foucault seemed to believe, or did she see this “postmodern condition” as something the system had inflicted upon everyone, upon Allan Bloom as well as upon Al Franken?

In our efforts to “cope” with our “lost” condition in postmodernity, Brown explained that one strategy was fundamentalism, or “reactionary foundationalism.” Quoting Feher and Heller, *Postmodern Political Condition*:

fundamentalists select one aspect of the dogma, one “text of foundation” with regard to which they declare all attempts at hermeneutics politically subversive.

That did sound like the fundamentalists I’d seen on TV. “What’s hermeneutics?” I whispered to Foucault. “Interpretation,” he whispered back. Brown had more to say about fundamentalism.

Reactionary foundationalism is not limited to the political or intellectual Right, but emerges across the political spectrum from those hostile to what they take to be postmodern political decay and intellectual disarray.

What? Apparently others were startled as well, because she immediately followed up on her point.

When these precepts “without which we cannot survive” issue from the intellectual or political Right, they are easy enough to identify as both reactionary and fundamentalist. It is fairly clear what they oppose and seek to foreclose: *inter alia*, democratic conversation about our collective condition and future. But when they issue from feminists or others on the “Left,” they are more slippery, especially insofar as they are posed in the name of caring about political things, caring about “actual women” or about women’s “actual condition in the world” [...]

So: the Right is trying to stop us from thinking democratically about the future, and the Left cares about real problems and real women – so why is it a problem that we believe that we are right?

I want to suggest that much North Atlantic feminism partakes deeply of [...] resentment and that this constitutes a good deal of our nervousness about moving toward an analysis as thoroughly Nietzschean in its wariness about truth as postfoundational political theory must be.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. How are we swimming in resentment? Doesn’t she mean right wingers? Why should our analysis be thoroughly Nietzschean? Why should it be “wary” about the truth? Why feminists?

What [is it about] identity’s desire for recognition that seem[s] often to breed a politics of recrimination and rancor, of culturally dispersed paralysis and suffering [...]?

I found Brown hard to understand. And the things I did understand, I wasn’t sure I liked.

She closed by saying that the Left should

give up substituting Truth and Morality for politics. Are we willing to engage in struggle rather than recrimination, to develop our faculties rather than revenge our subordination with moral and

epistemological gestures, to fight for a world rather than conduct process on the existing one?

The audience began to applaud, who knows with how much sincerity. I was annoyed, and I knew one person who I was pretty sure had understood the talk better than I had.

“Michel,” I said urgently. He turned to me.

“There are two things I don’t understand. First, Brown criticizes the Left for believing in myths like “truth is always on the side of the damned and excluded,” and “truth is clean of power and always positioned to reproach power,” and advocates instead “living and working without such myths, without insisting that our truths are less partial and more moral than theirs.”

“Yes,” Foucault agreed.

“But isn’t she insisting precisely that her postmodern, Nietzschean ideas about politics and rhetoric are less mythical, more true than those of the less reflective people she criticizes?”

“Ah,” he said. “I understand. And your other question?”

“When she says we need to do all these things, give up on resentment, make our analysis more Nietzschean, stop talking about absolute truth – why should we? Once you and she demonstrate to everyone that morality and truth are inseparable from power, and people merely engage in ‘wars of position’ and ‘amoral contests about the just and good’ – why would anyone bother to use postmodernist rhetoric?”

“Well...” he began.

I cut him off, with some heat. “Why wouldn’t they just continue to talk about morality and truth the way they do now? If all that matters is winning, and morality and truth help one side to win, then according to you, why care if they are myths?”

“Right,” Foucault said, his eyes sparkling. “About those two questions...”

He was not alarmed by my questions in the least, and I feel sure he would have addressed my doubts. But I stopped paying attention to him as Corinne and the young Outis walked toward me. The moment I had been dreading had come.

Corinne’s eyes were shining. “Did you see what she was saying? Wasn’t it brilliant? And she’s so courageous, willing to criticize even Left political movements that she identifies with...”

Outis looked reluctant to disappoint her. “She’s definitely very intelligent... It’s just that...”

Corinne froze. “What?” she said in a suddenly much more subdued voice.

He seemed to be gathering his courage. “It’s just that I don’t see why it has to be so complicated. Why can’t she just say what we ought to do?”

Corinne retorted, “But don’t you see – that’s the problem. Smart people have always been trying to tell people what is true and what to think. It’s a form of power. And she doesn’t want to fall into that trap.”

“Right,” Outis said, “but it feels like she sees the whole world as ringed by traps, so that everything a person could possibly say might somehow be wrong.”

“But Outis,” Corinne said, “lots of things people say really are problematic. Lots of times their wording shows habits of thought that are precisely the ones we can recognize as having underpinned horrible things like colonialism.”

“Does that mean we’re all going to have to talk like her?” Outis muttered.

“What do you mean, like her? What’s so bad about the way she talks?”

“It’s like she believes we’re all under surveillance by a Great and Powerful Monster. And so she has to speak in code so that neither the Monster nor anyone else will be able to prove that she’s opposing it.”

“You’re making it sound completely childish!” Corinne said with indignation.

“Well, maybe it is!” Outis said, his voice rising.

I turned to the Spirit in anguish.

“Leave me!” I cried. “Take me back, haunt me no longer!”

He looked at me with surprising gentleness in his eyes. “There are two shadows more,” he said, “that you must see; and yet, a respite will give you space to consider the points of fixity, of immobilization, in your position, so you can begin to see them as elements in a strategy...”

And with these words, he and everything else vanished, and I found myself alone in the abyssal vale. There were things then that I did not wish to remember, and I forced my mind onto other topics.

“Postmodernism,” I repeated darkly to myself. Even the word sounds pretentious. What does it mean, anyway?

It seemed to be in opposition to “modernism,” which in turn meant how people in the early twentieth century often believed that humanity could work toward absolute truth, and that current Western society represented the culmination of historical progress. For reasons Brown seemed to think were

obvious, modernism was not good, and so it had been replaced by the “postmodernism” that had bestrode the academic world like a colossus. Postmodernist irony, cultural relativism, skepticism about objective truth – in various guises, these could be seen not only in Foucault and Brown, but also in Franken, and echoes of it were present in Bloom’s critique.

So who killed it? And why was its death a secret?

If the most brilliant liberals of the 1990s had been convinced that all attempts to establish absolute truth were fundamentally flawed and problematic, how had we solved the problem and successfully created a set of fixed reference points for orienting ourselves? Had we, paraphrasing Feher and Heller, chosen a dogma and “declared all attempts at interpreting it critically to be subversive”?

* * *

In the next episode, Outis moves closer to the present, and watches as the outlines of modern progressivism become more discernible.

Sources: Wendy Brown’s book is online [here](#).

Chapter 4

Liberalism Past: The Rise of Moral Clarity

Posted on November 3, 2016 by Outis Philalithopoulos

By Outis Philalithopoulos, who met an untimely end five years ago, and now “wears the chains he forged in life” as an economist.

Previous events in this series led the ghost of Outis back to 1996. After meeting the first of three Spirits and being shown a series of sometimes unwelcome visions, Outis found himself alone.

I thought about the people I had seen during my spectral journey. They seemed to think of themselves as liberals, even though they would be out of place among modern progressives. I toyed with an evolutionary explanation. There were things Brown didn't understand about forceful communication, and things Franken didn't understand about a lot of subjects, but maybe the two of them were “primitive progressives,” who hadn't yet developed into real progressives. Maybe if someone had just called them out, they would have understood, and grown.

One thing Franken and Brown had in common is that they both came off as smarter than the people they criticized. To me, being progressive was basically about not being stupid, and so it was unsurprising that primitive progressives had also tried to show that they were intelligent. But to reach that end, Franken and Brown used different strategies.

Franken seemed one of a group of 90s Democrats who saw themselves as having mastered the most defensible positions on each issue. Support of deficit reduction and trade pacts were orthodox positions of mainstream economics, and so for these liberals, there wasn't any political problem here – you just needed to say the correct answer as quickly as possible. For Brown, on the other hand, her self-confidence was tied more closely to her academic career, and to her ability to see around and behind “narratives” that other people might believe in.

What else brought the “whipsmart” Democrats and the academic postmodernists together? Not much, as far as I could tell, except that they both disliked sounding too definite. In other words, they also had in common a sort of “postmodern attitude.”

I wondered if my generalizations about primitive progressives held more broadly. What else could I remember about liberals of the time? There was a lot said about self-esteem. One time in high school something bad happened and a teacher wanted us to hold hands, and talk and feel together – or was that a movie? Regardless, many people did seem to prize being non-judgmental.

Wendy Brown had worried about whether some liberals genuinely believed in postmodernism, especially those trying to represent particular demographic groups. Even those writers, according to Brown, typically claimed to believe that culture was socially constructed, but they also wanted to privilege the perspectives of people who had suffered more, and treat their suffering as objectively

real. Brown didn't explain why this was supposed to be a problem, and clearly later progressives had realized that Brown was wrong to be so concerned.

If primitive progressives had been a "rainbow coalition" of disparate groups who didn't have much in common besides smartness and a vague commitment to postmodernism, how were they able to work together at all? How had we managed to banish the specter of postmodernism, and build an unprecedented degree of cultural cohesion and confidence?

A finger touched my shoulder. Michel had returned.

"I know you are weary of my presence," he began sympathetically, "and so I will speed you to the last clues I can provide."

"But can we instead..." I began. Before I could finish my sentence, the horizon blurred and I found ourselves in a large lecture hall, surrounded by people who seemed very important, and somber. At the podium was a stern man in suit and tie. His voice rang through the hall:

Something else died on Tuesday, in addition to thousands of innocent people. It was the doctrine of moral equivalency — the idea that people everywhere are just like us, or can be made so by meeting their demands.

These humanistic, "can't we all get along," "profiling potential terrorists is racism," "we're all God's children," Kumbaya, "all we're saying is give peace a chance" moral equivalency equivocators will soon be back. They'll try to wear down our resolve.

They should be ignored. Evil exists. It must be opposed. If this is war, let's start acting like it and tell America's enemies that if they are so intent on seeing their God, we'll help them get there. As for us, we intend to die of natural causes.

The audience cheered. "I guess this is 9/11?" I said to Foucault. "Two days later," he concurred.

"And this guy is some sort of rightwinger?" He nodded. "Syndicated columnist Cal Thomas."

A young, smartly dressed woman was speaking to her neighbor. "Guess what's on the bestseller list right now?"

Her somewhat older neighbor shook her head.

"Quarterlife Crisis – a book written by two twentysomethings bemoaning the," and here her voice became brutally sarcastic, 'landmine period in our adult development during the transition from college graduation into the real world.'"

"The poor dears," said the neighbor.

“Many of them feel,” and here her voice took the same tone as it had before, “helpless, panicked, indecisive, and apprehensive. You know what this generation needs? A real crisis. And now... we have one. Our generational wake-up call. Our bloody moment of shattered self-complacency.”

“Michel, Michel,” I said, annoyed. “I get it. The Right was fixated on the idea that progressives lacked moral clarity. Whatever truth there was in that claim, it’s clearly false now. What I’d really like to know is...”

But Foucault shook his head and put a finger to his lips. Again, the scene shifted.

We were in another room, with another speaker and another audience. This venue, though, was rather small, and while some attendants looked rather professional, others were dressed informally. Foucault whispered to me, “2007.”

The audience listened intently to the speaker. She exuded an infectious, intimate candor as she talked about Internet activism.

You know what? Sometimes we’re very, very rude. I go right into the face of mainstream media writers’ faces and call them out. I’m right in there with the worst of them, foul-mouthed, vituperative, and personal. There’s a reason for that: it’s the only way to get their attention!

We have a beef – and I maintain it’s legitimate and important. For years we’ve watched the mainstream media aid and abet the right wing to the point at which they behaved like a bunch of puerile cheerleaders for an absurd impeachment and stolen election. Iraq was the frosting on the cake. There’s no amount of polite discourse that’s going to shake up that comfortable relationship. And after Iraq, it’s become downright dangerous.

Finally, a real progressive, I thought to myself. As she ended her speech, two men in expensive suits, with open collars, faced each other.

“She’s right, you know, and it’s not just the media,” one remarked.

“No shit,” the other seconded. “Say what you want about the Republicans, they know how to win. All we know how to do is lose.”

The first shook his head in disgust. “The whole Democratic Party has become a bunch of,” and he lowered his voice, “pussies.”

I looked angrily at Foucault. He put a sympathetic hand on my shoulder.

The second man also shook his head. “We need to grow some balls.” He paused, then went on. “The thing is, I know this sounds optimistic after the last couple decades, but I actually think some people are starting to get it.”

“It’s true,” the first acknowledged. “Take Rahm Emanuel. Someone tries to swift boat him, he swift boats them back. Some people don’t like him ‘cause he’s abrasive and says fuck a lot, but if you ask me, we need more people where you kinda feel like, this guy isn’t intimidated by Karl Rove.”

“Yeah, Rahm’s cool,” the second said. “We just need to put ourselves out there more. Stop letting the Republicans paint us as weak. Stop accepting that they’re just going to get all the good donors.”

“Exactly,” the first said with some passion. “And it’s not like this means compromising our principles.”

“Of course not,” snorted the second. “I mean, we have our convictions. We just need to be smarter.”

“Michel,” I said with some heat. “if the point is supposed to be that in our efforts to stand up to the right wing, we became more like them, I have to say, I find the idea unpersuasive and offensive.”

“Well...,” he began. I motioned him to silence.

“I think it’s really not that complicated. With the rise of the Internet, it became easier for good ideas to circulate and harder for bad ideas to escape criticism. So of course we were able to stick up for the truth more vigorously, and be less wishy-washy than before. Sort of like how the printing press made the Reformation possible...”

“I see!” he exclaimed, brightening. “You cast yourself as one of the early Protestants, upholding a more rigorous standard of morality against the worldly and corrupt Catholics who preceded you. The Internet punishes tentativeness, just as the printing press made it so Erasmus’ skepticism could be pilloried by Luther in their debate on free will.”

“Uh...” I said, a little disoriented by his tendency to show off his erudition.

“But perhaps,” he mused, “if the earlier liberals are the medieval Catholic church, then you are the Counter-Reformation, strengthening the discipline of the Catholic faithful by imposing meticulous rules of self-examination and intensifying the obligation of confession?”

That sounded less flattering.

Michel frowned and took a step back. Some sort of invisible force was tugging on the back of his shirt. He turned to me and sighed. “Désolé, but my time has grown very short.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but Foucault, and the room from 2007, disappeared. In their place stood a bunny, looking me straight in the eye.

* * *

In the next episode, Outis journeys into a popular and widely praised artistic representation of modern liberal culture.

Sources: Cal Thomas' column from September 13, 2001 can be read [here](#). The young woman attending his talk is based on Michelle Malkin, see her September 12 column. The Internet activist is based on Heather Digby Parton's recollections of Netroots, with past tense changed to present. Foucault's comments on the Counter-Reformation are loosely paraphrased from p. 19 of *Discipline and Punish*. His comments on the Reformation are not based on anything concrete in his writings, and hopefully he would not disagree too strongly with them.

Chapter 5

Liberalism Present: Disney's Utopia **Posted on November 4, 2016 by Outis Philalithopoulos**

At the beginning of this series, Outis' ghost embarked on a quest to explore possibly uncomfortable ideas about his identity as a progressive. In the previous episode, the Spirit of Liberalism Past abruptly vanished, and Outis found himself face to face with someone else.

“What a cute bunny,” I thought to myself. “But why is she wearing a police uniform?” She stared at me with her big blue eyes and confidently held out her paw.

Bemused, I took it. She softly shook my hand. “Hopps, Judy Hopps,” she announced.

“Outis Philalithopoulos,” I responded slowly. “And you are?”

“I am the Spirit of Liberalism Present!”

“I see,” I replied.

“Have you seen my movie?”

“I'm afraid I'm dead,” I confessed.

“So?” she responded undeterred.

“So I haven't seen it.”

Her face fell. “Oh,” she said.

Then she brightened again. “You just have to see it. The New York Times said it was ‘irresistible.’ And ‘delightful.’ And ‘thought-provoking.’ Not to mention ‘full of savvy jokes.’ Rolling Stone said that it might be ‘the most subversive movie of the year.’”

“That sounds nice,” I said.

“And it's on track to become the second highest grossing movie of the year,” she noted proudly.

Hesitantly, I said, “I don't mean this the wrong way, but are you sure you're the right Spirit? Or that you weren't sent to the wrong person?”

She stared at me sternly. “Maybe you think that because I'm a bunny I can't be a real Spirit?”

“No, no!” I protested. “I just wondered what you were going to show me.”

“Oh! Yes. Yes! My movie. Let’s go!” She grabbed my wrist and in a whirl, I was whisked away. I found myself in a movie theater, where an animated movie called Zootopia was playing, with Judy in the starring role.

Watching the movie

The city of Zootopia was a beautiful place to live. It was populated by animals who had evolved so they were all vegetarians. Their economy seemed mostly like our own, with buying and selling and corporations and advertising – but no poor people. There was, however, one problem in Zootopia, which was that some animals believed hurtful and wrong things about other animals.

In particular, some animals thought that predators still had different DNA from non-predators and so were inherently violent. Also, animals often assumed that bunnies were cute, dumb, fluffy things who couldn’t do anything serious. This was annoying to Judy, but the first two thirds of the movie show her convincing even animals who underestimate her that she is exceptional.

She wants to become a police officer, even though the conventional wisdom is that bunnies can’t become cops. She ignores this and becomes valedictorian of the police academy. When she starts work, the police chief doesn’t recognize her ability immediately and puts her on parking duty. Although she is understandably offended at having to do this sort of work, she resolves to show he was wrong about her, and so instead of handing out 100 tickets like she was told to do, she gives out 200, all before her lunch break.

She starts fighting back. She goes over the police chief’s head and gets herself an assignment more reflective of her abilities. One time, a fox named Nick had tricked her about something and then laughed at her for being liberal and naive. Now she evens the score – she threatens to have Nick thrown in jail for tax violations, and using this leverage, gets him to follow her all over town. She makes him illegally enter private property and go places where he feels threatened. “What a strong, intrepid character,” I thought to myself.

As time passes, Nick starts to appreciate how awesome Judy is, and they become friends. She exposes a scandal and everyone realizes that she’s a great cop. Right in that moment, though, she comes face to face with a second adversary: her unconscious mind.

In the midst of a press conference, Judy gets asked an awkward question about why the animals involved in a series of incidents were all predators. She doesn’t think about what the right thing to say is, and the first thing that pops into her head is that maybe it’s because predators have different DNA than non-predators.

It’s just what the anti-predator animals wanted her to say, and it makes Nick feel terrible. Anti-predator prejudice explodes, although thankfully pop stars speak out against it.

Judy tries to get Nick to help her fix things, but Nick is still furious with her. Judy pleads with him:

Wait, listen... I-I know you'll never forgive me, and I don't blame you. I wouldn't forgive me either. I was ignorant and irresponsible and small-minded. But predators shouldn't suffer because of my mistakes. I have to fix this. But I can't do it without you. And after we're done, you can hate me, [begins to cry] and... and that'll be fine, because I was a horrible friend, and I hurt you, and you... and you can walk away knowing that you were right all along – I really am just a dumb bunny.

Nick forgives her then, and things work out. They expose a plot by the anti-predator animals, and send the leader, an evil sheep, to jail. All conflict melts away as the animals dance together to the pop singer's finale.

After the movie

“What did you think?” the Spirit Judy asked me excitedly.

“I'm just so impressed,” I told her. She grinned.

“Who would have thought that a billion-dollar corporation like Disney would have the courage to make such a strong statement in support of progressive values?” I went on.

“I know!” she said.

“It did a great job showing how little things that we don't think of as bad can be hurtful to others. For example, while you were in the big city, you were carrying around a thing like a can of mace that was made to drive away foxes. And it sort of helped you to feel safe...”

She blushed, ashamed. “But it made Nick feel bad, because it implied I thought foxes were dangerous.”

“It showed how our attitudes can really affect people's lives. For example, Nick was making his living as a crook, and you might have thought that it was because times were hard and he had difficulty finding a job...”

Judy nodded soberly. “But actually,” she said, “it was all because when he was very young, he had wanted to be nice and good. But then some of the other young animals just assumed that since he was a fox, he had to be untrustworthy, and so he was like, ‘well, then I might as well be untrustworthy.’”

“In general, your movie didn't play it safe,” I said. “For example, you're an open-minded bunny and you always try to treat others with respect. But still, one time you carelessly said something that was really not good. And then, the only way you could return to being a good bunny was to convince yourself that you were truly a bad bunny, and say so publicly.”

“Oh, yeah,” Judy said. “Even though I’m really embarrassed that I said those horrible things, at least this way I could model for the children watching the movie how they ought to act when they say something wrong.”

“The movie definitely delved into difficult issues,” I agreed. “At the same time, it had plenty of humor. Like there was that time you go to the DMV, and the employees there, the sloths, just operate in a lower gear than the rest of us. Which was hilarious for anyone who’s had to deal with real life public employees.”

Judy shook her head. “I was in a hurry and it was just so frustrating. But I know I shouldn’t let it bother me – they can’t help it.”

“The movie often combined humor and teaching moments. Like there was the really, really fat police dispatcher, so I just assumed he eats doughnuts all the time. And then he calls you a cute bunny, and you’re very patient with him, and are like, ‘Ooh, uh, you probably didn’t know, but a bunny can call another bunny cute, but when other animals do it, it’s a little...’ And so you deftly addressed the theme of political correctness, but it didn’t feel preachy because then there was a light-hearted moment...”

“Right,” Judy laughed, “because he really did have a doughnut stuck in the fat folds of his neck.”

“Or when they put the evil sheep in jail at the end,” I went on, “and the other inmates touch her wool ‘cause it’s soft and fluffy, which makes her really mad, because as you explained earlier in the movie...”

“... touching a sheep’s wool is a microaggression and it’s not okay,” Judy supplied helpfully. “But she was xenophobic and hurt a lot of people, so when her wool gets touched, technically it’s wrong...”

“But it’s also kind of funny,” I concluded. “Another way the movie used humor was to show how it isn’t smart to be prejudiced. For example, your parents sometimes said prejudiced things, but that didn’t make us want to be like them, because after all – I mean, not to be critical or anything – they’re rural, they have a really big family, they’re always saying ‘gosh’ and ‘amen to that,’ they don’t really have ambitions...”

Judy fought back a smile. “Yeah, I love them to death, but they’re kind of old-fashioned.”

“And so the movie shows,” I went on, “how when you have wrong ideas, your kids just won’t listen to you. Like when you were little, they would try to give you advice, and you would just wander off and they wouldn’t even notice you were gone. Or there was that scene where they tried to get you to bring fox repellent with you to the big city – because a fox had beaten you up one time, and they were worried it would happen again. And you knew that carrying fox repellent was prejudiced, but finally you just said, ‘I will take this – to make you stop talking.’”

Judy laughed. “They mean well, they really do – it’s just that there are some things they don’t really understand.”

“On a side note,” I added, “I think it’s really awesome how even though you’re a bunny, you really have the mannerisms of white Millennial upper-middle-class girls down cold.”

“Thanks!” she said.

“And it just goes to show,” I continued excitedly, “that the right-wingers are totally wrong about us when they say we want to stamp out gender roles and make women exactly like men!”

“What... do... you... mean?” she said, her voice full of warning notes.

I went on obliviously. “I just mean, you do lots of things in the movie that they wouldn’t have guys do. Like for example, you force Nick to follow you around and do whatever you tell him, and that’s awesome ‘cause it showcases how you’re a strong female character, but if he had forced you to follow him around...”

“That would be controlling and creepy and horrible!” she exclaimed. “Obviously. But Nick wouldn’t do that. So what’s your point?”

I wasn’t sure if this conversation was going in a good direction. Instead, I said, “Actually, I’m worried – maybe your time is short. In case we get cut off, what is the most important thing you want me to learn from your visit?”

She looked at her watch. “Oh, yes. Yes. I do have to go,” she said.

Then she smiled at me warmly. “My final message is, if anyone ever tells you you can’t do anything, or you can’t be anything, don’t believe them. You can.”

I looked at her, stricken. “But Judy, I’m dead.”

She looked quizzically at me. “So? Look, I know a lot of people assume that dead people can’t do certain things, just because they’re dead. But don’t listen to them. Follow your dreams!”

And with a peal of thunder, she was gone, and I was back in the livid marshes.

* * *

The series will take a break for the weekend and resume Monday, at which point Outis will succeed at putting it all together – sort of.

Sources: Uncritical praise of Zootopia from major press outlets: the New York Times, Rolling

Stone, the Atlantic, the Guardian, the Washingtonnytimes.com/...03/04/movies/zootopia-reviewPost.

The Atlantic said Zootopia was “subversive,” while the Times said it “subverted clichés.” Rolling Stone declares “Zootopia takes chances and doesn’t play it safe. Is it too soon to talk about next year’s Oscars?” The Guardian says that in the movie, “the themes of cultural sensitivity and political correctness are handled with real wit,” while the Post says that the movie is about “the hard work of becoming the best, most open-minded bunny you can be.” The sloth scene is singled out for praise by the Times, the Post, Rolling Stone, and the Atlantic.

Chapter 6

Neoliberalism's Border Guard

Posted on November 7, 2016 by Outis Philalithopoulos

In the most recent episode of this series, the ghost of Outis had fun watching a Disney movie. Afterwards, he spoke with Zootopia's star, Judy Hopps, about the movie's sly humor, and its efficacy at stigmatizing prejudice and fostering empathy for the suffering of others.

After my visit from Judy, I felt reinvigorated, ready to take a fresh look at the questions that had puzzled me.

I could discern three large scale principles at work in deciding whom to include and whom to exclude from the liberal tent. One is postmodernism. One is smartness. And the third, seen clearly in Zootopia, is a consensus about the reality of certain kinds of suffering and trauma.

During the past few decades, the importance of smartness has if anything increased. A college education has become a basic requirement for being middle class, and parents of all political stripes scabble desperately to get their children into the "best" schools. The credentialing sectors of capitalism have been dominated by liberals for decades, but only recently have we successfully leveraged this strategic asset into the idea that liberals are basically the same as educated people.

Other sites of cultural production – Hollywood, television, marketing, social media corporations – are also stereotypically liberal, and have become much more responsive to pressure from progressives. Movies like Zootopia, watched by millions of parents and children, show how it is possible to direct corporate power toward positive goals. We have succeeded in dividing capitalism into two halves, one still ugly and irredeemable, but the other (the cultural and credentialing sectors) tamed, dynamic, and fashionable. We absorb into our alliance everyone from marketing professionals to college professors to people who just like the Daily Show, reinforcing our sense of truth by identifying things as stupid, backwards, or insane.

Looking now at the other two principles – postmodernism and suffering – Wendy Brown foretold that, as foci, they would be unable to coexist. Since the time of her prediction, the balance between the two has shifted dramatically, and it has become clear that Brown was rooting for the losing side.

Postmodernism lamented the modern world's lack of orienting fixed points, and maybe tried to make a virtue out of this disorientation. Maybe, as I suggested to Foucault, it tried to establish the insistent assertion of the lack of fixed points as its own fixed point, and then covered the maneuver in a bewildering morass of verbiage.

The contrast with the familiar liberalism of today is stark. We have reconstructed ourselves as progressives, burying postmodernism and reconstituting a robust sense of absolute morality and truth. The process took some time to gather steam, but is now at the helm of mainstream culture.

Although we believe in some positive ideals like education, we have been especially successful at vanquishing the corrosive doubts of postmodernism by setting up negative ideals as transcendently true. At the center of our imagination are atrocities like slavery, genocide, rape – these no one can doubt, these are things to which at one’s peril one refuses to kneel. Who can deny that they exist, that they hurt, that they are evil?

We therefore pick out vivid episodes in which certain groups of people suffered, and make it clear that anyone that does not ritually acknowledge the reality of their suffering is unworthy to be part of society.

In this way, we manage to stigmatize horrible, regressive behavior, but that isn’t enough. High profile instances of genocide and torture don’t appear every day, and commitment flags without regular stimulation. And so we have taken seriously at least one idea from postmodernism, the fascination with slight conceptual nuances, and the faith or fear that these nuances can produce enormously consequential effects. We focus not just on torture but also on less obviously brutal but still hurtful behavior (“micro-aggressions”); not just on behavior but on language, not just on language but also on thoughts.

By discouraging hurtful speech and sensitizing people to implicit bias, we make the world a more pleasant place. Critics of progressives complain about “political correctness,” but you can’t forge a unitary culture without imposing boundaries, and we mainly focus on obvious principles of good manners and consideration toward others.

Zootopia as an Allegory

Although there is still a long way to go, the progress of our culture toward liberation is historically unparalleled. Zootopia provides an extensive allegory about our achievement.

We naturally dread the uncivilized past. One symbol of the past is the pathetic figure of Judy’s parents, who tell her to settle and not follow her dreams. More frighteningly, the plot of the movie revolves around the mysterious fact that some animals are reverting to wildness – the past is thus not merely the past, but threatens to return. There is a still more insidious threat, which is the possibility that some part of the past remains lodged inside of us, like the specks of evil that St. Augustine once believed that God places in us in order to foil our efforts to attain goodness on our own. This fear is hardly surprising, given that we have come to a consensus that certain ways of talking that just twenty or even ten years ago passed without comment in liberal circles are, in reality, clearly problematic. The climax of Zootopia is when Judy, without any selfish or cruel intent, loses control of her mouth – and primitive, nonprogressive ideas escape from it.

Zootopia doesn’t merely show us the shadow of the past, but also offers us, as individuals, hope in the exciting future. Judy avoids becoming a carrot farmer like her parents, and is able to move past the degrading experience of working as a “meter maid.” By virtue of being impressive, competent, and using the rules in her favor, she is able to rise to the top and be valued for her abilities.

Leftists often worry that professional success can lead to people losing their moral compass. Zootopia offers a helpful perspective on this dilemma.

When Judy reaches the pinnacle of success, that is precisely when she messes up and says problematic things. At first glance, Zootopia seems to suggest that morality is far more important than worldly success. Judy responds to her fault by taking a leave of absence from her job and feeling terrible. In the end, she is only able to redeem herself by treating herself as utterly worthless: by confessing abjectly to Nick, pronouncing herself damned, and handing him the only key that can set her free.

I now realized, though, that the message of the movie was optimistic. True, if we say or think wrong things, we need to respond seriously, the way Judy did. But if we do that – and if we express support for progressive ideals and acknowledge our privilege – then we can be as successful as we want to be. There doesn't need to be any conflict between ambition and being a good person.

That doesn't mean that liberals have to care about professional success. If you want to care about people in Africa or the plight of the working class, that's great, too. The important thing is that we come together on the important things, like basic moral principles and recognizing the suffering of marginalized groups.

As this consensus consolidates, society will continue to progress. Some people will try to derail the process, maybe due to sensitivity about having been called out, or anger at losing their privilege. More and more, those people will be seen as throwbacks. Demographic forces will render them irrelevant. Maybe they will just be swept away by globalization. Or – maybe – they can work at the DMV.

The Phantom

A bell sounded and roused me from my vision of the future.

There I saw a Phantom, draped and hooded, gliding like mist along the ground towards me. It was shrouded in a deep, black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing visible except one outstretched hand.

“The Spirit of Liberalism Yet To Come, I presume?” I asked.

The Spirit did not answer. I felt a stab of fear at what it might show me. Would the current positive trajectory continue? Would the future bring cultural progress in ways I couldn't even imagine? Or would the 2020s instead feature a cyclical swing back to postmodernism? Or something worse still?

The Spirit merely pointed onward with its hand. I followed it, and found myself listening to another speech, taking place not in the far future, but toward the end of 2016. Yet my sense of foreboding did not abate, and for apparently no reason at all, the cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces of

my vision suddenly seemed insubstantial, and vain.

I remain curious why the “debate” over antiracism as a politics takes such indirect and evasive forms – like the analogizing and guilt by association, moralistic bombast in lieu of concrete argument – and why it persists in establishing, even often while denying the move, the terms of debate as race vs. class.

He seemed to refer to “antiracism” as if it were not an obviously good thing. I looked at his name plate. Adolph Reed? Who was this person?

In the logic of antiracism, exposure of the racial element of an instance of wrongdoing will lead to a recognition of injustice, which will in turn lead to remedial action – though not much attentions seems ever given to how this part is supposed to work. I suspect this is because the exposure part, which feels so righteously yet undemandingly good, is the real focus.

I did not understand why the sound of his voice troubled me so much.

“Spirit!” I exclaimed, “this is a fearful place. I will not forget its lessons, trust me. Let me go!”

But the Ghost only pointed, with an unmoved finger, at Reed, whose icy words burned in my ears.

These responses [show] how fundamentally antiracism and other identitarian programs are not only the left wing of neoliberalism but active agencies in its imposition of a notion of the boundaries of the politically thinkable – sort of neoliberalism’s intellectual and cultural border guard.

“Answer me one question,” I cried. “Are the things Reed says the shadows of things to come, or are they merely his own cynical perspective?”

I caught at the Spirit’s spectral hand. It sought to free itself, but I persisted. Yet the Spirit was stronger than I was, and repulsed me. I fell to the ground, and when I arose, I was alone in the weeping land.

* * *

The series concludes tomorrow, with Outis reaching new conclusions and making an important decision.

Sources: Adolph Reed’s remarks are from a recent interview and an earlier article. Some of the thoughts on political correctness are based on Belle Waring’s Crooked Timber article.

Chapter 7

Liberalism Yet To Come: The Boundaries of the Thinkable Posted on November 8, 2016 by Outis Philalithopoulos

In yesterday's episode of this series, Outis came up with an attractive synthesis about the trajectory of modern progressivism. He was then thrown into confusion by the arrival of a Phantom, and cryptic references to "neoliberalism's intellectual and cultural border guard."

I felt like a snake, compelled to painfully tear away one skin after another. The outline of my conclusions was the same, but in the cold light of Reed's words, things somehow appeared differently.

Is it true that we have surpassed postmodernism? We still look negatively at right wingers and others who believe in non-trendy absolutes. We still pay lip service to the idea that other cultures are just as praiseworthy as upper middle class American liberal culture. But looking beneath the surface, it does seem like postmodernism has been consigned to the graveyard of history.

But rather than post-postmodernists who have learned from the mistakes of postmodernism, we are neo-modernists who have successfully forgotten that postmodernism ever existed.

Already in the 90s, parts of the left/liberal world were uncomfortable with postmodernism, and Wendy Brown argued that they had set up their own "reactionary foundationalism." By that she meant that they had selected one aspect of their dogma, and then declared all attempts to interpret it critically to be subversive.

Our newfound unity is based on two prongs. On the one hand, we have consolidated our alliance with key sectors of modern capitalism, and thereby cemented our branding as well-educated, intelligent people. It is working out wonderfully – but have we paid a price for it? Daniel Bell argued in 1976 (*The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*) that conservatives supporting capitalism were thereby supporting a cultural engine that undermined the social values central to their conservatism. Have we, by letting the cultural arm of the economy fight our battles for us, clouded our ability to radically critique that economy? In the complex relationship between modern progressivism and the cultural sector of capitalism, who is using whom?

On the other hand, we have fixed certain instances of suffering as foundational texts, and can now blast anyone who seems to doubt their centrality in understanding the world.

Earlier attempts to create a liberal culture based on a consensus about oppression tended to produce a hodgepodge of groups that centrifugal forces could easily pull apart. What was different now?

Maybe, as I had suggested to Foucault, the Internet had played a role. But 9/11 seemed relevant as well. As Osama bin Laden had hoped, the image of the planes striking the towers appeared on

television as a dramatic flash of absolute reality. In the new rhetorical world thus created, “squishy” postmodernism came off as inane and decadent; meanwhile, neocon Republicans happily twitted liberals over their lack of moral clarity. The Right surged from one apparent victory to another, while liberals seethed with humiliation.

Maybe there was no epistemological breakthrough that enabled us to answer the postmodernists’ gnawing doubts about objectivity. Maybe we changed the nature of liberalism, absorbed the stubborn moral clarity of Rush Limbaugh’s conservatism, and went on to forge a rough-and-ready consensus between unruly interest groups, simply because we believed we had to.

Morality

As stylized images of suffering inject us with potent shots of certainty, we become addicted to empathy with suffering, as an antidote for existential disorientation. This leads to a natural desire to expand our attention to micro-aggressions and hurtful ways of thinking.

But then, if we commit to being on the side of people who experience micro-aggressions, almost everyone might be able to find something in their life that could qualify. And in fact, many groups for whom we feel little sympathy are not unwilling to talk about their pain and humiliation. We have dodged this trap by finding a principle that will disqualify unintended groups from empathy – that way we can classify their pain as not real. The simple rule that does the trick is: “If a group has suffered something historical that we agree is really, unmistakably horrible, then it is also allowed to claim micro-aggressions as real.” We dress it up in academic language about what counts as “structural” oppression, but in simple words, the rule is, “if a group suffered, and we have canonized their suffering as a source of moral clarity for us, then they should be allowed to freely discover further incitements to suffering.”

So in Judy’s movie, mocking older people, or rural people, or government employees, or overweight people, is all entirely acceptable, while carrying around fox repellent, thinking a sheep’s fur is fluffy, calling a bunny cute, or not supporting a baby fox who wants to be an elephant are all entirely unacceptable. The principle isn’t that prejudice is wrong. The principle is that the latter examples are code for liberal flash points.

I thought about something Brown said:

In its emergence as a protest against marginalization or subordination, politicized identity [...] instills its pain over its unredeemed history in the very foundation of its political claim [...] Politicized identity enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future – for itself or others – that triumphs over this pain.

By “instilling” pain at the center of our epistemological universe, we condemn ourselves to endless efforts to shuttle around, direct, and amplify that pain. Brown emphasized revenge as a key

technique in dealing with pain:

[...] a will that makes not only a psychological but a political practice of revenge, [...] an identity whose present past is one of insistently unredeemable injury.

Zootopia offers plenty of examples of hurting people the way they hurt others, so they can see what it feels like, and learn. The response to Nick tricking Judy and telling her “it’s a hustle, sweetheart” is for her to trick him and then announce, “it’s a hustle, sweetheart.” The same line is then used on the evil female sheep at the end of the movie. The movie sees cultural insensitivity as not only the primary evil in the world, but also the most appropriate punishment – the final prison episode also came to mind, when I had laughed at the evil sheep’s anger at her wool getting touched. The culmination of Judy’s apology is announcing that she really is “just a dumb bunny” – her guilt is so great that she knows she deserves the pain of stereotyping.

Brown worried about the insatiable dead end of “insistently irredeemable injury.” Here, though, modern liberal culture proposes a way out of the cycle of suffering and revenge – Judy models it for us in her apology to Nick. If the oppressor voluntarily decides to submit to the worst tortures the oppressed can inflict, and to bind herself as an instrument of his revenge, then he may choose to forgive her, making possible a triumph over pain.

I had always thought that when people do something wrong, they should just stop caring about their own feelings and, like Judy, really, deeply apologize. In the movie, Nick had forgiven her. But in real life, if someone apologized like that, say in a professional context, and the other person chose to be unmerciful – what then?

Imagining the Future

Wendy Brown said that right wing fundamentalists were trying to “foreclose democratic conversation about our collective condition and future.” Are we doing the same thing?

Adolph Reed maybe thought so. What did he mean when he said we had become “border guards of neoliberalism,” policing “the boundaries of the thinkable”?

Of course we work hard to stigmatize certain sorts of prejudices. Do we thereby successfully repress them?

Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, recalled that it is often supposed that the Victorian era’s rules of manners and taboos on sexuality were aimed at making sex “driven out, denied, and reduced to silence.” He argued instead that those restrictions had the effect, and maybe the purpose, of inciting and intensifying the power of sexuality: a “complex deployment for compelling sex to speak, for fastening our attention and concern upon” it.

If Foucault was right about sexuality, are our attempts at “repressing” prejudice and trauma serving

to amplify them as a force in society, by “compelling prejudice and trauma to speak,” “fastening our attention” upon them? Is the result then to drown out attempts to speak in other ways, and so to police “the boundaries of the thinkable”?

Is the neoliberal order safeguarded by the fact that certain conversations just don’t happen in mainstream progressive circles?

Well, it does seem that Star Trek is better at imagining an economic system without money than modern progressives. Maybe we see a radical stance on the economy as a quick way to brand oneself as edgy, while privately assuming that there is no alternative to modern capitalism. If so, why continue to be so moralistic about it? Is our compulsive focus on mental sin a way we cover up despair at our inability to change the deep structure of the world?

A lot of ordinary people are convinced not that capitalism is perfect, but that any alternative to it is will necessarily involve the collapse of technological civilization or severe restrictions on freedom. If this isn’t true, are there some progressives trying to explain why?

I struggled with what I had perceived. Were we, despite our idealistic vision of ourselves, simply agents of the system, tentacles that it uses to smash some people, complete with the pretext of defending others? Was it a labyrinthine, twisted joke?

Hope

At that point, I rebelled at the implications of my thought.

Maybe modern progressives are much less self-critical than we imagined ourselves to be. Maybe we do indulge in some prejudices while criticizing and often tokenizing others. Maybe we have acquiesced in a long series of accommodations with power.

But Polyphemus had spoken not just of wretchedness, but of idealism and grandeur. Maybe I didn’t agree with the postmodernists after all. Maybe there is something good, or at least potentially good, in the way we have tried to turn back to sincerity and moral conviction, to humility and introspection.

Brown said that in the postmodern world,

individuals are buffeted and controlled by global configurations of [...] power of extraordinary proportions, and are at the same time nakedly individuated, stripped of reprieve [...]

Since she wrote, the way the world makes many feel precarious and lost has only gotten worse. Maybe she was right that when we feel this way, we try to rebuild a sense of something we can really believe in. But was she right in assuming that this was mainly a bad thing?

When Judy apologizes to Nick, she treats herself as utterly insignificant, and her victim as

omnipotent, exactly mimicking the relationship between the sinner and God in traditional Christian confession. This was extreme, but could it also be seen as the sign of a great and widely-shared loneliness? Of the longing we feel for more dramatically intimate relationships between people, or between a person and some sort of transcendence?

Could we salvage what was hopeful in modern progressivism and disentangle it from what wasn't?

That sounds... hard, I thought to myself. Anyway, I'm dead. Maybe someone else will worry about it.

Then I remembered Judy Hopps. She wouldn't accept me being dead as a reason for me not to try to help people.

What could I do?

“OUTIS!”

“Polyphemus,” I cried out. “You're back.”

He surveyed me. “WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED?” his voice boomed.

I thought for a moment. Then I realized how to solve this problem.

“Polyphemus,” I said. “I have learned that I have been ignorant and irresponsible and small-minded. When I hear criticism of liberals that I don't want to think about, I deal with it by explaining how right-wingers caused the problem, or are worse than us, or are scary or horrible. Or I say the criticism is justified, but only as a criticism of not-real-progressives. Or I divert attention by accusing critics of ignoring the horrible things that have been done to marginalized people.

I say I am against prejudice and trauma, but my attempts to repress certain forms of them have the predictable effect of intensifying their power throughout society. I say I am against prejudice, but I don't mind making fun of old people, Millennials, hicks, wingnuts, adults who live with their parents, and a whole slew of other categories and stereotypes. I say I am against capitalism, but I'm completely fine with corporate action when it imposes antiracism, feminism, and other aspects of liberal culture. If someone raises an objection, I accuse them of opposing antiracism or feminism. I have the privilege of knowing that I can repel any attack on my basic understanding of reality. I really am a horrible hypocrite; some of the things I do hurt people, abet an atmosphere of shaming and guilt, and ultimately foreclose any possibility of positive change.”

“How do you feel now?” Polyphemus inquired.

“Great,” I responded. “I feel great.”

“So will you honor the spirit of true progressivism in your heart, and try to keep it always?” he demanded.

“Perhaps,” I said. “But not just now. A bootleg copy of the latest Game of Thrones season just made it past Charon. And anyway, I’ve faced my fears, I’ve recognized my progressive privilege, and I feel like I’ve really grown through this experience.”

Polyphemus smirked at me. I smirked back.

Epilogue: And so I thought no more about these matters, and have been able to return to my comfortable existence in the underworld. I no longer need this diary, and am casting it into a bottle so that it can dance along the eddies of fate, troubling whom it may.

Outis Philalithopoulos

April 1, 2016