

Capitalism and Morality

THE PROBLEMATIC POLITICS OF POSTMODERN PLURALISM

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The POMO passion for pluralism is a piece of pernicious prestidigitation. It is a clever slight-of-hand trick to fool us into accepting its supreme value of absolute tolerance. In accepting such tolerance, we, in turn, are rendered vulnerable to the POMO political platform, and the POMO pursuit of power progresses.

We are told that if we do not respect pluralism with a disposition of absolute tolerance, then we are guilty of fanatic bigotry, or, at least, suffer from some sort of irrational fear: a phobia like xenophobia (fear of strangers), allodoxaphobia (fear of opinions), anthropophobia (fear of people or society), homophobia (fear of homosexuality) or Europhobia (fear of European Union).¹ We do not want to be dysfunctional; we are afraid of having irrational fears, which according to the official list of current phobias is labeled as “phobophobia,” so we are inclined to acquiesce to some degree to POMO tolerance. Once we do, however, we become enablers, contributors to propagating POMO's political power.

Ryszard Legutko recognizes that the supreme value of POMO politics is tolerance, and that intolerance is more to be feared than all traditional sins.² Legutko distinguishes between negative and positive toleration. Negative toleration is a virtue of individual character. It is a habit of temperance which involves self-governance and humility, and it helps people to live together and cooperate in society. This tolerance is not a substitute for other moral and political qualities such as justice or equality. This tolerance, as a habit of character, cannot make any positive claims, such as that a certain category of persons should be given certain political or social positions, certain privileges or “special rights,” specifically on the grounds of toleration.

It is an aggressive positive toleration that POMO politics promotes. This tolerance is pitched as socially and politically normative. It is not indifferent to contests between opposing views, since in a partisan way it condemns the view it perceives as coercive, authoritarian, domineering or repressive. The moral norm it prizes is made in its own image, namely, “We ought to make the world safe for toleration.” The practical principle this imperative implies is that, “We must liquidate all cultural bases of intolerance.”

This is the culture war which POMO wages. POMO's total commitment to the cause of positive tolerance entirely excludes negative tolerance, since negative tolerance preaches only self-control and humility, and POMO believes it can allow for intolerance. POMO, unfortunately, does not understand the principal merit of negative tolerance, namely that Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Moslems, capitalists, socialists, etc. are not compelled to renounce their beliefs, but only to be humbly temperate in espousing

or acting on them in society. POMO's positive tolerance campaign, however, aims for a fundamental transformation of our worldviews, if POMO deems them as socially or politically offensive.

What for POMO is the criterion for a worldview being offensive? It is whether the worldview makes a claim to truth. In the POMO mind, truth itself is responsible for intolerance because it marginalizes people. Truth alienates those who disagree as heretics, subversives or misfits. Truth spawns prejudice, which leads to persecution. So, in order to secure tolerance and eliminate prejudice and persecution, we must abandon all traditional criteria of truth, which means specifically, traditional realist metaphysics, epistemology and morality.

This is the platform of POMO politics, for with the assault on truth, it is power which substitutes. As Michel Foucault believed, truth is a regime, nothing but an ensemble of conventional rules, which establish the difference between the true and the false and attach power to the true. The truth is not powerful because it corresponds to what is real, but truth is the power to define or create what is real.

What are the strategies of POMO's political agenda? How is it accomplishing its pursuit of power? There are at least three strategies which together are targeted at gaining control of educational institutions and/or the media as the bases of power. The first is the politics of anti-realism, the second, the politics of absolute alterity, and the third, the politics of hyper-reality. Through educational systems and the media these strategies combine to disconnect us from reality, to seduce us to embrace absolute positive tolerance and become party to POMO's power trip.

The politics of anti-realism are clearly manifest in Richard Rorty's axiom: democracy is prior to philosophy.³ Rorty emphasizes that maintaining harmony within a pluralized democratic society, what for him is genuine solidarity, supercedes serious philosophical pursuit of objective truth. In fact, for Rorty all philosophical claims of objective truth are empty, since all truth is relative to the society in which we participate. Rorty, therefore, views truth merely as social consensus, and objectivity is reduced to solidarity. The only types of "truths" he supports are those values which conform to his version of solidarity, and of course for him, the highest value is absolute tolerance.

Rorty would agree that for the sake of solidarity, we must respect others' beliefs as if they were our own. This respect, moreover, must be absolute, so no matter how different from or even contradictory to our beliefs another's beliefs might be, they are not to be challenged in any way. This is Rorty's so-called "democratic" value of egalitarianism. All beliefs must be respected as equal in truth-merit to our own beliefs. Hence, for the sake of harmonious solidarity we must acknowledge that everyone's opinions of truth, everyone's views of reality are as respectable as ours. For Rorty, solidarity is not built on truth, solidarity does not defer to reality, but solidarity builds truth and manufactures reality.

As promoted through educational institutions and the media, Rorty's brand of egalitarian solidarity is not really democratic at all. Students are taught in schools and the media transmits the message that all lifestyles, all moral choices, all religious preferences are equally valuable, except, of course, those that commit intolerance. No belief has any special access to the truth, and no belief can claim any special correspondence with what is real.

The traditional view of democracy is, however, founded on realism. As rational creatures, all persons, regardless of class, gender, ethnicity or culture, are equally capable of knowing truths which correspond to reality. Accessing reality and knowing truths is sometimes not easy; among other things, it often requires a virtuous disposition of prudence, temperance, courage and justice. All persons do not necessarily know the truths of reality to the same degree, but all are capable to some degree of becoming truth-knowers. Rorty's egalitarian solidarity with its consensual theory of truth is not merely anti-realist, but it is anti-democratic as well. It perpetuates the POMO power of education and the media to impose on

us their versions of the truths of reality. The more we are convinced that we cannot discover the truths of reality ourselves, the more we are rendered powerless, and the more our beliefs, our moral choices and our very lives become invented by our schools and the media.

The politics of absolute alterity are based on the POMO claim that any other person is absolutely other. Realists object that others are not absolutely other, since we do, even cross-culturally, communicate with others, exchange our thoughts, know each other's feelings and experience mutual love. Still, a POMO pundit like Jacques Derrida insists on the radical otherness of the other. This leads him to put community under erasure. For Derrida, a community which shares virtues, which engages in a common effort to discover the truths of reality, which values interpersonal communication and love, is a useless fiction. Derridian otherness, thereby, entails the *difference* of extreme pluralism and irreconcilable diversity.

As with Rorty's egalitarianism, Derrida's otherness fortifies POMO's agenda of absolute tolerance, since it is only such tolerance that can preserve harmony in the face of radical diversity. Diversity, the differences between people, is not affirmed as a means for strengthening the pursuit of truth. Realist truth-seekers accept that their purposes are invigorated by understanding and evaluating diverse and even competing truth-claims. With absolute alterity, diversity becomes autotelic: it becomes its own purpose, in that whatever can be said to be true is only whatever affirms diversity itself. Consequently, in education, POMO curricula impose gender studies, multiculturalism, and assorted ethnologies. Theology becomes "Religious Studies," in which zealous ecumaniacs typically promote an indiscriminate ecumenism. The aim, again, is not to teach about diverse views to support our search for truth. The aim is to teach us that diversity is itself absolute, and that objective common truths which can reconcile differences are nowhere to be found. Absolute positive tolerance is, therefore, our only option and we must yield to POMO power.

As the term itself suggests, the POMO politics of "hyper-reality" are designed to replace our connection to the real with a world of phantasmic meanings. The origins of such hyper-reality are in, among other sources, Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology. He maintains that the meaning of any action or object is never fixed or definite, but is founded on a socially fluid system of shared convention.⁴ Meaning is, thereby, a process of signification which binds together the signifier and the signified to produce the sign. A sign is a relation which has no meaning outside the continuously evolving social process of signification. The signified, moreover, refers only to the image or concept and not to the thing itself in reality. Therefore, the meanings we know and what those meanings represent are merely the outcomes of a social process of learning, and they do not represent or refer to anything definite, stable or certain in reality.

The French sociologist, Jean Baudrillard, extends Saussure's semiology to claim that all of the meanings we know, all of the contents of our thoughts, intensify within our imaginations so that the images breed incestuously with each other without reference to reality.⁵ This is hyper-reality wherein the sign becomes a simulacrum of and a substitute for reality. The distinction between representation and reality, between signs and what they refer to, breaks down. Images merge into one another and their hybrid significations become the meanings of our reality. For instance, the image of "The Madonna" breeds with the pop-diva Madonna's image so that the meaning "Queen of Heaven," the perfect female role model, becomes subsumed within the MTV role model of the "Queen of All Material Girls Living in a Material World."

The politics of POMO hyper-reality should be apparent: those who implant the images in us, those who teach us the preferred politically correct language, those who establish the social conventions for the system of signification, do, to various degrees, construct our hyper-reality and thereby control what reality means for us. Overloaded with the incessant intercourse of diverse images, we become confused

and weakened. We are rendered docile, willing to accept that only the image of a reality harmonized by absolute tolerance can make sense of, can unify, our inchoate hyper-reality. We allow ourselves, then, to become “imago POMI.”

POMO political power is indeed pervasive globally. It thrives on perpetuating absolute tolerance as the moral means for respecting pluralism. As has been discussed, however, POMO's absolute tolerance is nothing but a political device to expand its power. Pluralism and absolute tolerance are used as techniques to undermine what it perceives as the threat of traditional metaphysical, epistemological and moral realism. What, though, can or should be a response to POMO's tactics?

Aristotle once offered words to the effect that: Courage is the virtue which makes all of the other virtues possible. POMO's politics can be opposed with the courage to discover and appreciate what is truly real. It takes courage to judge prudently what ought to be the real and true qualities of a person's moral life. It takes courage to act with the real tolerance of a humble temperance in a pluralistic society and world. It is courage which can sustain those who hunger and thirst for real justice and do not impose on people the indignity of ideological egalitarianism. And, finally, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, courage can help us to be gifted with the faith, hope and charity which are the real and true bases of a solidarity that can challenge and resist POMO's political power.

Endnotes

1. For an expansive list of current phobias see: www.aboutphobias.com/phobia_list.html
2. This paragraph and the four paragraphs which follow paraphrase statements, and summarize and interpret points in Ryszard Legutko's “The Trouble with Toleration” in *A Free Society Reader*, edited by Michael Novak, William Brailsford and Cornelius Heesters (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000) 166-178.
3. See Richard Rorty's “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
4. This brief rendition of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology is based on: Richard Appignanesi and Chris Garrat, *Introducing Postmodernism* (Thirplow, Cambridge, UK: Totem Books, 2005) 58-60.
5. See *Introducing Postmodernism*, 54-55.