

# Globalisation, Citizenship and the War on Terror

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There is a wide recognition that the phenomenon of international terrorism presents a wide-ranging set of challenges to those who must confront it. For democratic western societies there is the particular challenge of balancing the needs of communal security with the traditional rights of the citizen. In this context, there is certainly a need for scholarly texts which attempt to understand the tensions and suggest and critique principles on which judgements might be made. This is not that book. It is, instead, a collection of post-modern musings by a clique of old-left academics, mainly (8 out of 10) from the University of Hull, on the defects of contemporary democratic societies (like their own) and the evils of globalisation, together with a spirited defence of terrorism and terrorists. In this respect, it may be of interest to citizens and parents who might like to know what is being taught in departments of sociology and political science over much of the western world.

The dominant orientation of the work is clear from the editorial introduction. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are (we are told) ‘replays of colonial civilising missions’, with international institutions, like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as ‘willing accomplices’. ‘Resistance movements’ in ‘pacified territories’ are ‘criminalised’ by being called ‘terrorist’ and it is all ‘racist’. Overall, there is a need (it is said) for ‘global institutions’ to deal with these things. Anticipating a later chapter, the editorial also offers an extensive discourse on how images of the ‘war’ (on terror) are ‘constructed’ and ‘manipulated’ and how resistance becomes a form of terrorism, complaining that ‘all forms of terrorism are homogenised and defined as illegitimate, *whatever the cause*’ (reviewer’s emphasis). The crucial thing to note about all this is that nowhere in the introduction or in the substantive chapters is there any attempt to define the terms ‘terrorism’ or ‘terrorist’, or to note how the UN in its various pronouncements, or scholars generally, have defined them. This is very convenient for maintaining the superficiality of the ‘discourse’ so that, for example, the various authors do not have to notice that the UN General Assembly, in a resolution of 29 November 2000, confirmed that:

‘criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public ... for political purposes *are in any circumstances unjustifiable*; whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, racial, ethnic, religious or other nature that may be invoked to justify them. (reviewer’s emphasis).

This particular global institution does exactly what is being complained about; it categorises terrorism as illegitimate, whatever the cause. The substantive chapter (Chapter 12) continues the theme, setting out to ‘challenge prevailing conceptions’ by giving an account of Islamic terrorists as honourable ‘soldiers’ in a just cause. And this is done without any reference to a fundamental principle of moral discourse about the prosecution of just causes: that of discrimination. Of course there is extensive contextualising mention of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay but no discussion at all of how one might start to justify such episodes as the sending into a pet-market, of two mentally-impaired young women with explosives strapped to them, where the explosives are subsequently remotely detonated. For this reviewer, those who would defend terrorism need to justify what terrorists do, unless they take a Leninist ends-justify-the-means view, which they equally need to make explicit. Otherwise, we are dealing with something that is not an academic work at all, but simply a piece of propaganda. Perhaps that is what is being confessed to when the author of Chapter 2 (‘discourse analysis’ of discourse analysis) concludes that, ‘the war on/of terror is particularly dependent on fraught and imperilled discursive construction which produces its own conditions’ (p 30).

On the matter of globalisation (seen as the internationalisation of economic activity and the removal of barriers to trade), matters are equally clear, ‘free markets are implacably corrosive of the social fabric’. They threaten international disaster, and only a new framework of global economic regulation can prevent this (Chapter 4). But this ‘disaster’ is not an economic one. This same chapter also contains a carefully obscured acceptance that contrary to classic Marxist prescription, capitalism has actually performed much better in increasing the general well-being of citizens than has ‘real existing socialism’ (which, of course, is why there was never any problem of preventing people from the West escaping to East Germany, or people from South Korea escaping to the North). For all that, it is claimed that the liberal democratic societies are still deeply flawed in the quality of the citizenship they offer. Insofar as the specifics of these defects are identified, we appear to be talking of the relative powerlessness of individuals (or even governments) in entrepreneurial societies, as well as the implications for human rights of security measures associated with the war on terror. It seems to this reviewer that in both cases there are delicate balances to be struck and careful calculations of benefit to be made for both citizen and collective. Extensive and obscure discourse on alienation really doesn’t help us to do this.

It is illustrative of the political mindset of the authors of this book that old political devils (Thatcher), still make their appearance, along with the new (Bush, Blair and Howard), so that as an

example of how images are manipulated, we are told that, ‘Margaret Thatcher used the Falklands War to increase her political popularity in Britain in the 1980s’. One might equally say that a relatively new Prime Minister (at the time) had the political courage to resist the unprovoked aggression of a military dictatorship, at some risk of failure, and that her success in this increased her political popularity. An academic judgement on the episode would have to address the question as to what extent British military action was justified in the circumstances and, particularly, to what extent it was motivated by a *desire* for political advantage (as opposed to capitalising on the advantage that came). Argentinean motivation for the Falkland adventure might also have provided a useful example of the use of war by a deeply unpopular government to serve its political ends. Of course, it isn’t mentioned. Again, the point is the same. *Globalisation, Citizenship and the War on Terror* is agenda-driven polemic, rather than scholarship. Old-left readers may read this book with pleasure, if limited understanding. The rest of us can confidently give it a miss.

Ron Smith

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