

Democracy debased



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DEMOCRACY, the modern world's holy cow, is in crisis. And the crisis is a profound one. Every kind of outrage is being committed in the name of democracy. It has become little more than a hollow word, a pretty shell, emptied of all content or meaning. It can be whatever you want it to be. Democracy is the Free World's whore, willing to dress up, dress down, willing to satisfy a whole range of taste, available to be used and abused at will.

Until quite recently, right up to the 1980s, democracy did seem as though it might actually succeed in delivering a degree of real social justice.

But modern democracies have been around for long enough for neo-liberal capitalists to learn how to subvert them. They have mastered the technique of infiltrating the instruments of democracy -- the "independent" judiciary, the "free" press, the parliament -- and moulding them to their purpose. The project of corporate globalisation has cracked the code. Free elections, a free press, and an independent judiciary mean little when the free market has reduced them to commodities on sale to the highest bidder.

To fully comprehend the extent to which democracy is under siege, it might be an idea to look at what goes on in some of our contemporary democracies. The world's largest: India (which I have written about elsewhere at some length). The world's most interesting: South Africa. The world's most powerful:

the USA. And, most instructive of all, the plans that are being made to usher in the world's newest: Iraq.

In South Africa, after 300 years of brutal domination of the black majority by a white minority through colonialism and apartheid, a non-racial, multi-party democracy came to power in 1994. It was a phenomenal achievement. Within two years of coming to power, the African National Congress had genuflected with no caveats to the Market God. Its massive programme of structural adjustment, privatisation, and

In countries of the first world, too, the machinery of democracy has been effectively subverted. Politicians, media barons, judges, powerful corporate lobbies, and government officials are imbricated in an elaborate underhand configuration that completely undermines the lateral arrangement of checks and balances between the constitution, courts of law, parliament, the administration and, perhaps most important of all, the independent media that forms the structural basis of a parliamentary democracy.

The only institution more powerful than the US government is American civil society. The rest of us are subjects of slave nations. We are by no means powerless, but you have the power of proximity. You have access to the Imperial Palace and the Emperor's chambers. Empire's conquests are being carried out in your name, and you have the right to refuse. You could refuse to fight. Refuse to move those missiles from the warehouse to the dock.

liberalisation has only increased the hideous disparities between the rich and the poor. More than a million people have lost their jobs. The corporatisation of basic services -- electricity, water, and housing - has meant that ten million South Africans, almost a quarter of the population, have been disconnected from water and electricity. Two million have been evicted from their homes.

Meanwhile, a small white minority that has been historically privileged by centuries of brutal exploitation is more secure than ever before. They continue to control the land, the farms, the factories, and the abundant natural resources of that country. For them the transition from apartheid to neo-liberalism barely disturbed the grass. It's apartheid with a clean conscience. And it goes by the name of democracy.

Democracy has become Empire's euphemism for neo-liberal capitalism.

Increasingly, the imbrication is neither subtle nor elaborate.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, for instance, has a controlling interest in major Italian newspapers, magazines, television channels, and publishing houses. The Financial Times reported that he controls about ninety percent of Italy's TV viewership. Recently, during a trial on bribery charges, while insisting he was the only person who could save Italy from the Left, he said, "How much longer do I have to keep living this life of sacrifices?" That bodes ill for the remaining ten percent of Italy's TV viewership. What price free speech? Free speech for whom?

In the United States, the arrangement is more complex. Clear Channel Worldwide Incorporated is the largest radio station owner in the country. It runs more than 1,200 channels, which together account for nine percent of the market. Its CEO contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to Bush's

election campaign. When hundreds of thousands of American citizens took to the streets to protest against the war on Iraq, Clear Channel organized pro-war patriotic "Rallies for America" across the country. It used its radio stations to advertise the events and then sent correspondents to cover them as though they were breaking news. The era of manufacturing consent has given way to the era of manufacturing news. Soon media newsrooms will drop the pretense, and start hiring theatre directors instead of journalists.

As America's show business gets more and more violent and war-like, and America's wars get more and more like show business, some interesting crossovers are taking place. The designer who built the \$250,000 set in Qatar from which General Tommy Franks stage-managed news coverage of Operation Shock and Awe has also built sets for Disney, MGM, and Good Morning America.

It is a cruel irony that the US, which has the most ardent, vociferous defenders of the idea of free speech, and (until recently) the most elaborate legislation to protect it, has so circumscribed the space in which that freedom can be expressed. In a strange, convoluted way, the sound and fury that accompanies the legal and conceptual defence of free speech in America serves to mask the process of the rapid erosion of the possibilities of actually exercising that freedom.

The news and entertainment industry in the US is for the most part controlled by a few major corporations -- AOL-Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, News Corporation. Each of these corporations owns and controls TV stations, film studios, record companies, and publishing ventures. Effectively, the exits are sealed.

America's media empire is controlled by a tiny coterie of people. Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission Michael Powell, the son of Secretary of State Colin Powell, has proposed even further deregulation of the communications industry, which will lead to even greater consolidation.

The battle to reclaim democracy is going to be a difficult one. Our freedoms were not granted to us by any governments. They were wrested from them by us. And once we surrender them, the battle to retrieve them is called a revolution. It is a battle that must range across continents and countries. It must not acknowledge national boundaries but, if it is to succeed, it has to begin here. In America. The only institution more powerful than the US government is American civil society. The rest of us are subjects of slave nations. We are by no means powerless, but you have the power of proximity. You have access to the Imperial Palace and the Emperor's chambers. Empire's conquests are being carried out in your name, and you have the right to refuse. You could refuse to fight. Refuse to move those missiles from the warehouse to the dock. Refuse to wave that flag. Refuse the victory parade.

You have a rich tradition of resistance.

Hundreds of thousands of you have survived the relentless propaganda you have been subjected to, and are actively fighting your own government. In the ultra-patriotic climate that prevails in the United States, that's as brave as any Iraqi or Afghan or Palestinian fighting for his or her homeland.

If you join the battle, not in your hundreds of thousands, but in your millions, you will be greeted joyously by the rest of the world. And you will see how beautiful it is to be gentle instead of brutal, safe instead of scared. Befriended instead of isolated. Loved instead of hated.

I hate to disagree with your president. Yours is by no means a great nation. But you could be a great people.

History is giving you the chance. Seize the time.

Courtesy: Fellowship Magazine

A personal tribute to Edward Said

SAYEED AHMAD

I first met Edward Said in Stockholm in 1991 at the Conference of Intellectuals arranged by SIDA. We were housed in Vor Gard Conference Centre of repute.

I saw him in the dining room. He had just arrived from America. He met me very warmly and was happy to learn that I was a delegate from Bangladesh. We took to each other immediately. He wanted to know about the people of Bangladesh of whom he had heard so much. He wished he could have the opportunity to visit our country. In fact Prof Fakhru Alam of English Department of Dhaka University urged me to invite Edward Said to come to Dhaka. But he was busy with his other assignments and promised to come sometime next.

As we sat over dinner we had a lot of time to exchange views. I was looking forward eagerly to hear his lecture at the famous Stockholm Town Hall, where the Nobel Peace Prize was being awarded. I had read his book on 'Orientalism' many years before and admired him for his brilliant discourse and analysis of existing theories on eastern cultures. He was able to confront western civilizations vis-a-vis oriental. His writing had given a stature to the eastern nations who had long suffered from the prejudices and biases meted out by western scholars.

It was such a pleasure to meet this great man who was congenial and lively. Over the next seven days we became friends and met morning and evening, at meals, breakfast, lunch and dinner. I had first heard of Edward Said during my stay in New York in 1976. I was staying with a friend Gautum Das Gupta, Editor and Publisher of Performing Arts Journal in New York who was a friend of Edward Said. We attended a meeting at Columbia University where Edward Said was to come, but for some reason he did not attend. It was to be another time that we met.

Now that I was meeting him in Stockholm we had ample time to discuss many subjects over a wide range. We talked of liberation movements in many parts of the world, especially the Palestinian cause and Bangladesh's national identity movement. We talked of films, sports, music, drama and the weather!

Edward Said was born in 1935 in Jerusalem to a well-off Christian family. His father's name was Wadi Ibrahim and mother's Janet. His mother gave him the name Edward after the British regent Edward, Prince of Wales. I came to know that Edward's nature was the opposite of his father, who was hot-tempered and practical. His father migrated to America in 1911 during the First World War and signed up in the United States Army. He prided himself as a citizen of America. Edward, however, the only son of his parents (although he had four sisters) was gentle and thoughtful by nature. When I presented him with a Dhaka Muslin stole (orna) for his wife, explaining the intrinsic value of this handloom fabric, I could see the appreciation in his eyes. He told me he would convey the historic background of this woven textile to his wife. It was such a satisfaction for me to give this gift to a man steeped in culture.

On the day of Edward Said's lecture at Stockholm Town Hall, the assembled crowd was waiting with bated breath. We all knew we were going to hear the words of not only a literary scholar, but the foremost Arab intellectual of our times. He was proud to be Arab and proud to be Palestinian. English was his academic speciality as well as music and culture. He spoke in a beautiful voice and raised the moral issues of the Palestinian cause with depth of feeling. There was pin-drop silence among the listeners.

After the event we returned to our lodge and I went forward to congratulate him. I said "Edward it was a marvelous piece of oratory. Your words will be written in golden letters in the history books." He smiled humbly and rose to clasp my hands. He asked me to sit down and celebrate. We did till the wee hours of the night. We were in a glorious mood. I mentioned I would be visiting Morocco the next month. He wanted to know which cities I would

be visiting and I mentioned Rabat, Casablanca, Marrakesh and Fez. He corrected my pronunciation saying the local inhabitants pronounced it not as Fez but as Fars. What a meticulous person he was! Again he stated that he had friends in Fars whom I must meet. We had struck a friendship that I greatly value to this day.



The author with Edward Said (left)