

# Watching the Dogs Salivate

## Remarks on the 1992 Elections

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“I know one or 2 who have this year, for the first time, read a president’s message, but they do not see that this implies a fall in themselves rather than a rise in the president. Blessed are the young for they do not read the president’s message.”

—Thoreau to Parker Pillsbury, April 1861

The Empire now has New Clothiers, and opportunely for the rulers. As the political management languished and the economy buckled, change became the only way to keep the Empire on its track. The apparatus of organized illusion called the slaves to the Lever: which figurehead could best keep the Empire slouching along? Which party would put them back to work mining the Mystery, with picks and shovels and a small particle of eternity for all, while soothing them with homilies of health and happiness and an economy that would grow and grow forever, amen? Who could provide bread and circuses, feed the unruly to the Coliseum, torch the rebel colonies?

It was Caligula versus Nero, really, with the option to register (responsible) disaffection by voting for Croesus, the billionaire buffoon. Its atmosphere of sport and scandal, its Big Brother-like electronic “town meetings” and Hollywood hyper-politics drugged the populace like any mass entertainment. Age of complicit cynicism, the spectators could play along even while knowing it was all essentially a hoax. It worked anyway.

It didn’t matter if one believed in a party or even voted; what mattered was fascination, as the state and the media, in their double helix of ersatz opposition and legitimation, simultaneously roused and anaesthetized the audience. Just as the Gulf War became popular once initial fears were allayed, this performance involved its audience in organized, active passivity. Hearing the bell ring, the citizens gazed upon the show and told themselves that some momentous event was occurring. The Empire and only the Empire was real, not that receding shadow of what was once the phenomenal world. Watching was enough; publicity did the rest. Meanwhile life continued its downward spiral.

**Not that there was no unambiguous difference** between the candidates. If essentially they represented only alternative strategies for continuing imperial power, there were also significant differences on the level of mass psychology. Consider the blood-drenched Bush, proud of his massacres and denying the imperial malaise altogether, with bloated thieves at one hand and lead-lined, flint-eyed fascists at the other. One half-step to his right was the puffed-up pretender Buchanan, and one half-step to Buchanan’s right was the nazi cretin Duke. Bush appealed to what was most cramped and vengeful in the plebes and to raw avarice in the patricians.

In contrast, the consummate politico Clinton played a traditional game, manipulating a rhetoric (modernized for his television-bred generation) of inclusion, optimism, personal liberty, indignation at injustice and the promise to resolve the built-in miseries of the capitalist system. Clinton promised to make things better—better for the Empire, that is. Thus, he could appeal to plebes and patricians alike.

This good cop/bad cop combination worked well for capital. After a long period of steady economic dislocation and erosion of formal liberties, many people felt beaten-up enough to grasp at straws. Even if Clinton meant more of the same, Bush somehow appeared to signal something even uglier. Or perhaps, to shift analogies, one could say

that wanting to avoid Hitler, they pulled the lever for Hindenberg, as Germans fearful of nazism had done during the early 1930s. (Hindenberg soon after brought Hitler into the government.)

If on the level of mass psychology, the abused child has become (along with the abuser, or the serial murderer and his victim) an “indicator persona” in the culture (no matter what the actual conditions of abuse), those desperate souls who voted for the contender evoked the brutalized victim, shakily and hopefully accepting the extended, now seemingly conciliatory hand of the tormentor. As anyone questioning the whole procedure was apt to be told, what choice did they have? One candidate promised to send women to back alleys, to triturate the natural world, to let the poor rot. The other sold the snake-oil of a shapeless optimism.

Of course, this post-modern Hindenberg was the candidate for a more efficient business-as-usual, an Empire “with a human face.” The victims were hoping for a breather, but it didn’t last even until the inaugural, as it became brazenly clear that many of the same rats were going to join the listing ship of state. And the place still stinks of Weimar (the fascists haven’t gone away).

The rule of the caesars has been temporarily streamlined, but the new administrators face the same problems and crises, the same obstacles to rule, and will continue to oversee the decline of their civilization (no matter how protracted the decline may be). Most importantly, they will employ the same means to maintain their rule— austerly and misery for the masses and continued looting of the natural world, all enforced by the armed might of their legions.

**“The American people may yet vote** themselves dead and buried. I have never voted in my country; but don’t let that stop you if it makes you feel better.”

—Raymond Mungo, *Famous Long Ago*, 1970

Despite the palpable fraud, reasoned arguments against voting never seemed so brittle or flatly rationalistic— something akin to shouting into a vacuum. The declaration that “we” should abstain suggested a coherence in mass society that massification itself had undermined. One could, after all, riot one day and vote the next, but such acts do not in themselves necessarily constitute what radicals have trained ourselves to think they mean, or what dogma might say they mean. Given that one oppressor was going to win, a person might vote the way one might choose to buy (or steal) a specific capitalist product. This, in fact, was one common attitude.

To dispute even this kind of participation was to argue against the totality of humiliations and oppressive relations in mass authoritarian society. But invoking the totality implied just as much the relative meaninglessness of not voting, enmeshed as most people are in the reproduction of daily life under the Empire. Those too oppressed or too self-absorbed to vote don’t need to be told not to. Those who take voting seriously can’t fathom the idea. In the absence of far-reaching and coherent oppositional movements capable of posing real alternatives, such an argument was like appealing to people to stop being an atomized mass; by definition, they wouldn’t be listening.

In fact, those astute enough to see the strings being pulled appeared both to vote or not to vote for the same reasons and for some of the same values. If there was even a slight distinction between the two leaders (and only shrill dogma would assert that there was none), some people decided that all acts being relatively weightless in a world whose major determinants are beyond one’s reach, they would settle for the minuscule difference, and carry out that one small act. Thus, in the end, all the arguments against voting added up to a single, quixotic act of refusal.

I was sympathetic to those who voted for the challenger simply because they hated the incumbent’s guts. What was one more humiliation if you wouldn’t have to hear that nasal rich-boy whine of a monster you had grown to abhor with a bitter puissance, and you could see him repudiated rather than vindicated by his own system of prestige? Rather, given that conditions seemed to put one within striking distance (if only as a member of the atomized aggregate), why not give old Caligula a major stomach ache? (And those who did so had their way. Stepping out of the voting booth, Bush told reporters, “This has been the worst year of my life.” There was a momentary, delicious satisfaction in hearing that story, even though he deserved not so much to lose as to be hung for his many “years of service.”)

**And that 45% of eligible voters** who abstained, despite the “record turnout” (so much for mass abstention, “sending a message” to the rulers)—what were their reasons? One of my co-workers, a friendly enough, innocuous middle-aged family man, told me that he could not bring himself to vote “this time.” In other words, there was something particular to this election that bothered him.

He himself had evaded the draft (while not actively opposing the Vietnam War) in the 1960s, either because he was too smart or too squeamish. One would have thought he would choose Clinton out of a kind of fellowship or for old time's sake. Given his habitual inclination to take part, what exactly did he object to in the candidates?

His was, I suspect, a fairly typical example of not voting. Was he smart or squeamish enough to recognize it was meaningless? But what was meaningless about it to him? Another co-worker, who had actively opposed the Vietnam War and others hence, said he hated That Motherfucker so much that since he was apparently vulnerable, he was going to vote against him out of sheer spite. There was time in the day (and he even took off work), so I could hardly argue with him.

I, too, was happy to see That Motherfucker get his stomach ache, to see the lynch mobs with their plastic fetus fetishes sent back, if only temporarily, to their revival tents. Given the multiplicity and enormity of insults in this society, my friend chose which leader to hate for the next quadrennium. It was also his small way of saying to Bush (or so he told me), I couldn't stand your war—not only in the Middle East and Central America but against nature, women and the poor—and I can't stand you.

This was, in so many words, why many people I know voted for the panda in the jogging suit, even as they recognized full well there was no fundamental difference. They held their noses and pulled the lever, voting against the multi-front war, not least against Desert Storm and the myriad lies around it, since it was billed as Bush's chief attraction and proof of his superior character (and is now considered by media pundits and other cheerful robots to be his greatest, indeed his only "achievement").

Yet whatever their personal reasons, those who voted against the incumbent caesar voted for a more efficient, better managed Empire. They voted with the corporate CEOs who wanted a way out of capital's impasse. But perhaps worst of all, they voted alongside that much larger constituency for the most part satisfied with Bush's execution of the Gulf War but unhappy with his management of the imperial economy.

Had Bush been able to turn genocide into high-paying jobs, he might have been re-elected. Thus, the desperate and the outraged had to share the booth with people ("Reagan Democrats," "Clinton Republicans," patriots all) who bring to mind the line that it can't happen here because for all practical purposes it already has.

**Then there was the Croesus vote**, the Ross-for-Boss vote—the clown vote. A multibillionaire fascist who made his fortune bilking and milking the state, drew the interest of proles and plebes. He simply bought his way in, and for his megalomania was respectfully dubbed a political "maverick" and an "independent" by the Spin Machine.

Probably even more than his rivals, Perot reflected the total irrationality of the society in general and the elections in particular—their weightlessness, their ghostly irreality. The classic authoritarian character structure contributing to fascism was striking; here was the harsh, punitive father figure central to the complex of abuse and masochism, authority and obedience, rebellion and submission, in the psychology of modern authoritarian societies.

There was also the slavish fascination with money and its power. Ross would write the checks and flog the profligate. It didn't matter that he himself was a robber baron and swindler even by normal capitalist standards, or that his army of "paid volunteers" and his expensive "info-mercials" probably surpassed the routine venality of elections. In America, money talks and bullshit walks. Ross talked; his brittle cracker voice and corn-pone pablum appealed to the dull-but-cynical and were a direct reflection of their stupefaction and Pavlovian conditioning. An amalgam of "Dallas" tycoon J.R. Ewing and E.T., he was going to lift U.S. capitalism's hood and get that little engine running smoothly again.

A young Latina working mother told a reporter that the billionaire's fire and brimstone sermons on the imperial debt had made her realize she needed to worry about the future, to take responsibility. Worry over the deficit had "politicized" her—in the service of the power system. Not the falling forests, the dying sky, the fetid mountain of petrochemical waste, the ragged poor, the violence, the glazed eyes and withered souls of the young, the high tech televised wars. None of that. A paper debt to usurers: a fantasy.

This Croesus, who could swim in his money like Scrooge McDuck, was called the outsider, the watchdog, the Jeremiah. One of his supporters, a so-called "independent," a chubby, middle-aged, suburban white male known as a "swing voter," thought the corporate clown would "get things done." He explained his own independence in a manner suitable to his hero: "If Ford makes a good pickup truck but a lousy car, I'll buy a Ford pickup and a Chevy

car.” (Imagine what it would mean to urge him not to vote.) Proof that, as a political wit once remarked, America has the best democracy money can buy.

The Croesus vote was in most cases the stupid vote, even more manipulated and enthralled by the fraud than the others. Perot supporters were reminiscent of those unhappy creatures who protested rising meat prices in the 1970s by organizing public dinners to consume dog food. In this case, however, they seemed to be discovering that they rather liked the fare, and were recommending it. They wanted “their country back,” and they were willing to eat dog food to get it.

**The elections, like the Gulf War before them**, demonstrated how effectively the capitalist system self-stabilizes, balancing itself by using the very erosion of loyalty and confidence it engenders, both to mobilize support for rationalizing its rule and to discard ideologues that are no longer useful. Thus, during the Gulf War, the state successfully manipulated an amorphous anti-war sentiment and fear of casualties to generate support for and compliance with the war by exaggerating the Iraqi threat and then calling up many more reserves and troops (hostages) than needed. This imposed a nervous quiescence in many quarters, followed by sighs of relief when the affair became nothing more than shooting fish in a barrel, as one victor so aptly put it.

The elections continued this imposition of conformist regimentation and imperial loyalty as a kind of mopping-up campaign on the culture; the fear of the proto-fascist right and a desire to return to the good old days of relative misery rather than sliding into absolute misery brought a significant number of dissidents out to endorse an emergent game-plan among the rulers. Consider the alternatives, we will be told, no matter how bad it turns out to be with Nero.

While it might have been one thing for believers in the democratic state (as well as for believers in nothing) to vote to rid themselves of Caligula, for those claiming a principled opposition to statism in any form it meant a new compliance. If a publication like *The Nation* could counsel its left liberal constituency in October that, given their negligible numbers, they should make their relationship to the elections one of principled self-identity rather than pragmatic realpolitik, how much more such an argument had to mean for the handful of anarchists, anti-authoritarians and anti-statist radicals in the country! Yet a significant number opted for the lever.

Of course, none of us knows exactly how to confront the drift and thrust of mass society, its baroque distortion of human intentions and consequences, any more than we knew clearly how to respond to the Gulf War (the first post-modern war?) in order to reach and move people around us. So, even an anarchist who hated That Mother-fucker’s guts enough to pull the lever must have had his or her reasons. Such a choice had to represent a personal, existential act that suffered no illusion (and held even less hope) about the reduced terrain on which any meaningful, let alone effective, liberatory act might be accomplished. As the taoist sage wrote, “When society is orderly, a fool alone cannot disturb it; when society is chaotic, a sage alone cannot bring order.” Social entropy being the order of the day, their shifting under the oppressors’ weight was hardly a cause for indignation.

A conscious refusal to participate had and has promise not because of any eternal principles or anti-electoral dogma. Voting might conceivably make sense under certain conditions; it must be clear why it was senseless in 1992, under these. (In fact, the “None-of-the-Above” slogan was easily recuperated into a “message” of discontent to the leaders like protest voting. A cop in a restaurant laughed and told me he agreed with my “Vote No President” pin but would probably vote anyway—being a cop and therefore being stupid—for Croesus.)

If it can be argued that all acts have the same relative weightlessness in mass society, another response with potentially more exemplary promise might be to articulate opposition to the whole show by focusing on mass society itself, recognizing that for the most part those who voted and those who did not acted under the same operational principles of organized passivity. It was necessary to reveal the emptiness of voting in relation to life’s descent continuing behind imperial pseudo-events, and it was inevitably necessary to do so with the most meager of meager means—one’s own voice. A pacifist maxim has it that peace begins with oneself. One could say the same of coherence—one’s refusal has as much weight as one can expect to muster.

**In Baghdad, people danced in the streets** when Bush’s defeat was announced. One could hardly blame them; it might have been worth voting just to send them a ray of sunshine and a drop of revenge. Indeed, it was hard to resist the temptation to ruin Bush’s day; it was lovely to hear how depressed he became after his defeat, as long as he didn’t start firing missiles. (And, lo and behold, he eventually did.)

Ultimately, conscious electoral abstention was a personal act like voting. Being personal, it was automatically political. It was not necessarily rational or reasonable; it might have started from a refusal, despite all distinctions and circumstances, to grasp at the straw, or to salivate when the bell rang. It made sense precisely because so few people were doing it consciously. I earlier called such an act quixotic; but the goal of Don Quixote was to defend an ideal, no matter how archaic and obsolete, against a world steeped in corruption, greed and deception.

In June 1854, Thoreau asked his journal, "Who can be serene in a country where both rulers and ruled are without principle? The remembrance of the baseness of politicians spoils my walks. My thoughts are murder to the State; I endeavor in vain to observe nature; my thoughts involuntarily go plotting against the State. I trust that all just men will conspire."

With the entire planet shriveling under the weight of this civilization, voting could only be a pathetic, absurd kind of denial or repetition fetish for absurd, absolutely perilous conditions—a bit of entertainment or busy work for the passengers in steerage on a rudderless, sinking ship. The election and the enthusiasms it provoked permit the continuance of the war that both Caligula and Nero wage, the war against human reason and the gaunt hope for genuine solidarity and community.

An electoral refusal that was more than protest would act not only negatively, but as negation within negation, a "no" in relation to both the "yes" and the "no." It would recognize the sometimes compelling ambiguities and distinctions, and still respond with a "no."

Starting from the long view of the Empire and its inevitable decline, such a refusal would seek to illuminate the reality of a mass society that renders all choices meaningless.

But what if the simple act of voting meant saving a single species from extinction, I was asked. This might not be a question of symbols, but something like the Spotted Owl itself. I could only answer—and I am no more satisfied with the answer than my questioner was—how can the owl and the Empire both be saved? I bow humbly to the owl, but still a "no" within the "no." A reply to pragmatism with raw intransigence: a refusal of that bread, and that circus. When Nero proves to be just another version of Caligula, this "no" will remain.

I understand why Iraqis (and others) celebrated Caligula's retirement, and I celebrated with them. But still a "no" within the "no." The baseness of politics and the suffocation of whole worlds, the glare from the screens and the ringing of the bell—only the "no" within the "no" seems to adequately respond.

Some things have changed little since Thoreau's day. Endeavoring in vain to observe nature, my mind goes involuntarily plotting. Plot against the State; plot against the state of affairs. I hope all just women and men will conspire.

—George Bradford,

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