

Bad Trip

California in the Age of Schwarzenegger and Bush

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2004

After the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as the new governor of California, most people could be forgiven for thinking that something much less than a political cataclysm has occurred in this state. The inhabitants go about their routines of work and leisure; there are no torchlight parades, or even rumors of same, to celebrate the victory of the former admirer of Hitler, Schwarzenegger, over the spectral and aptly named Gray Davis.

So far, Californians show little likelihood of trading in their running shoes for jackboots. One half of the state is still shaking its collective head at the election outcome; the other, those who have given the Austrian-born actor a new starring role, this time in Sacramento rather than Hollywood, have already “moved on” and are in search of new thrills.

After the election, the sky doesn't seem to have fallen, and one knows that much of what passes for politics in the United States is purely epiphenomenal. Real power resides elsewhere, in the instances of the National Security State and the corporate elite, so why all the fuss over who warms the governor's chair in California? There have been actors in Californian and national politics before; Schwarzenegger is a member, by proxy, of the Kennedy family; he's a Republican, but without a hard right agenda; he may even owe his victory to the fact that he had no political program whatsoever aside from the box office value of his celebrity status. It is hardly more catastrophic than any other election in recent times in this country, one might say. Wasn't a professional wrestler elected governor of the “progressive” state of Minnesota just a few years back?

But if sober analysis is usually preferable to apocalyptic interpretation when it comes to American elections, it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of the Schwarzenegger phenomenon, coming as it does while the Iraq War can hardly be called over, and with the California recall election taking place just a few months after the streets of San Francisco and other American cities were filled with antiwar protesters, to such an extent that some on the left could plausibly, if giddily, proclaim that the protesters represented the “other global superpower.” San Francisco, to be sure, voted massively against Schwarzenegger, who fared badly in the Bay Area as a whole, and along the northern coast of the state. It is tempting to see the Schwarzenegger campaign as being purely a product of Southern California, with the northern half of the state being held hostage by the demographic power of the south.

Still, to have Schwarzenegger—for all of his movie star glamour, a member of the war party—elected while American casualties (to say nothing of Iraqi ones) continue in Iraq, and while Bush has come under sustained scrutiny for the lies used to promote the Iraq war in the first place, suggests that a kind of cognitive dissonance, or at least selective amnesia, was evidenced in the recall election. People who were apparently against Bush, or against Bush's war, still found it possible to vote for the recall and for Bush's candidate for governor.

During the antiwar marches, when the political momentum in California, and in the country as a whole, seemed to shift in a massive repudiation of Bush and his policies, one of the popular slogans chanted by the marchers was, “This is what democracy looks like!” Faced with the results of the recall election, one is forced at the very least, to re-

evaluate the proposition contained in this phrase. Either the recall wasn't democratic, or the people were deluded, or both.

Even allowing for the obviously denatured quality of a process conducted essentially via television and under the sign of the Almighty Dollar, we are uncomfortably close to the situation described in Brecht's famous remark about the people's vanguard, when being faced with a population refusing its leadership, having to "elect another people."

An argument based on the idea of the masses simply being duped is always tempting and is not necessarily wrong for its simplicity—but it is also a copout. It absolves people of any responsibility for the consequences of their actions, and it trivializes the end result. In any case, it is an argument based on assumptions of "politics as usual," and at the very least, one has learned by now that politics in the era of Bush is anything but usual. By itself, the Schwarzenegger phenomenon is startling enough; when placed in the context of the ambitions of the Bush-Cheney regime, it is profoundly disturbing.

Fantasy and Uncertainty, Recession and Racism

Most obviously, the recall campaign took place after more than two years of a recession which was characterized first, and dramatically so in California, by the collapse of the speculative bubble surrounding the "dot.com economy" of the late 1990s. This downturn has produced a high and persistent rate of unemployment in California, and resulted in the drastic reduction of state revenues, thereby creating a fiscal crisis at the level of state government.

As the incumbent, Davis came to personify this crisis, even though its origins—like the Californian electricity crisis which followed in its wake—lay elsewhere, in the cyclical nature of capitalist economics, and in the case of the so-called electricity crisis, in specific policies of the Bush administration, which pursued a policy of deregulation at all costs, or at costs which would benefit its friends in the energy brokerage business, like the Houston-based Enron corporation.

The recession, and its transformation of the economic outlook for California from exhilarating fantasy (the Bush government seeks to complete and extend the "Reagan revolution," to drastically revise the de facto social contract in the United States in the direction of an unregulated and unlimited private sector based on illusions of an endless expansion) to one of uncertainty and precariousness, created the environment in which the recall campaign took place.

But that the recall found such fertile terrain must also be explained by the fact that the political ground had already been softened up by decades of right-wing populism in California centered on the initiative process.

Beginning with the Prop. 13 "taxpayers' revolt," and on through the Prop. 157 anti-immigrant hysteria, an "anti-establishment," nativist message was crafted, one which provided an obvious blueprint for the Schwarzenegger campaign. Ironically, the initiative process, a legacy of the Progressive era in California, has become a vehicle for a kind of petit-bourgeois, Poujadist resentment whose target is never the ruling class, but "special interests" in the form of minorities and labor.

An educational system structurally and chronically underfunded due to the success of Prop. 13 bears the brunt of voter anger which simply lashes out at the status quo, all the while further entrenching the existing system of corporate power.

In the recall campaign, Schwarzenegger's handlers played the race card in a shrewd way. Their candidate could point to his immigrant origins and emphasize his Austrian accent, all the while exploiting the "illegal immigrant driver's license" issue to play on the fears of Anglo Californians, who have been fed propaganda for years on rightwing talk radio about a Mexican "invasion," hyperbole which has risen to the level of hysteria about a "re-conquest" which would result in "Mexifornia," a state in which non-Hispanic natives would supposedly be deprived of their "birthright." To a sense of economic insecurity was added a dose of existential anxiety, both serving as fuel for the recall.

Unilateral Dominance and Unlimited Dollars

For the Bush administration, the California recall presented an unhopèd-for target of opportunity, allowing for a kind of pre-emptive strike in which politics in the state could be destabilized and, through Schwarzenegger's election, captured at least nominally for the Republican Party. In this sense, the recall represented the success of a kind of bloodless "executive action" plan, one in keeping with the Bush administration's modus operandi in other areas, both foreign and domestic. And beyond its immediate impact in California, Schwarzenegger's election becomes truly scary when seen as part of a general state of exception that defines political rule in the United States at present.

Politics in the era of Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld has increasingly come to resemble something extraordinary, as more closely resembling the tactics associated with the times of Bush's grandfather, Prescott, the banker to the Nazis, than the corporate suite style of his father, the former president. In the 2000 election, the Bush campaign deployed its operatives in Florida and nationally, in a well-financed and well-organized operation to secure power, at whatever cost.

Once power was obtained, the Bush administration set about to systematically implement its campaign program, much to the chagrin of the usually blase members of the political class in the United States, who were slow to realize the extent of the ambitions of the Bush-Cheney regime—and the term regime seems most appropriate to a government which came to power in the manner in which this one did.

Having clawed their way to power, Bush and Cheney set about to make use of it. In doing so, they clarified what had seemed a mystery during the Clinton years, i.e., just why the American right had savaged Clinton, who after all had accommodated Wall Street and played well in Silicon Valley, pursuing a centrist domestic and foreign policy, which hardly jeopardized American pre-eminence in the post-Cold War world. The Bush-Cheney faction of the American ruling class, which emanated directly from the oil and defense industries, was not content with mere pre-eminence, however. Its interpretation of "the unipolar moment" created by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War was to unilaterally assert American claims to a global authority, to a universal supremacy which brooks no rival or competitor and is backed by military force.

The Bush government seeks to complete and extend the "Reagan revolution," to drastically revise the de facto social contract in the United States in the direction of an unregulated and unlimited private sector, while simultaneously consolidating American power globally through the accumulation of overwhelming force, and internally through the dramatic extension of the military-intelligence complex, to the extent that politics in the United States now seems simply to be the agenda of the National Security State writ large. The September 11th catastrophe created the opportunity for the implementation of this ambitious program.

Since then, the Bush administration, much in the manner of the Likud in Israel, has sought to create certain permanent "facts on the ground." The invasion of Iraq, and the projection of American military power which this war represented, was part of a continuum which began with the repudiation of the Kyoto Protocols on global warming and the ABM treaty on the deployment of anti-missile weapons. The quagmire which the ' occupation of Iraq now represents will interrupt the momentum of American unilateralism, but it will not break it, at least as long as the neo-conservatives hold sway in Washington.

Bush and company seek to institutionalize their power by means of sustained high levels of military spending and the incorporation of neo-conservative doctrine as the operating manual of the American security state. Domestically, their program is one of rollback and privatization to a degree even undreamed of in the Reagan era.

Where public relations ploys fail in the implementation of their strategy, they have few scruples about resorting to a policy of intimidation and the criminalization of dissent in order to neutralize opposition to their policies. Recent revelations about a Cointelpro-type surveillance of the antiwar movement by the Ashcroft Justice Department only emphasize the degree to which the current administration has resorted to special measures as instruments of its rule.

From Terminator to Dominator Action Hero in Dystopia

Arnold Schwarzenegger's fictive on-screen powers are now enhanced by real temporal authority, but it is doubtful that many will make any distinction between the "real" and the "unreal." Should the image of Schwarzenegger the Action Hero become tarnished by revelations about his actions in real life, he may very well find an indulgent or sympathetic audience, for this would be in keeping with public attitudes toward celebrities, whose failures make them "human" and therefore, in many instances, more appealing. Conversely, should the Terminator become the Dominator, it is conceivable that his exercise of authoritarian power might be enjoyed, as a kind of masochistic experience of erotic submission, by that multitude which has already succumbed to his charms as screen idol and star candidate.

The image of Schwarzenegger at the wheel of his Hummer—a monstrosity developed originally as a military vehicle, the Humvee—is emblematic of all that is wrong in contemporary California, and the United States, for that matter. Not only is a moron at the wheel; the vehicle is militarized, relies on huge amounts of petroleum, and is antithetical to any sense of human scale or natural beauty. Both Schwarzenegger and his Hummer are exaggerated yet representative products of a society whose absurdity no longer shocks because it is so pervasive.

As governor, Schwarzenegger merely has to show up in Sacramento to earn a certain "credibility," very much in the manner of George W Bush, whose mere ability to utter a complete English sentence was offered as "proof" of his intellectual abilities during the presidential campaign of 2000.

Schwarzenegger has made no secret of his tilt toward business, and this will ensure that California workers will be at even more of a disadvantage when confronted by corporate demands, as in the current Southern California grocery strike, for givebacks on health benefits and salaries; his policies are likely to encourage more unplanned and unnatural growth, more use of nonrenewable and nuclear energy, leading to further degradation of an overstressed environment.

Bush will be looking to a successful performance by Schwarzenegger to push California to the right and thereby help ensure a Republican victory at the national level in 2004. In spite of an occupation in Iraq that seems to become messier and bloodier by the day, a Bush victory in 2004 cannot be discounted at this point, and this prospect only underlines the fact that it does matter that this particular group of people is in power at this time.

It is not just the abstract "movement of capital" we are witnessing, but a world in which human agents make decisions and execute commands. It is also obviously a world in which orders are obeyed, triggers are pulled, and decisions are implemented. Putting Bush in Washington, and Schwarzenegger in California, does have consequences.

Beyond Machine Dreams: Is Another World Possible?

For many people, it is a matter of supreme unimportance who is governor, or who is president. There is something healthy, and perhaps quintessentially American, about this popular disdain for power and prestige, and for those who incarnate these qualities.

But to paraphrase Trotsky's famous quip about war, you may not be interested in the state, but the state is interested in you. Power does require acquiescence, or at least indifference, on the part of the masses. Even those most uninterested in political issues are not immune to the effects of government decisions or the consequences of unbridled corporate power in the world.

At present, where even the most modest curtailment of the National Security State seems a utopian undertaking, there may be no harm in thinking speculatively about alternatives to the status quo, and dreaming big. If even incremental change seems remote, one may as well think about more fundamental, systemic change addressing the root causes of the socio-political disaster and environmental catastrophe that the world of Bush and Schwarzenegger represents.

There is certainly no project of radical social transformation on the immediate horizon in California: one must look elsewhere, where the crisis of hypercapitalism is much more articulated, for that. It is instructive to look at a few recent examples of institutional crisis in another part of the Americas. In Argentina, where IMF-imposed plans created mass unemployment and a collapse in the living standards, the slogan of the rioters in Buenos Aires

in 2001 was “¡Que se vayan todos!” which can be roughly translated as “Throw them all out, every last one!” If there was perhaps a small echo of this in the “throw the bums out” mentality of California voters, there was also something fundamentally different. In Argentina, not only did the government fall, but alternative forms of social power were created in neighborhood assemblies and in the actions of the radical piquetero movement, which continues into the present. In Bolivia, another radical social movement recently caused the downfall of the government.

Clearly, California is not Argentina or Bolivia, although its corporations and banks are part of the world system that creates and enforces the conditions that led to such radical results in those countries. And certainly some in California are aware of this: during the antiwar marches of earlier this year, a slogan borrowed from the anti-globalization movement simply stated “Another World is Possible.” Of course it is, but saying so doesn’t make it so. For another world to appear, or even to be envisioned by large numbers of people, one needs to offer a compelling alternative, an emancipatory vision, and not simply a miserabilist denunciation of the reigning order and its many odious features. What made the antiwar demonstrations of the past year interesting was the spontaneity and imaginativeness displayed by thousands of people in the streets, not the droning speeches from leftist ideologues or the crowd-pleasing rhetoric of Democratic politicians on the speakers’ platform.

Another, better world is definitely not going to be made with the authoritarian troglodytes of International ANSWER and Not in Our Name, who should be left to “defend” Stalinist North Korea and the Maoist Shining Path by themselves. Unfortunately, many on the anti-authoritarian left, who do have a critique of the indefensible politics of the antiwar coalitions, demonstrated their own failure of imagination in being unable to put forward the project of a different kind of antiwar movement, and through this, a different kind of movement for social change.

This is an admittedly tall order for any contemporary movement to achieve, but staying in a dependent position vis-a-vis the major antiwar coalitions, and functioning, in effect, simply as their left wing, ensured that nothing of the kind could even be started.

Where the anti-authoritarian left did try to distinguish itself from the mainstream antiwar movement, it ran into a cul-de-sac largely of its own making. Opting for direct action and a kind of moralistic unilateralism in which certain laudable actions (shutting down the business district of San Francisco, and “bringing the war home” in other areas) were pursued without the inclusion of the very people (ordinary office workers, for example) the actions were supposed to influence, it found itself without the mass base that any further extension of its activities would require. Ironically, in so doing, it showed itself to be just as “vanguardist” as the Marxist-Leninist parties. collective movement for radical social change will not be inaugurated by sheer pre-emption or a kind of maximalist rhetoric emptily proclaiming that there is “no war but the class war.” The affinity groups of the Spanish anarchists—which serve as a direct model for much of today’s direct action and anti-globalization protest—were embedded in a radicalized working class with its own organizations, newspapers, and oppositional culture. The anti-authoritarian left in the United States is a long way from creating such an alternative social space, and, to be fair there are a host of reasons why this is so, rooted in historical processes and the social composition of much of this movement, which; for all of its well-intentioned concern for “the people,” is largely confined to the radicalized intelligentsia and the urban bohemian milieu.

In the post-Fordist world of hypercapitalism whose very development fragments and disrupts solidarities based on commonalities of social class and social space, replacing them with a segmented workforce and a diffusely organic social environment, it is hard to imagine where new communities of resistance will arise. At the same time, one knows that the very “progress” of the present world system will inevitably generate more contradictions, more crises, more opposition to its dominion.

In the first days of the Schwarzenegger administration, California largely presents a negative example to itself and to the world. It combines physical gigantism with a shrinking of social possibilities, resulting in the paradoxical coexistence of vast technical capacities and knowledge with a determination of their potential use based largely on market or military criteria. The current California model generates both material and intellectual impoverishment, the latter manifested in a collective incapacity to imagine and pursue possibilities other than those imposed in the present epoch.

Inevitably, however, techno-capitalism cannot reproduce socially the kind of integrated circuitry at the core of its silicon empire. There are barriers, interruptions, surges; above all, there is the “human factor” which does not fit

into the equations of the planners and programmers' and which will always seek something beyond the machine dreams of the present social order. —Palo Alto, November 24, 2003.

This is an excerpt from a much larger work. For more information, contact the author at aproximaciones@hotmail.com or Approximations, PO Box 61036, Palo Alto, CA 94306-1036.

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