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Certainty in the Coming Community

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The last part of the twentieth century saw an array of theses proclaiming sweeping changes in the way we understood our world, several of which proclaimed—concurrent with the end of the cold war, the fall of the Berlin wall and the apparent retreat of communism—that we had reached the ‘end of history’. This, of course, was not to be read as meaning an end of things happening (a common mistaken reading of Francis Fukuyama’s claims in *The End of History and the Last Man*), but rather that the apparent loss of anything to systematically challenge the western liberal democratic political system suggested that all would come to accept this system simply as the ‘solution that other people will necessarily adopt when they cease to be ‘irrational’’ (Mouffe, 2000: 65). This is, in other words, the western tradition’s assumption of the liberal democratic having become ‘coextensive with the political’ (Derrida, 2005: 28). Certainly the system would be open to pragmatic adjustments of the kind Richard Rorty calls for—adjustments aimed at making liberal democratic practices work more effectively—but these would not question the underlying status of the system itself. After all, the assumption would be that, as Rorty describes it, the liberal democratic system simply is ‘the greatest thing ever invented, and the source of all good things’ (Rorty, 2006: 53-54).

The events of and succeeding from 9/11, despite clearly demonstrating that liberal democracy is not beyond challenge (physically and ideologically), did little to rock this view. If anything they reiterated the western view that the civilised is (only) the liberal democratic. Think, for example, of then U.S. President George W. Bush’s Address to the Nation where he made a clear distinction between ‘us’ (civilized) and ‘them’ (barbaric), describing the attacks as ‘evil, despicable acts of terror’ (Bush, 2001), further contending that, as Chomsky puts it, other nations must either ‘join us or face

destruction' (Chomsky, 2001: 75). This division was further entrenched by one of the rationales for the War on Terror being the western introduction of and support for liberal democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nonetheless, these events did mark some changes in perspective. In particular they highlighted the ongoing tension in western liberal democracy between the maximising of liberty and equality, and raised the question of how democracy can continue if it needs to—for reasons of 'homeland security'—restrict its operation as a democracy. They highlighted, in other words, both the need for, and logical incoherence of, protectionist strategies—strategies to protect democracy against its own openness, strategies that were instigated and maintained by democratic governments on the back of issues of homeland security and public anxiety. Such strategies of course included new anti-terrorism (and refugee) laws, restrictions on individual rights, greater powers given to federal agencies, etc.

With all of these changes, December 2008 is an interesting point to stop and take stock of some of the events of the previous twelve months. On the political front in the west, this period has seen the election of Kevin Rudd as Australian Prime Minister and the end of the eleven year reign of John Howard; the confirmation of Barack Obama as U.S. President-elect, ending the eight year reign of George W. Bush. This period has also seen the gradual mainstream acceptance of climate change and glimmers of recognition of the forthcoming problem of peak oil. Also clear is that we are entering a global recession, one that has brought a range of commentators to question the integrity of capitalist economies, and to speculate on alternatives to the free-market. Finally, there is apparent a growing loss of confidence in the War on Terror as the most appropriate means of combating global terrorist activity. Taken together all of these suggest a gradual shift in public attitudes in the west.

Looking close to home, Kevin Rudd's election as Australian Prime Minister heralded an array of policy reversals—reversals that, being at the basis of many of his election promises, clearly informed Rudd's coming to power. Under Rudd, for instance, Australia finally ratified the Kyoto Protocol, delivered a national apology to indigenous Australians, abandoned the 'Pacific Solution', set in motion the withdrawal of (combat) troops from Iraq, and is set to overhaul some of the sweeping anti-terrorism regulations introduced under Howard's government. Similar shifts could also be presumed to occur in the United States of America once President-elect Obama comes to power in 2009. He has, for instance, already indicated changes in policy regarding the War on Terror and climate change.

2008, then, marks a rethinking of some of the certainties through which we have engaged with issues of war, terror, indigeneity, economics, and the state of the planet. This rethinking points to both a social present that is less certain, less sure and more open, and perhaps to the potential of what Agamben calls the 'coming

community'. This, he describes as the situation where the condition of belonging, or more precisely the co-belonging of humans, is not premised upon or built through 'any representable condition of belonging' (1993: 86), since all representable conditions of belonging, operate through a violent inclusion/exclusion logic (the divisive 'us' versus 'them' logic common to the policies of both the Howard and Bush governments, for instance). More crucially, the representable conditions of belonging are built upon particular certainties—about identity, the environment, terrorism and so on—that can hinder the possibility of change and transformation. This is why, for Agamben, the coming community is a community that 'do[es] not possess any identity to vindicate or any bond of belonging for which to seek recognition' (1993: 86). Rudd's apology and the ratification of Kyoto, Obama's impending intervention and reorganisation of the US's position on climate change, the war on terror and domestic policies, are marks of the possibility of forming and forging such a community, one that is less concerned with marking tropes of inclusion and exclusion and more concerned with dismantling these very regimes of regulation. (A similar call can be found in the recent resurgence of interest in cosmopolitanism.

However the changes that we have signalled to above must be cautiously embraced, for amidst the changes that point to a future social order that is less certain, open, there remains the disconcerting spectre of certainty. We can see this for instance in the global response to the recent financial crisis in the form of bailout packages. While such a move ensures employment, the ability to maintain a mortgage and so on, it also points to the certainty and centrality of the capitalist system whose demise these responses are keen to prevent. In other words, bailouts entrench the certainty of the capitalist system. Similarly, while Obama has signalled a shift from the Bush policy, which is most welcome, the certainty, centrality and power of specific state structures and institutions should not be underestimated. Obama's response to the Gaza invasion in December is a case in point. Other than these two instances that we have mentioned, there are numerous other events built on certainties resulting in the genocide, expulsion, and rejection of people, communities, environments, and forms of livelihoods. This continued exercise of violence on peoples, communities, environments, livelihoods is enacted through recourse and legitimacy to various forms of certainties—the right to rule, the right to exclude/include, the right to punish and take life, and the right to let live. And these certainties are built upon, or more precisely premised on a form of logocentrism. That is to say the locution, the exercise of certain rights, rules, and regulations are staged in non-negotiable terms, with absolute certainty (Derrida, 1978).

To this end, 2008 thus witnessed the continuity and entrenchment of different forms of violences as well as attempts at rethinking the validity and legitimacy of positions on climate change, settler-indigenous relations, war on terror, and the speculative finance that drives contemporary capitalism. In short 2008 witnessed the

cementing of the certainty of particular truths or knowledge structures as well as events that marked a challenge to the discourse of certainty. It is against such a backdrop, and in response to such a social present, that the three issues for 2008 have appeared.

The two previous issues for 2008 touched upon, elaborated and attempted not only to rethink the certainty through which specific discourses are constituted, but also call into question what we mean by certainty in the first place. The papers in the first issue, 'Protean Borders and Unsettled Interstices', tackled the question of borders (both symbolic and real) that inform debates about climate change, political liberalism, and the rights of movement and entry, and collectively attempt to rethink the certainties through which economic, socio-cultural, political, disciplinary and institutional border zones are produced. The special issue for 2008, 'Indigenous Bodies', continued with an interrogation of what we mean by certainty through an exploration of the myriad and complex ways that indigenous bodies are constituted and reconstituted. Spanning across 'more than two centuries' (Konishi, et al, 2008: 7-8) the papers demonstrate continuities in the exoticisation and eroticisation of indigenous bodies, driven by the certainties of colonial and neo-colonial knowledge systems. In other words, they show how the certainties of such knowledges perpetuate and legitimise the racialisation of indigenous bodies. On the other hand, the papers also seek to rethink the certainties through which such conceptions of the body are entrenched and at the same time open other potential and possible ways to think through indigenous bodies that deviate from and challenge the assumptions embedded in colonial and neo-colonial certainties regarding indigenous bodies.

In that sense both previous issues, and the current, about which we will elaborate below, attend to and are vigilant of the violence of certainties. More importantly however, underwriting these issues is a challenge posed to the certainties of a decision and the privileging of a certain truth or knowledge structure. The discussions in Issue 7.1 by Mansfield on the inadequateness of current conceptions of cultural politics for the debates on climate change, or the call for the 'the pluralisation of democracy over the liberal project to protect democracy through normative principles' by Chambers and Finlayson, or Ganter's critique in Issue 7.2 of attempts to unproblematically define, make certain, Aboriginality without bearing witness to the slippage inherent within such projects of naming and calculating, are cases in point.

The current issue, 7.3, brings 2008 to a close, with six contributions all engaged with this changing climate of certainty. To begin with, Tarik Kochi and Noam Ordan, in their paper 'An Argument for the Global Suicide of Humanity', question our acceptance of humanity as the focal point of our modern moral discourses and the way this acceptance informs our thinking about interspecies relations and broader environmental and ecological issues. They propose that we

should substantially revise our assumptions regarding the moral status of the human species, flattening out our hitherto accepted human-centric hierarchy. Explored in the context of what Stephen Hawking has called 'a world that is in chaos politically, socially and environmentally (Hawking, 2007), Kochi and Ordan controversially propose the 'possibility of human's willing extinction', a possibility that they describe as a 'profound moral gesture' that would remake the 'equation of life on this earth ... for the benefit of everything non-human' (Kochi & Ordan, 2008). Detailed in the form of a thought experiment (and one with a range of precursors), Kochi and Ordan suggest that such proposals, even while they are extremely unlikely to take hold, are important in that they drive us to 'rethink what it means to participate in modern, moral life within the natural world' (Kochi & Ordan, 2008). They drive us, in other words, to consider some of our long-standing assumptions and to remember that our certainties have divisive and violent effects.

The next two papers continue this explicit interrogation of current assumptions and practices, although they do so in the context of policy and governance in the global arena rather than ethics. First William Walters explores the long-standing assumptions and practices of the 'policing of stowaways' in his 'Bordering the Sea: Shipping Industries and the Policing of Stowaways'. Here, in the context of 'maritime insurance companies and shipping consultants who have made the prevention and resolution of stowaway incidents into a normal part of their practice', Walters makes clear the necessity of rethinking some of the prevailing assumptions around securitisation, borders and deportation. After all, as he demonstrates, this management of the stowaway utilises a very different set of strategies to those normally drawn on in securitisation theory, strategies that tend towards a 'normalization of illegal immigration' rather than simply a fight against it (Walters, 2008).

Also concerned with questions of policy and governance, Jenny Bryant-Tokalau turns our attention to the management of environmental projects in the Pacific. Here she argues the need for a new approach in environmental governance in the region, one that better recognises the tensions between global, regional and indigenous environmental aims and issues. After all, as Bryant-Tokalau puts it:

The necessity to respond to a plethora of global conventions, opportunities for accessing funds, participation in global and regional meetings and conferences, as well as membership of regional and local organizations, can place untenable demands on small countries with limited resources and expertise. (Bryant-Tokalau, 2008)

The reality of this has meant 'uneven returns' on donor aid, returns that inform further layers of governance to the point that there are, as Bryant-Tokalau notes, perhaps more 'layers of governance in the Pacific ... than in the rest of the developing world' (Bryant-Tokalau,

2008). What is needed, she argues, is a shift in both understanding and practices of governance, making both more aware of and responsive to the realities of life in these small countries and communities.

The final three papers all interrogate broad questions of identity and credibility in the contexts of white expertise, witnessing and resistance respectively. In each case the authors are concerned to draw our attention to the political ramifications of all claims of identity and credibility. Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer, for instance, explores the performativity of the 'white expert' in *Critical Whiteness Studies*, examining both how 'white authors fashion themselves within their texts' and how different audiences might 'consume and react to' these performances. Through this she concludes that such performances need to demonstrate an awareness of both how 'the white body takes up (takes over) space' and how such presence can easily slip once again into a 'recuperation and affirmation of whiteness and white privilege' (Greenhalgh-Spencer, 2008). Making a point that Bryant-Tokalau would undoubtedly affirm, Greenhalgh-Spencer suggests that the white expert would benefit from a dose of uneasiness and awkwardness.

The fifth paper, Julie Matthews' and Kwangsook Chung's 'Credible Witness: Identity, Refuge and Hospitality', is an exploration of how issues of identity and credibility can play out in the fraught arena of transnational displacement and refuge. In particular the authors consider the 'condition of those who become witnesses to a violent dislocation from family, friends, homes and histories', the condition of 'forced migrants', and ask us how we should bear witness to these subjects. Discussed through the frame of Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Credible Witness*, Matthews and Chung provoke us to question our own—and those of various levels of governance—practices of (in)hospitality.

The last paper of the issue, 'Transnational Resistance or Cultural Exotica?: Interrogating the Multicultural Accommodation of the *Kufiya*' by Nashwa Salem, makes clear the contradictory articulations of the *kufiya*. A checkered scarf historically rooted in anticolonial resistance, Salem contends the *kufiya* has, through its western cosmopolitan consumption, enabled the emergence of the 'fetishized figure of the 'dangerous stranger' as a 'consumable figment of the Orientalist imaginary'. An interrogation of the mundane, Salem contends that the 'innocent task of deciding "what to wear" inevitably intersects with plural dimensions of power', demonstrating the 'creative and subversive potential of clothing practices as a mode of representation' (Salem, 2008).

Traversing various domains, from policy and governance, to ethics, the issue of co-belonging, migration, and humanism, to clothing, the papers for our closing issue for 2008 are oriented, without stating it explicitly, to asking that core Foucauldian question 'what are we

today'?. More precisely, they are oriented toward asking and responding to the question of the certainties that structure what we are today, and of attempting to undo some of the certainties that mark our sense of self, community, and belonging. To this end, we hope that this last issue for 2008 provokes further debates about the space and time we inhabit. Finally, on behalf of our editorial team, we would like to wish all our readers, contributors, and referees, all the best for 2009 and a big thank you for all their ongoing work and support.

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