A bright autumn day in New York City, 1989. Sun reflects back from the used needles lying around Washington Square. Uptown a gigantic neon sign flashes the National Debt in up-to-the-second figures, changing so quickly that I can't read the last five columns. I'm thinking New York warnings: 'Keep your wallet in a front pocket,' 'The latest scam: they squirt you with ketchup and an accomplice cleans you up, and cleans you out,' 'Keep moving if someone asks you for something.'

I'm just off Bleeker Street, Greenwich Village, looking for a coffee shop; looking like a tourist; looking back to the sixties and the incongruity, today, of Paul bloody Simon's lyrics:

Fog's rolling in off the East River bank
Like a shroud it covers Bleeker Street
Fills the alleys where men sleep
Hides the shepherd from the sheep

On the next corner there's a couple of black guys arguing, New York style, at the top of their voices. So loud. You wonder what they'd do if they really got angry. One of them seems to be a street preacher. Anyhow, he's bringing down a heavy God-message on the other guy. Next thing, the second guy turns to him and says: 'Yo ain't here by the grace of no Higher Authority, brother - yo here by the grace of yowa ass.'

And in some ways, it could finish right here - politics in America, that is, with a non-starter of a difference; with the twin pillars of God and the human soul. With nothing in between. It's an ancient American edifice, a formal structure supporting nothing.

As if in compensation for that lack, that empty space of collective politics, the media are full of gloating details about the fall of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe.

I'm sipping a fourth long black decaf in the Café Florio, watching the woman at the next table compose autobiographical fragments.
between tall glasses of frothy iced coffee. Someone turns on the wall TV for the CBS news. Wandering the streets of Czechoslovakia, interviewing the celebrants, is Dan Rather, looking bulky as a WWII barrage balloon in his winter gear. His line is the upsurge of the church in Eastern European politics. Poland is the obvious model. He talks to a bishop in full regalia against a stained-glass window. It looks like a fancy-dress party. The bishop has gone to the party as God, and Dan Rather as somebody's ass.

Back in New York, Rather asks that most astute of political experts, Billy Graham: 'From what you've just seen there in Czechoslovakia, would you say that overall in Eastern Europe we're witnessing a triumph of faith over ideology?'

Politics, they presume, is elsewhere, anywhere but America. Here they have only faith. And that, of course, isn't political, is it, Billy?

Flying south on American Airlines, I put down my copy of Baudrillard's eurocentric celebration of America and pick up the in-flight magazine, aptly titled *American Way*. There's a letter I can't begin to understand:

I enjoy your magazine and look forward to each issue when I fly American Airlines.

It seems paradoxical, however, that you would publicize Mr. Dan Rather ['Rather Redux,' *American Way*, Oct. 1], who symbolizes socialist doctrines, rather than the American ideal that I cherish. Mr. Rather is a master at misinformation, and he distorts truth, which should be the foundation of the news.

Most people of my walk of life abhor that the news media have been so totally captured by the ultraliberal individuals like Mr. Rather and Walter Cronkite.

The one fundamental that has been unique about the American way is the belief that the freedom of the individual is superior to the power of government. I know of no individual (excluding Marx and Lenin) who has done more to subjugate individuals to government than Mr. Rather.

I hope in the future you publicize patriots and those great people who build rather than destroy.

Richard G. Murray
Perkins, Okla.

In New Orleans, I show this to a learned friend. He tells me Dan Rather was the only TV interviewer to give George Bush anything like a difficult time in the run-up to the last presidential election. That would seem to explain it then. But if giving George a hard time is a case of subjugating individuals to government, then I'm still confused.

A little further on in the magazine is the now ubiquitous photo of the young guy in a white shirt facing down the tanks on the approach to Tiananmen Square — the media archetype of the resistance of individuals to government. As a summary of the passing 80s, it's
placed alongside other American triumphs of what are made to look like the same kind: Gorbachev and Reagan’s 1987 Geneva summit (‘It’s the voice of peace’), Springsteen-the-Boss singing ‘Born in the USA’ (‘It’s the voice of every man’), the return of the US hostages in 1981 (‘It’s the voice of hope’), Lech Walesa, a pre-assassination Anwar Sadat (1980), Charles and Di. Charles and Di? And the caption? ‘From a distance there is harmony and it echoes through the land . . . God is watching us, from a distance.’ The politics of ‘God-and-me’ is everywhere. It slips by incognito, unrecognized precisely as a politics.

I have to remember hard to find Baudrillard writing, elsewhere, that this ‘silence of the masses is . . . obscene’. Obscene because the masses are made of ‘useless hyperinformation’. So the information circuits and the masses ‘fit one another: the masses have no opinion and information does not inform them’. Both, he goes on, lack ‘a scene where the meaning of the social can be enacted’. The social, the political, is forever repressed into the only available and necessarily counter-political discourses. And the most obvious candidates, in fancy dress, are still ‘the Higher Authority’ and ‘yowa ass’.

In a curiously damp and steamy New Orleans December, the wooden shopfronts and verandas of the French Quarter are dripping and sagging with rain and age, trying to lean across the narrow streets to their opposite numbers, as if to whisper some message no longer secret. It’s a city predicated on well-known pleasures — where middle-American middle-class mid-Westerners come for vacations, to take drugs, screw, get pissed, throw up and go back home and loudly say how secretly decadent it all was.

My rented mock ‘slave quarters’ (and this is a selling point for landlords and real-estate agents) is a good way back from the street and I’m walking down from its old pink-painted boards to the kerb. With my garbage: over-packaged Real Superstore remnants, and a pair of jeans. They’ve had the Higher Authority and the ass shot out of them from belting down the steep slopes of the Rockies. As I reach the kerb, a little black guy with no shoes asks if he can have the garbage bag. He especially wants the jeans. Before the winter sets in. Well, that’s certainly OK with me, but why didn’t he just wait and take them out of the garbage bin? Turns out some other guys have the de facto rights to scavenge in that neighbourhood but it’s OK with them, providing he gets to the garbage before it gets to the bin before they get to it.

A friend of mine, whose political views I’ve never questioned before now, says it’s just a ‘cultural’ difference. And I start to complain about the industrial and welfare practices I’ve seen in America and the ones I haven’t: the Eastern Airlines pickets confined to a small barricaded rectangle among the vast sprawl of LaGuardia Airport. The university tenure system that operates against academic freedom. (They check you out morally and politically for a ten-year period before they let you in, by which time you’ve forgotten all about axes and how to grind them.)
And, in New Orleans in particular, there's the tipping system. Waiters aren't paid salaries; they work for tips, and sometimes they 'hire' under-waiters to work for them for a share of the tips. When business is good, that is. And when it's bad, you don't get to pay the rent. That's why restaurant customers always get a smile; and that's why we must, told or not, add .5 per cent to the bill.

So this friend of mine says I should accept the system: it's no better or worse than the Australian award system, it's just different, and, she adds, at least these guys don't have to stand in line for a roll of toilet paper all day like they do in Moscow.

Next day, I'm shopping at a Schwegmann's supermarket in a poor part of town, between the Mississippi River and a warehouse district. I'm the only white person in the store. Taking my trolley to the checkout, I notice that one register is empty and make a dive for it. The woman asks me if I'm paying cash. This is cash only. Maybe the rest are using credit cards or cheques. But as I leave I see the welfare food coupons: money-sized sheets of various denominations stapled into books. An older woman with a stick buys a single toilet roll.

Meanwhile, throughout December, the media continue to gloat over the events in Eastern Europe. The New York Times runs headlines:

CZECH COMMUNISTS ECLIPSED IN CABINET SWORN INTO OFFICE
BAKER PRESSSES SOVIETS ON LATIN ARMS
RETIREMENT FOR DEAN OF THE OLD GUARD IN PRAGUE
HUSSAK SUPPRESSED DISSERT IN PrAGUE SINCE '68
TWO BALTIC REPUBLICS VOTE IN TEST OF COMMUNIST RULE
50,000 IN BULGARIA DEMAND FASTER MOVE TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

The last of these has a 116 by 145 mm photo with the caption: 'Bulgarians at a pro-democracy rally yesterday in Sofia carried a poster showing Stalin with an eye patch and a Nazi armband.' What the eye patch signifies isn't clear. Pirate Nazism perhaps? Surely, given

JOY AND APPREHENSION AMONG EAST BERLIN'S JEWS
and its ilk, the NYT couldn't be referring to Moshe Dayan, could it?
This headline is interesting: it gets an entire half page in the international section of the paper, but the article acknowledges its minor importance in the first sentence: 'The handful of citizens who are observant Jews or of Jewish ancestry in this country are viewing the current political upheaval here with a peculiar combination of elation and fear.' Not a mention of the 28,000 Jews in West Germany. And nothing on other minorities in Eastern Europe. Let alone any position from which, for example, Palestinians could speak, except with the (unspeakable) voice called 'terrorism'.

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LENIN STATUE IN MOTBALLS
EUROPEANS PRAISING BAKER BLUEPRINT
CROATIAN COMMUNISTS ENDORSE FREE ELECTION
COMMUNISTS IN BULGARIA EXPEL ZHIVKOV
SOVIET LEGISLATORS FAULT GORBACHEV PROGRAM

Again the last one is significant because it prefigures the kinds of paradox America faces in the absence of a clear enemy. If no Other, then no Self, as it were. While Gorbachev has been, by and large, among the heroes of the changes, he remains a Soviet leader and a communist. That is, there is still a space now, albeit a small one, for categories like 'dissenter', 'sceptic', 'minority views' and so on. At the same time, and hence the paradox, several American media outlets have continually urged Gorbachev to take greater control of unruly Soviet populations, especially in the Baltic States, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the last case, one news commentator suggested that a firm military action would quell dissent and so speed the process of peaceful democratization! Imagine that being said about Afghanistan.

Finally, then:

FOR PRAGUE'S INSTITUTES, IT'S GOODBYE TO MARXISM

Now students and professors admit how much they lied. And the lying? Well, it's glossed as follows:

Students agreed cheerfully that they lied in their exams. 'You cram, you say what you don't believe, and you forget it immediately,' said Hanna Hornakova, a 19-year-old second-year student, in a corridor interview. 'It's worthless, so why keep it in your memory?'

No doubt it's a technique Dan Rather might be advised to learn before visiting Perkins, Oklahoma.

I get a real sense that many Americans feel in some way responsible for what's happening: they feel as if their model of individualist freedom has somehow brought about the demise of 'the communist monopoly on power' (to use one phrase that is frequently heard on American TV, not entirely without an element of hypocrisy). A taxi driver tells me that it's all Reagan's doing. 'He told them they were the Evil Empire, and they couldn't take it.' He's not joking.

During a break in the rain, a group of us go off one Sunday afternoon to be counted at a Pro-Choice Rally. It's in a big New Orleans municipal park and the police have set aside a section of the lawns for the rally. We buy T-shirts showing the Statue of Liberty with the caption 'This lady's pro-choice', Catholics-for-choice stickers, and buttons showing a coat-hanger crossed out within a red circle. As we assemble, the Pro-Life crowd begins to group elsewhere in the park. When the rally gets going, they march around the perimeter, chanting, singing hymns and carrying banners. One particularly portly Southern gent is carrying a
wooden stake pushed through a baby doll. Fake blood drips down as he walks.

Well, perhaps at last we have here some genuine antagonism, some conflict and opposition? But that idea is soon dissipated by the soap-opera stars, famous names, easily recognizable from American TV in Australia. Their line in the rally goes something like this:

I grew up in America to respect the rights of the individual and I learnt that only Communists and Nazis were oppressors of my rights and freedom. But today I see another group emerging who want to do the same thing. And here they are (pointing to the Pro-Life crowd). They say they're religious, but I believe they're dogmatists who are stifling belief. For God distinguished us from the animals by giving us minds to think with and to make our own choices. This is his greatest gift of all to mankind. And these people (again pointing to the Pro-Lifers) want to take away God's gift of choice. They put themselves in the place of God and aspire to nothing but vanity . . .

And so on. No doubt the tactic is a good one. It's certainly a way of winning the local battle in Louisiana; take away the moral and religious ground from under the feet of the opposition, like Hawke's move to the right. But this leaves a negative space – a space for a genuine discourse (party, or institution) of opposition. At least discursively, it confirms reactionary categories as the proper terms and conditions of the struggle. It's probably the only tactic that can win the local battle, but (to continue an obviously masculinist metaphor) it's probably also the very strategy that can lose the war as a whole. Perhaps the ante-bellum South is, in this other sense, already post-bellum. The war for a social-collectivist American self-understanding has already been lost. A single successful lawsuit on behalf of an individual can out-maneuvre any number of women and men who take to the streets. If this had happened in Europe in the seventeenth century, it could have provoked the search for another new world.

In downtown New Orleans, the statue of Robert E. Lee faces north. Behind him is the red neon sign of the YMCA building. Local wits say it stands for 'Yankees May Come Again'. Maybe they're already here—in fancy dress.

Alone on a beach in Hawaii, waiting for a Qantas 747 to Cairns, drinking a too-warm Foster's, and reading an aerogramme from Melbourne containing a Leunig cartoon about safe sex and romance. I'm watching a group of Japanese girls travelling overseas for the first time, on their first holiday without parents. Everything has to be safely gathered in before they'll be seen in their bathing costumes. One of them has a floatie. I'm thinking about Cottesloe Beach, Perth, on Sunday afternoons.

I'm tired of America now and glad to be on its very edge. From here,
you can tour Pearl Harbor and listen to a stock anti-Japanese tourist tape through a headset. Not many Japanese take the trip. No point now. The place has been much more successfully bombed since, with slow and careful droppings of yen. At Pearl Harbor, you’re taken over a sunken battleship, the USS Arizona — a kind of in situ museum. To this day it leaves behind a long spoor of oil on the water. Someone tells me that other things occasionally float up from the wreck. ‘Bits of body’, they try to hint.

Drifting off on the beach and drifting back, I suddenly see the face of the taxi driver — the one who said that Reagan’s ‘Evil Empire’ speech was what did for communism. By a fantastic sleepy synecdoche, he comes to be America in my dream. I wonder what he’s going to think and feel if and when he, America, has no clear world opposition. What terms will be available then? What will be unAmerican? And if nothing is, is he then going to have to think of himself in positive political terms? Will he have to understand himself as political once politics (‘ideology’, ‘government’, ‘dogma’, ‘suppression’ and the rest) is no longer easily identifiable as being elsewhere? If so: in what terms? What new discourse is about to be born?

The Japanese girls are finally ready and about to take the plunge.

NOTES

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