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In 1932, in an attempt to explain the “völkerrechtlichen Formen des modernen Imperialismus,” Carl Schmitt looked to the power of language, specifically, to the power of the concept, or as we might now say, following Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, to the power of the empty signifier to effect hegemony. The modern imperialism in question is American; and, according to Schmitt, the “erstaunliche politische Leistung der Vereinigten Staaten” consists in the fact,

daß sie sich allgemeiner, offenbleibender Begriffe bedienen....Eine derartige Elastizität, eine derartige Fähigkeit, mit weiten Begriffen zu operieren und die Völker der Erde zu zwingen, sie zu respektieren, ist ein Phänomen von weltgeschichtlicher Bedeutung. Bei jenen entscheidenden politischen Begriffen kommt es eben darauf an, wer sie interpretiert, definiert und anwendet; wer durch die konkrete Entscheidung sagt, was Frieden, was Abrüstung, was Intervention, was öffentliche Ordnung und Sicherheit ist. Es ist eine der wichtigsten Erscheinungen im rechtlichen und geistigen Leben der Menschheit überhaupt, daß derjenige, der wahre Macht hat, auch von sich aus Begriffe und Worte zu bestimmen vermag. Caesar dominus et supra grammaticam: der Kaiser ist Herr auch über die Grammatik. (Schmitt, *Positionen und Begriffe* [Duncker & Humblot, 1988] p. 202)

Though George W. Bush is notorious for *not* being Lord over the grammar of the English language, his speech writers, like the speech writers of other presidents going back to

Woodrow Wilson, have indeed been masters of the empty signifier. We can see this in the texts we have read for this session. After the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the various so-called “abuses” that followed, it may seem easy to us to point to the hypocrisy of Bush’s use of the terms like “freedom,” “democracy,” and “justice,” but one need only live in the United States to understand the power that this discourse of interlocking “offenbleibender Begriffe” commands, a power that has little or nothing to do with George W. Bush, and everything to do with a long tradition of American exceptionalism. Once captured by the siren song of “freedom, democracy, and free enterprise,” – and one notes that economic freedom, implicitly identified with a so-called free-market economy, looms large in this rhetoric – it becomes all but impossible to refute the claims that our current form of government is, as Bush states, the “single sustainable model for national success” or that the values our nation are said to embody are, to quote Bush again, “right and true for every person, in every society – and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies is the common calling of freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages” (188).

In using the term “American exceptionalism,” I inevitably evoke the German term “Sonderweg” and thus invite comparison. However, whereas the 19th- and early 20th-century proponents of a German *Sonderweg* emphasized German *particularity*, modeled on inevitable and desirable differences of historical development – I have in mind Friedrich Meinecke’s distinction between *Weltbürgertum* and *Nationalstaat*, based on a 19th-century, largely Rankean view of history – to repeat: whereas the German *Sonderweg* emphasized German particularity, the American *Sonderweg* presents itself as the creator and carrier of universal ideals. As Bush says, “Our Nation’s cause has always

been larger than our Nation's defense" (191). The American "Nation" – spelled here with a capital "N" – is no mere nation-state, the American cause no mere *Machtpolitik*. No, our "Nation's" cause has always been defined as the spread of "liberty" against tyrants – whether those tyrants resided in Old Europe or in other benighted parts of the world. If particularist ideologies of "class, nation, and race...have been defeated and discredited," then to oppose "our Nation" is *not* to oppose a particular political power acting according to state interest, but rather to oppose those values that Americans unselfishly wish to advance – namely, freedom, democracy, and peace. As it turns out, the German, and every subsequent, *Sonderweg* was so very wrong precisely because it deviated from the universal norm, a norm embodied by the U.S. in such an exemplary and exceptional fashion. To cite Bush again, "The U.S. national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better" (191). To oppose us, then, is to oppose the betterment of mankind.

The force that the United States exerts through its language is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Bush's reiterations of America's mission to "defend," "preserve," and "extend" peace. "Today," Bush tells us, "the international community has the best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war. Today, the world's great powers find ourselves on the same side – united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos" (189). This new arrangement, he tells us, is a "balance of power that favors freedom" (190). But of course, there is no balance of power; rather, "peace" is claimed by one side of a political divide, and violence, as terror and tyranny, is consigned

to the other. Not only does the side of peace – “our Nation, allies, and friends” (191) – possess by far the greater military force; it also possesses the only valid moral force that is “right and true” for all times and all peoples. Thus, peaceful competition among the great powers (who all stand on the side of peace) can only be understood as economic competition, and resistance to this friendly competition (by those, for instance, who may feel themselves systematically and unfairly excluded by prevailing rules of the game) can only be understood as an unlawful and immoral disturbance of the peace. We have drawn new Amity lines; we drew them, as Schmitt pointed out, already in the 19th century with the Monroe Doctrine. Protest from the other side of the line is heard only as noise, that is, as terror and chaos; protest from this side of the line exposes those “allies and friends” to the threat of excommunication.

The world order implied here, which transforms political force into economic competition and thus disallows political resistance, corresponds to a presumed state of nature that is innocent of violence and reminds one, not surprisingly, of the words of John Locke. “The State of Nature,” Locke writes, “has a Law of Nature to govern it, which obliges every one: And Reason, which is that law, teaches all Mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, health, Liberty, or Possessions...In transgressing the Law of Nature, the Offender declares himself to live by another Rule, than that of *reason* and common Equity...and so becomes dangerous to Mankind.” Such a “Criminal,” he continues, has “declared War against all Mankind, and therefore may be destroyed as a *Lyon* or a *Tyger*, one of those wild Savage Beasts, with whom Men can have no Society nor Security” (Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* [ed. Peter Laslett, Cambridge UP, 1988] pp. 271, 272, 274). In

short, the disturbers of a peace that is established by a power acting according to the law of nature, a law that is determined by reason to be valid for all peoples at all times, are no longer part of the human race. They are beasts, rogue beasts.

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American exceptionalism makes exceptions of those who wish to challenge Caesar's lordship over grammar. Conceptually, it seems easy to reverse the procedure and see the mark of the true rogue in America's identification of *its* particular, national interests with purportedly universal values. This, in fact, is what Derrida does with his usual finesse, though it is a finesse that has been sharpened by some Schmittian clarity. As if responding to Schmitt's ceaseless question, "Wer entscheidet?", Derrida quotes Robert S. Litwak's frank appraisal: "A rogue State is whoever The United States says it is" (202). This ability to decide on the exception, to decide, in fact, what is and what is not an exception, is the mark of the sovereign. The sovereign state, identifying itself with universal democracy yet acting with exceptional powers, stigmatizes political opponents as rogue states, and in so doing, becomes a rogue state itself. The sovereign act, Derrida concludes, is the rogue act par excellence. Furthermore, the ability to act in a sovereign manner without having to acknowledge the exceptionality of one's own sovereignty, to enjoy, in other words, all the benefits of sovereignty, while acting as if sovereignty no longer existed, to determine the content of concepts at will, all the while acting as if their truths were self-evident, is the real achievement of the United States, the one that so impressed Schmitt in the years following the First World War, and the one that Derrida identifies with the United States "at the end of the Cold War." Yet, despite the historicity of this apparently unique manifestation of stealth sovereignty, it is this American

achievement that Derrida associates with sovereignty in general: “Denn Stillschweigen, Verleugnung, ist ja gerade das niemals erscheinende Wesen der Souveränität” (204).

By way of this equation of sovereignty in general with a specifically historical instantiation of the principle, Derrida arrives, ironically and, one is tempted to say, in a Hegelian manner, at the end of a historical epoch. “Es gibt also nur noch Schurkenstaaten und gleichzeitig keinen Schurkenstaat mehr. Der Begriff ist an seine Grenze gestoßen, seine Zeit ist zu Ende.” To arrive at the end of history, or of *a* history, leads, or can lead, to apocalyptic despair, which is to say, to apocalyptic hope. As a political attitude, neither despair nor hope is necessarily helpful. If one is locked in a conceptual battle with a particular sovereign power manifested in a historically particular way, one needs to engage the enemy on its own conceptual terrain. In so doing, one cannot help but take on the trappings of sovereignty oneself. That is, if one wrestles with Caesar over grammar, one wrestles for the title of being the next Caesar, even if one claims that title in the name of the proletariat, the multitude, or simply the *demos*. The great paradox of sovereignty would seem to be the simple fact that deconstructing sovereignty is itself a sovereign act. This observation is, of course, a commonplace complaint, one that accuses deconstruction of remaining wed to what it seeks to annul. Nevertheless, the paradox points to a suspicion. If, as an American or European intellectual, one wishes to engage with the power wielded by the series of presidents from Wilson to Bush, then one needs to assume the sovereignty of a Caesar in the battle over grammar. This Derrida does in a masterly fashion. Yet, the weakness of Derrida’s *political* position is not his critique, but his mimicry of American sovereignty. To remind us of the concept’s inherent onto-theology, to remind us again of the perfidy of the

Western metaphysical tradition seems more an evasion of, rather than an engagement with the question of power. Holding out for a “democracy to come,” no matter how a-temporal, non-teleological, hospitable, and classically impossible that notion may be, looks far too much like the trick of a sovereign who claims not to be one. Such a trick is the trick that we, the United States, have successfully played on the world. The task should be to illuminate the structure of this deception, not to emulate it, even if “illumination” sounds too much like Enlightenment rhetoric. So, I end with a question: Is Derrida’s use of the term “democracy” – to designate the coming of the unforeseeable other and the incalculable event – a new politics? Or is it rather the “Stillschweigen,” the “Verleugnung,” that he says “ist ja gerade das niemals erscheinende Wesen der Souveränität”? In other words, is the fundamental discontent with sovereignty itself nothing but a sovereign evasion of “Empire” that claims for itself the purity and super-sovereignty of a secularized Pauline politics?