

BOOK REVIEWS

Seymour Hersh: our guy in Washington

ECE TEMELKURAN

The Killing of Osama bin Laden, by Seymour Hersh. Verso Books. 144 pp. £12.99

Having been a professional journalist for twenty years, mostly reporting or commenting in Turkey on taboo subjects from Armenian and Kurdish issues to political prisoners in Turkey, as well as the Middle East and Latin America, I was on the receiving end of ‘oppression’ of Turkish media for what I said and wrote. So I hope I am not causing offence to other professional journalists when I say that one can no longer be sure whether journalism is a profession. Perhaps it is just sophisticated curiosity morphing into insubordination, or a kind of stubborn killjoy state of being, or an urge to tell true stories, and even, occasionally, a legitimate way of being an all-time vagabond. Theorizing the job may provide it with the required gravitas; yet, at its core, it seems to me that a journalist should be like an angry child who just cannot resist denouncing hypocrisy without worrying about the consequences; a child who refuses to grow up and enjoy the comfort of consensus and conformity. A journalist should be like the never-aging little Oscar in Günter Grass’s famous novel *The Tin Drum*, who never stops playing his drum, and with good reason.

Seymour Hersh’s book *The Killing of Osama bin Laden* nicely fits this job description—and not simply because, at 73, he has been a never-aging legend of journalism, but also because his tin drum still continues to annoy so many.

Last year Seymour Hersh wrote a 10,000-word article for the *London Review of Books* explaining that the Obama administration has been lying about the killing of Osama bin Laden and that this clumsy lie had not been challenged properly by most journalists. His article raised questions and criticisms. One was that he had deliberately chosen to write for the *LRB* instead of the

obsessively fact-checking *The New Yorker* (where he is a regular contributor) because his sources were ‘thin’ and not so well grounded. Then Verso published Hersh’s piece as a book along with three other articles critical of Obama’s policy in Syria. The White House was too busy putting together the last entertainment acts for Obama’s final days in office to express much discomfort. Book reviews produced further criticisms, though most did not challenge or question the actual story but rather kept elaborating on the same concern about the sources being anonymous and the author’s ‘Trust me’ attitude. The man who often almost ‘made’ history several times over the past forty years through his reporting (e.g. Pulitzer 1970 for revealing the My Lai massacre, a series of articles in *The New Yorker* on the Abu Ghraib prison atrocities in Iraq, etc) was now to be questioned.

So let’s talk about Seymour Hersh, not the man, but the journalist or *homo-diurnalis*.

Obama is the *homo-posse*, ‘the man who can’, the man who... ‘yes, he can’. He came to power because he could tell us an amazing story without actually saying anything. His gigantic marketing operation ran on the most beautiful words of human history. He was like a breath of fresh air after the Bush era. Being a member of this mesmerized crowd, I can tell you that it was not a matter of *wanting* to believe but rather *needing* to believe. Not only enthusiastic American voters but even the more sophisticated international audience fell for this perfectly performed ‘Trust me’ act. Unfortunately the man who was to end ‘the mind-set that caused the war’ (as he declared in one of his televised debates against Hillary Clinton during the 2008 presidential campaign) witnessed, helplessly, a seemingly ever-lasting one in Syria, one

which has produced the biggest humanitarian crisis of our time. Dancing with Star Wars characters, as he and his family did in May (see <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/05/politics/star-wars-day-obama-dance/>), *may have attracted an audience*, but his real magic has long gone. At the end of his presidency he has come to parody himself, somewhat overshadowing his earlier 'trust me' act. He raised the hopes for the White House occupying the moral high ground so much that the great fall from that height appeared dramatic.

It was at this moment that Hersh's *The Killing of bin Laden* hit the media. The critics have a point: Hersh's book demands trust from the reader. However, unlike Obama's gigantic marketing operation, there are four decades of solid, game-changing reporting to back Hersh's 'trust me' stand. In a very rough summary, Hersh is telling that bin Laden's killing owed much to Pakistanis and the process was quite different from the White House official version. For Hersh, the White House's narrative 'might have been written by Lewis Carroll'. He claims that Pakistani military and government knew bin Laden had been living in Abbottabad since 2006, long before the operation began, but for several reasons the intelligence was not put to use. According to Hersh's sources, Americans were supposed to delay announcing that bin Laden had been killed and announce, weeks later, that he had died in a firefight on the Afghan side of the mountainous Afghan-Pakistan border. Hersh argues that Obama administration officials were so impatient to get political credit that they forgot about the Pakistanis' sensitive situation and disclosed the true location of the assassination right away. Hersh explains in great detail that this made-up story is not only one of trivial wrong-doing but also one that reveals a bigger picture, namely the Obama administration's general inadequacy with international politics. Quoting former US SEAL Teams commanders as well as retired officials from Pakistan, Hersh gives the reader an entirely new account of affairs as well as insider information about the enthusiasm in the White House.

In the other articles, Hersh explains that the Assad regime was the victim of a Turkish conspiracy, supported by the USA, in

which it was entirely blamed for using chemical weapons. It turned out that some of these weapons were actually deployed by the Islamist rebel group al-Nusra (designated as terrorist by both the USA and Russia).

When Hersh praised Obama's 'principled stand on behalf of the proposed nuclear agreement with Iran', his critics blamed him for taking a pro-Democrat political position rather than using legitimate journalistic tools.

To be a proper journalist (*homo-diurnalis*) is problematic for Hersh's way of reporting. As a journalist, he has connections in high places but he must work for us, readers of news, members of a global audience. The journalist's duty is to pursue the truth but this creates a never-ending moral struggle. Is the journalist, in order to get the 'right' information, getting too close to his well-placed sources? Is he risking loosening his ties with 'us', his readers? Is he losing his tin drum? This is not a struggle that takes place out in the open, but it should be part of routine self-questioning by real *homo-diurnalis*.

In my early years in the profession I was bothered when journalists were accommodating themselves to the field in which they were working, when they were too 'embedded'. Those following social democrats dressed like social democrats; reporters close to the Conservative party often displayed pocket handkerchiefs like Conservative party officials. They became like those they followed. I often wondered if the disguise and relation of trust they use to obtain information affected their ethics as well. Does playing to their tune made them forget the sound of the tin drum? These moral complications may not affect those who write human-interest stories or report from the field, but they matter when one is dealing with those in power, with *homo-posses*. It is a delicate dance of trust and one earns respect not only in one or two reports but through a lifetime's work. In Hersh's case I suppose nobody can question that. However, maybe it is not a question of Hersh's journalism, but more a matter of change in journalism and its connection to truth.

Journalism has taken a new shape because of two recent developments. The first one appeared somewhere around the 1980s. Objectivity is replaced by neutrality to

produce a hygienic sort of journalism. Unlike the journalism of old, the new practitioner must stress his or her objectivity, his or her lack of politics. He or she must have no ideas at all, but just be a messenger passing on the facts. I still support those who think that journalism is on the side of the humane against the inhumane. In the jumble of reality, he or she must be on the side of truth. There is and must not be neutrality in that.

The second, and even more recent, development came in when a humongous pile of information was poured into the public sphere via famous leaks. Presenting millions of facts on a website began to pass as revealing the truth. This development not only bypassed the role of the *homo-diurnalis* but also normalised outrageous facts simply by producing too many of them. When you think about it, did anything really happen after the revelation of the so-called Panama Papers? Did it hit us the way Watergate did? We know there is something shady out there among the thousands of files, but we cannot really put our finger on it. Here is a very well grounded—source-wise—solid reporting, but there is no tin drum telling us where to look, is there?

Paying more attention to facts than the truth made the heart of the story invisible and turned the *homo-diurnalis* into a fact-listing, fact-picking, boring, new type of creature. This was all done in the name of trust, which brings us to another issue that witnessed another dramatic change in our times.

The concept of trust has metamorphosed in the last decade. The term ‘user-generated content’ makes it sound nice and cute whereas it is in fact a fierce development for *homo-diurnalis*, a predator even. The recent uprisings in Arab countries and elsewhere demonstrated that when it comes to hearing a story, the global audience chooses the ‘person’ over the ‘institution’. All those millions of dollars invested on—let’s say—the *CNN International* logo to earn audience trust mean little when a random guy with a nickname on Tahrir Square starts telling the ‘genuine’ story. During the interesting times marked by a chain of uprisings we witnessed bloggers and real-time witnesses on social media turning into the heroes of

our time at the expense of prominent reporters with proper credentials. As the line between activism and journalism gets thinner, the nicknames on social media win over the conventional big names of the international media. These days, the people of this planet trust the actual person more than the global network of *homo-diurnalis*. They know that ‘the person’ might not be as accurate as a trained journalist when it comes to facts, but then they feel safer with a guy who is genuinely telling the truth. This seems to me not a completely new invention of our times, but rather getting back to old times when *homo-diurnalis* was ‘our guy on the ground’.

Hersh told us a story—indeed, a true one. His way of telling the truth might not be favoured by the scrutinising fact-checkers. However, as once a journalist and now a newsreader, I trust the *homo-diurnalis* who played his tin drum for decades and has no good reason to stop now. Not to mention the fact that, as a Turkish citizen, I closely witness that one year after his reporting, the facts to which we are being subjected fit very well with the story Hersh told us in his book. Naming the names might cause yet more problems in my already difficult life in Turkey, but let me tell you at least that it is not only Obama who told the world a very big lie: suffice it to also read Hersh’s stories about Syria and Turkey.

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A penny for your thoughts

Dick Pountain

The Knowledge Corrupters: Hidden Consequences of the Financial Takeover of Public Life, by Colin Crouch. Polity Press. 182 pp. £15.99.

The Knowledge Corrupters opens with an example of a truly perverse incentive—the 2014 revelation that the NHS was paying doctors £55 for every patient they diagnosed

as suffering from dementia. Inadequate diagnosis of dementia had become a political hot potato, hence this modern solution: pay 'em to find more. Colin Crouch observes that this should surprise no one because 'That as much of life as possible should be reduced to market exchanges, and therefore to money values, is one of the main messages of the most influential political and economic ideology of today's world, neoliberalism'.

That very word is currently the site of a skirmish in the civil war for the soul of the Labour party. A December 2015 editorial in the Blairite magazine *Progress* condemned the term neoliberalism as 'lazy use of language' and 'a catch-all for anyone with whom you disagree', but since it's usually Corbynistas who use it against Blairites, this was a predictable defensive parry. It's nevertheless true that, as a shorthand for the newly aggressive capitalism we've suffered since the late 1980s, the word is at risk of demotion to a status like that of 'fascist'—a loosely defined insult only vaguely connected to its proper historical meaning. Colin Crouch would be the last person in the world to use the term carelessly: his three previous books, *Post-democracy* (2005), *The Strange Non-death of Neoliberalism* (2011) and *Making Capitalism Fit for Society* (2013), contained masterly analyses of the crisis of twentieth-century social democracy and its ongoing struggle with the neoliberal reaction.

Crouch regards neoliberalism not as an alien imposition, to be eliminated by going back to some improbable variant of state socialism, but as a permanent feature of the political landscape, an inevitable response to social democracies that had become ossified, conservative, protectionist and no longer capable of dealing with the globalised power of multinational corporations and demands for choice from affluent consumers.

For Crouch a 'mixed economy' means not just separate public and private employment sectors but also corresponding social democratic and neoliberal ideological sectors, locked in permanent struggle for territory and even capable of mutual influence. The neoliberal Old Testament is Friedrich Hayek's 1943 *The Road To Serfdom*, which proclaimed that the market is a repository of superior wisdom which 'renders all human

attempts to second-guess it through the use of expertise imposed on its outcomes as necessarily inferior'. Against communism, social democracy and fascism, Hayek and colleagues claimed that all attempts at planning were potentially totalitarian. During the economic instability that followed the Oil Crisis of the 1970s, some conservative thinkers resurrected this belief; electoral victories by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher enthroned it as the alternative to Keynesian demand management, and this forced 'Third Way' politicians like Bill Clinton and Tony Blair to entrench it as the new orthodoxy.

Crouch's new book focuses on one specific problem: the concerted attempts by neoliberal agents to restrict and corrupt the dissemination of information, by attacking the status of knowledge professionals and expert advice. His first chapter explores neoliberalism as a theory of knowledge, and claims that these attacks erode the feedback mechanisms necessary for democratic governance of modern technological, knowledge-based societies, thus becoming a threat to democracy itself.

Neoliberalism's current assault against the public realm goes by the name of New Public Management (NPM), the doctrine that all public services must behave as though they were in the private sector. NPM first emerged under Thatcher, but was enthusiastically extended by New Labour and has continued under David Cameron and George Osborne. In Chapter 2, 'The Corrosion of the Public-Service Ethos', Crouch explains that though proponents can portray this doctrine as democratic and anti-elitist—a cure for the blundering of planners which encourages experts to evolve and improve their skills through market exposure—it also masks a darker, populist belief that people who aren't motivated by profit must automatically be considered lazier and less competent than those who are. This belief prevails among most businesses and throughout our current Tory administration and demands several kinds of remedy: privatise whatever can be privatised; outsource all regulation by public professionals to private agencies; set performance targets and assessment regimes for those public professionals who had hitherto been self-governing.

Outsourcing forces public service professionals into closer contact with business, supposedly to teach them efficiency through competition but in practice encouraging corruption by breaking down firewalls deliberately erected after long experience (for example school inspectors or credit rating agencies). Performance targets are the neoliberal's way of evaluating services to which a monetary value can't be directly attached. They are meant to imitate the way businesses choose product lines, but in complex activities like healthcare, education and policing it's not possible for politicians to know which are the most significant aspects of performance to target. The result is a dangerous over-simplification that undermines the accumulated knowledge and expertise of the service providers. Providers are also provoked into spending time meeting the targets—time that could have been better spent providing service.

School and university reforms offer grim examples of this kind of interference, as does the police force. When opinion polls suggested that burglary and car theft most influenced public perception of the crime rate, targets were imposed to prioritise those crimes at the expense of police efforts against other areas, like child abuse. Hence new scandals, targets reset, narrow spotlights shone onto newly crucial areas, a state of perpetual re-re-reform. Crouch calls this kind of excessive politicisation 'hyper-democracy': when there are few major policy disagreements between main parties, they explore ever finer levels of detail to promote a distinctive policy, which further sidelines and undermines the knowledge of practitioners on the ground in favour of bright ideas from political ideologues.

Crouch condenses his arguments into five major points, which are:

- 1 Forcing public services into markets encourages them to over-simplify the knowledge that they demand, and undermines the professionals who create and deliver that knowledge.
- 2 Though markets do indeed concentrate certain kinds of knowledge, as Hayek claimed, over-reliance on them undermines other forms of knowledge, including science.
- 3 For earlier free-market theorists like Adam Smith it was axiomatic that market participants would behave with moral integrity, but contemporary rational-choice theory actually exalts and rewards dishonesty and the corruption of knowledge.
- 4 Pure market theory presupposes an economy with many producers and consumers, but today's neoliberals tolerate high degrees of monopoly and often permit corporate elites to restrict access to and distort knowledge in their corporate interest (Crouch calls this 'corporate neoliberalism').
- 5 To act fully effectively in a market demands amoral, calculating and self-centred behaviour. As one small component of a total personality this may be tolerable, but as markets spread into ever more areas of life it tends to coarsen us all into calculating machines.

Crouch illustrates these points with copious real-world examples drawn from contemporary affairs and scandals, far too many to catalogue in this short review. Suffice to say they include: BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill; the 2011 Japanese tsunami and nuclear meltdown; the Greek bail-out; PPI (payment protection insurance) mis-selling; climate-change science; food nutrition labelling; the Libor, Euribor and Forex fiddling scandals; school GCSE performance indicators; university impact targets; PFI (Private Finance Initiative) building programmes; Big Pharma's suppression of adverse test results; G4S and Serco prisoner tagging scandals; HMRC's leniency to rich tax evaders; and much, much more.

Central to Crouch's critique is a distinction between three different conceptions of the consumer of goods and services: as citizen, as customer or as object. Citizens have rights to participate in discussion and decision-making, rather than merely to consume services. Customers have the capacity to choose to pay for different goods and services in a marketplace. Objects are mere statistics, passive recipients of whatever is offered to them. Neoliberals charge social democracy with reducing people to objects without choices, and preach privatisation to promote them to customers. Crouch agrees with the diagnosis but not the treatment, and would instead promote them to full citizens.

His conclusion is that we can't avoid dependence upon markets that will always give suppliers the incentive to ignore important information or to deceive us, upon professionals who don't merit the trust we can't avoid placing in them and upon politicians who exaggerate both problems to enhance their own power. The solutions he proposes are not such as to set one's pulse racing: more and better inspection regimes and more participation (that is, two-way communication between professionals and their citizen/users).

In fact, these prescriptions are both hard to achieve and highly political. Inspectors must again be experts in their field (rather than price-cutting private agencies), which is expensive, and they must be freed from both political and commercial pressures. The furor over the BBC's charter renewal shows how political this can become. As for participation, the problem is a gross asymmetry of knowledge and educational level between expert and typical user. The neoliberal solution is to interpose a middle layer of advisory services, often via websites supported by advertising, which merely displaces the problem of trust onto these advice services and so is no solution. Colin Crouch is not entirely pessimistic, observing that in the UK at least strong public support for the welfare state persists, and that the assaults have not so far actually diminished the expert skills required for education and medicine—but for how long?

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American politics and government: if you fail, try again, and again, and again

Gianfranco Pasquino

When Movements Anchor Parties. Electoral Alignments in American History, by Daniel Schlozman. Princeton University Press. 288 pp. £19.95.

Why Government Fails So Often. And How It Can Do Better, by Peter H. Schuck. Princeton University Press. 471 pp. £15.95.

The questions are: how often, how and why do governments fail? The answers have to be highly documented and comparative, through time and space. Since practically all contemporary governments share one extremely important feature, that is, they are party governments, a fair amount of attention ought to be given to the nature, quality and performance of the political parties. In a way, Schlozman provides part of the answer by analysing why, how and how much the Democrats and the Republicans have allowed themselves, more or less willingly, to be 'penetrated' by, respectively, labour organisations such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and the Christian Right, especially the evangelicals. His solid, highly documented, excellent book does not deal specifically with any policy, but it shows that the movements' capability to anchor parties has put serious limits on the parties' freedom of action on several policies. Of course, the freedom of action of the Democrats and the Republicans becomes even more limited the closer the policies to be chosen, shaped and implemented are to the core of the preferences of the two movements, to their very *raison d'être*.

Schlozman's analysis is a truly fascinating account of the transformations of US politics through time. Especially significant is the author's reconstruction of the tremendous ability of the Christian Right to organise itself, to innovate on the traditional methods to reach potential adherents—for instance, through direct mails—and, as a consequence, to acquire a large amount of social and political power to oppose some social policies as well as to slow down the overall process of cultural secularisation. On the other side of the political spectrum, there is the undeniable, relative, but visible decline in the power and the representativeness of labour organisations, unable to renew their forms of action and, moreover, 'inserted' or 'anchored' within a Democratic party which is a composite and multifaceted aggregation of minorities of all kinds.

Obviously, there is no end to this story. Schlozman concludes that labour and the Christian Right have helped to redefine the contours of politics. At least for a time: it remains to be seen if new movements will

try to reshape those contours in an environment in which parties remain 'penetrable', but society seems to have become, in the American lexicon, less robust and less vibrant, as Robert Putnam discovered more than a decade ago.

Methodologically, one can say that Schlozman provides the readers with the tools necessary to understand an important past and to interpret future events and developments. Substantially, the strength of the Christian Right and the inability, perhaps even the unwillingness, of the Republican party to resist have conspicuously contributed to the blatant polarisation of American politics in the past twenty years or so.

How much this polarisation is responsible for the failure of US governmental policies does not appear to be a central concern of Peter Schuck's strong indictment in his *Why Government Fails So Often*. He offers plenty of significant material suggesting that the failure of the US government is structural, that is, deriving almost inevitably from the nature of the institutional arrangements, and to a much lesser extent cultural, regarding practices and attitudes that constitute obstacles to change.

Schuck's definition of culture focuses on ten distinct features: 1. constitutionalism; 2. decentralisation; 3. protection of individual rights; 4. interest group pluralism; 5. tolerance for inequality; 6. religion and political moralism; 7. social diversity; 8. populism; 9. public opinion; and 10. civil society. But this definition seems to me to be too broad and all-encompassing, since it is made of elements that are not all cultural.

Schuck's analysis is totally centred on the USA. At the most, he offers a few unsystematic glimpses of European policy-making processes and their outcomes. Nor does he refer to the huge literature produced in the 1970s and 1980s on the crisis of governability. Some useful lessons might have been drawn from the extent of the crisis and how it was tackled by European democracies. Most of them succeeded in overcoming their own apparent crisis of governability, making significant institutional adaptations and proceeding to some cultural transformations. The failures of US government (or is it the US 'political system'?) are not considered by Schuck in connection to what took place in

those years, though they have been analysed and criticised for the Trilateral Commission by Samuel Huntington, Michel Crozier and Joy Watanuki in their 1975 report *The Crisis of Democracy: On the Governability of Democracies*. The roots of governmental failures are quite deep in US politics and institutions. Because of his methodological preferences, focusing on single policies, and his inclination to stress incrementalism, Schuck does not suggest the need for major structural changes in the US political system. He gives little attention to the role played by the political parties and largely avoids the task of evaluating the impact of pressure groups and lobbies in the drafting and the implementation of public policies.

Schuck has written an extremely dense and complex book (there are almost sixty pages of endnotes) whose framework has the ambition to provide the best approach to evaluate governmental policies and, whenever appropriate, to explore alternatives. The core of the book consists in identification of the criteria that define the success and failure of policies produced by the federal government and implemented by governmental agencies. Schuck is at his best in drafting the criteria of effectiveness. A policy's benefits must exceed its costs. It must improve on market outcomes. It must be 'well-targeted on those who need the benefits most'. However, when he writes that 'reasonable people will disagree about how to assess a policy' he runs the risk of jeopardising his entire approach and of diminishing the value of the lesson to be drawn from the bulk of the policies he has taken into consideration: if it were impossible to produce reasonably acceptable evaluations, then all policy-makers and citizens alike would be left in the wilderness. Fortunately, Schuck himself provides what I would consider a paramount, almost impeccable standard based on cost-benefit analysis. Needless to say, policies do not have to be perfect. It suffices that 'they be more beneficial ... than alternative policies, including the status quo'.

When dealing with the many instances of policy failures, Schuck always identifies a plurality of factors. However, in the end, he seems to suggest that, so to speak, while failures may have several fathers, there is also a 'grandfather' who bears most of the

responsibility: the government. Perhaps an even greater responsibility has to be attributed to the structure of the bureaucracy—but not, according to the author, to the federal employees to whom he dedicates his book, crediting them ‘for struggling against great odds to make our government work’. Exactly because policy successes are largely outnumbered by policy failures, the chapter devoted to what went right is especially interesting and, in a way, revealing.

Schuck sketches and briefly analyses nine cases of success:

- 1 Social security;
- 2 the interstate highway system;
- 3 the food stamp programme;
- 4 the Voting Rights Act of 1965;
- 5 the Immigration Act of 1965;
- 6 the Earned Income Tax Credit Act of 1975;
- 7 the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978;
- 8 the Welfare Reform Act of 1996;
- 9 the National Institute of Health.

From these successful policies he draws two major conclusions that can be used to explain success in an otherwise vast and confused array of public policies. First, ‘to succeed... the programs largely needed to engage the actors’ self-interest; they did not need to create new values or transform deeply rooted behaviours’; second, somewhat contradictorily, ‘some programs can only succeed by altering behaviour’, but ‘it is easier to alter people’s incentives than to change their values or character’, or, I would add, their culture.

I had the impression that Schuck wants to convey the message that no generalisation is possible concerning a set of rules, procedures and actions that will certainly produce good results. The overall conclusions are somewhat sombre. Schuck states that ‘government policies often fail to satisfy even the most minimal reasonable standards’; that there is no partisan divide in explaining failure; that in the US system ‘the essential ingredients of sound policy are seriously wanting’; that even a well-crafted policy is vulnerable to powerful market forces; that the most striking feature of failure is ‘how deep and structural its causes are’. Stressing that, perhaps, ‘government’s ambition is a cause of the

public’s lower confidence in its performance’, Schuck seems to resuscitate one of the most controversial suggestions contained in the Report to the Trilateral Commission mentioned above, clearly articulated by Huntington. In order to avoid major challenges and damaging crises, governments that are unable to increase and improve the power of their institutions ought to attempt to discourage and curtail the demands coming from their citizens and to demobilise them. Schuck shuns this bitter recipe. Contrary to the impressive body of evidence he has collected and utilised, Schuck keeps his faith in a melioristic, incrementalist approach. But, wounded by the growing chasm between the Democrats and the Republicans, vividly highlighted by Schlozman and too often affected by stalemate, the US government continues to fail, sometimes floating, sometimes rolling on.

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A hatchet job on Tony Blair ... not entirely undeserved

Richard Briand

Broken Vows: Tony Blair and the Tragedy of Power, by Tom Bower. Faber and Faber. 553 pp. £20.00.

Nine years after Tony Blair left office, and nineteen years after he came to power, the former Prime Minister has become the subject of Tom Bower’s latest biography. Despite the author’s protestations that he voted for Tony Blair’s Labour party in 1997 and that he has no ‘prejudice’, this is just as much a hatchet job as his previous biographies, whether of Gordon Brown, Geoffrey Robinson, Simon Cowell, Richard Branson or Robert Maxwell. As if the title does not provide a clue, the cover has a photo of Blair looking so shifty that it could have been borrowed from a police poster titled ‘Has anyone seen this man?’

The main themes of Bower’s indictment are that Blair operated government ‘by sofa’, that the bypassing of the usual checks and balances of Cabinet government had

particularly grave consequences for the government's involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, that he showed insufficient resolve and ruthlessness in dealing with Gordon Brown, that he spent taxpayers' money on abolishing Conservative education and health reforms in the shape of grant-maintained schools and internal markets in the NHS only to later resurrect them and that he behaved in a thoroughly avaricious way once he left office. Some of this ground has been covered already. Indeed, Bower's protestation that we do not know what really happened during the Blair decade seems disingenuous given not just Anthony Seldon's biographies of Tony Blair, his three volumes of 'The Blair Effect' anthologies, John Kampfner's *Blair's Wars* and the public policy audits by Polly Toynbee and David Walker (*The Verdict: Did Labour Change Britain?*).

The author's harrumphing about the 'gossip' tone of Andrew Rawnsley's fly-on-the-wall instant histories of New Labour in office, *Servants of the People: The Inside Story of New Labour* (2000) and *The End of the Party: The Rise and Fall of New Labour* (2010), also seems misplaced when some of the most enjoyable parts of his own book are the insider anecdotes, including stories of ministerial temper tantrums so entertaining that they could have come from the television series *The Thick of It*. Bower has offered civil servants and senior military officers the opportunity to tell their side of the story, and they duly get their revenge, with the likes of Sir Robin Butler, Admiral Lord West and Richard Wilson taking the opportunity to express disappointment with their former master.

What mars the book throughout, though, is the clunking vindictiveness of the author toward his subject, often descending into utterly inane personal abuse. If Geoffrey Wheatcroft's *Yo, Blair!* was full of witty rapiers, and managed to make the reader smile even when disagreeing with his arguments, Bower makes reading this biography hard going through his relentless use of the bludgeon. At times it feels as though a more appropriate title for *Broken Vows* might have been 'Broken Record'. Blair is described as having been a 'geeky youth' and looking 'wretched' at the Millennium Eve

celebrations, and his wife as 'unphotogenic'. 'He had never loved the common man', snarls the author in relation to Blair's final Labour party conference speech. If Bower manages to rise above banal vitriol, it is merely to the relative heights of middle-market journalese and rhetorical hyperbole. In one speech, for example, Blair starts as a 'nervous wreck' but transforms into 'a colossus'. At times the author does not seem able to settle on the angle from which he wishes to criticise his subject. At one moment he accuses Blair of offering nothing in place of socialism but 'intentions'; he then goes on to accuse him of being 'an instinctive dogmatist'.

Then again, the author has dogmas of his own. For all his protestations of having retained some of the 'radicalism' of his years studying at the London School of Economics, the criticisms Bower makes of Blair are ones that could have come straight from the editorial pages of the newspaper in which this book was serialised, the *Daily Mail*. Benefits are referred to pejoratively as 'handouts'. The Blair government is accused of encouraging people to see themselves as victims. There are also grating references to Labour having pledged to close 'special needs schools' (sic), with no mention of how Conservative local authorities also closed special schools in order to save money. Sir Chris Woodhead is described as an 'evangelist' for the 'depoliticisation of the education system'—Sir Chris was one of the most political Chief Inspectors of Schools in years, if not decades. And the dour social conservatism of the *Daily Mail* is reflected in Bower's assertion that Blair's Christianity sat oddly with his 'support for ungodly activities such as legalising marriage for homosexuals'. Same-sex marriage was, in fact, introduced by the Coalition, though it would not have been possible without the civil partnerships introduced by the Blair government, which Bower may have had in mind. Both reforms were supported by numerous Christian denominations such as Quakers and Unitarians, as well as liberal Jewish orders.

Sententious editorialising aside, Bower's eagerness to criticise Blair also leads him into straightforward factual error, as with his assertion that Blair's bellicosity over Kosovo would have horrified those who

remembered the Labour party of Michael Foot. It may have appalled those who revered the pacifist Labour tradition represented by George Lansbury, but Michael Foot supported NATO's bombing of Serbia. There are numerous other sloppy errors, such as Bower's claim that the Blairs and Harriet Harman sent their children to private schools (when in fact they sent them to a grant-maintained school) and that Ehud Barak was replaced as Israeli Prime Minister by Benjamin Netanyahu (when in fact he was replaced by Ariel Sharon).

Bower seems more assured, however, in his account of Tony Blair's business activities since leaving office, possibly because the author is more used to writing about business figures such as Robert Maxwell and Richard Branson than about politicians. To read about Blair's employment by Nursultan Nazarbayev, his defence of Egypt's return to military dictatorship and his demand for a fee of £250,000 to make a twenty-minute speech at a conference to discuss feeding the hungry is to be reminded of how one of the main factors in the eclipse of Blairism in the Labour party has been Blair's own behaviour since leaving office.

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Liberalism and the centrality of race in the USA

Eric Foner

Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932–1965, by Eric Schickler. Princeton University Press. 384 pp. \$85.00.

Possibly the most frequently quoted unofficial presidential statement of the past half-century is a comment attributed to Lyndon Johnson when he signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964: 'I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party.' That Johnson probably never uttered these words makes no difference. Together with the nomination of Barry Goldwater, an opponent of the new law, as the Republican candidate for president that same year, Johnson's supposed aphorism has been invoked by generations

of historians as an explanation for the shift from Democrats to Republicans as the dominant party in the South. The year 1964 made Democrats the party of civil rights—and of the overwhelming majority of black voters—and Republicans the party of southern white backlash.

In *Racial Realignment* Eric Schickler challenges this conventional wisdom. Drawing on recent literature on the 'long' civil rights movement as well as new and rarely used data sets, Schickler insists that the shift in partisan alignments took place over a long period of time and that the impetus came from the grassroots, with national political leaders lagging well behind. The result is a book that convincingly recasts our understanding of twentieth-century racial politics.

Schickler is most interested in how support for black rights became central to the definition of American liberalism. At the start of the New Deal and for much of the 1930s, he points out, liberalism was defined vis-à-vis economic policies and, increasingly, support for civil liberties. One could be a bona fide liberal and an arch-segregationist. Indeed, much of the support for Roosevelt's economic measures came from the Jim Crow South. By the same token, where blacks enjoyed the right to vote (that is, outside the South), most still embraced the party of Lincoln.

By the end of the 1930s, this pattern had begun to unravel. Two developments served as catalysts. In the wake of the Great Migration of the 1920s, the black vote in northern cities took on increasing electoral significance. More important was the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) as a central part of the Roosevelt coalition. Both because of the key role of communists (the only political party that made racial justice a top priority at this time) in organising CIO unions and because the CIO's success hinged on organising all workers in an industry, not just overwhelmingly white skilled craft workers—the approach of the American Federation of Labor—the CIO enthusiastically linked economic and racial liberalism. This, in turn, helped to spawn a backlash among southern Democrats, who feared that the extension of labour organisation into the non-union South would upset the region's racial hierarchy. By the end of the 1930s, southern Democrats had joined

with Republicans to rein in the New Deal, thus beginning a retreat from economic liberalism.

The 1940s saw these trends continue. Black migration to northern and western cities accelerated. The Second World War produced a new, militant black movement closely linked to the CIO. More and more northern urban liberals embraced the cause of civil rights. The battle over a civil rights platform at the 1948 Democratic national convention revealed the existence of a powerful new element in the party that sought to make racial justice an essential piece of the liberal outlook. Schickler draws on works on Detroit (Beth Bates' *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford*) and New York City (Martha Biondi's *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City*) to relate the emergence of a new civil rights coalition that brought together black organisations, unions, religious groups (especially Jews) and liberal institutions like the American Civil Liberties Union to press for an end to racial discrimination. His account offers a salutary reminder that the modern civil rights movement did not begin with the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and, indeed, did not begin in the South. As a result of all these developments, well before 1964 a significant majority of blacks were already voting for the Democrats.

Schickler carefully examines a database of state party platforms to chart the rise of civil rights consciousness among Democrats even as national party leaders remained unconverted. (Despite grass-roots support for civil rights in the North, Adlai Stevenson chose John Sparkman, an arch-segregationist from Alabama, as his running mate in 1952, and John F. Kennedy showed little interest in racial issues until the Birmingham crisis of 1963.)

Schickler's account of changes in Republican racial policies is much briefer. But he points to the party's embrace of a states' rights outlook in opposing Roosevelt's New Deal as a stepping stone to abandoning even a rhetorical commitment to black people. In the 1950s, Dwight Eisenhower sought to expand Republicanism in the South by appealing to white suburban voters, a strategy that meant downplaying civil rights. Thus, Schickler insists, well before the

Johnson–Goldwater campaign, 'their parties had been remade beneath them'.

Schickler's focus on local and state-level politics yields important insights, and he is to be commended for making extensive use of the black press to gauge changes in black people's political outlook. But the reader may well feel that his account too often slights the national side of this story. He only mentions briefly President Truman's pioneering Committee on Civil Rights, whose 1947 report, *To Secure These Rights*, offered a devastating indictment of racial inequality in all areas of American life and paved the way for the convention fight the following year. He devotes too little attention to the contradictory impact of the Cold War on civil rights advocacy. On the one hand, as he notes, Jim Crow increasingly became an international embarrassment to the United States as it struggled to win the 'hearts and minds' of Third World peoples. But at the same time, the Cold War led to the purge of radical elements (communists and their allies) who saw the problems of black people as structurally embedded in the economic system rather than as the result of individual bigotry. Thus, the economic agenda of civil rights liberalism slipped away just as a new popular struggle was emerging in the South.

In a brief conclusion, Schickler notes that, today, support for racial justice remains central to the liberal outlook, as does identification with the aspirations of a variety of other groups—women, immigrants, gay people, etc. But liberalism lacks a coherent economic outlook. One can consider oneself a liberal while feeling no identification with organised labour and supporting global trade agreements that have devastated parts of the working class. Perhaps Schickler will provide us with a sequel to this fine book that explains this latest transformation of American liberalism.

Columbia University

The digital mess we are in

Leonardo Clausi

Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action, by Helen Margetts, Peter John, Scott Hale and Taha Yasseri. Princeton University Press. 304 pp. £19.95.

Whenever asked to comment on contemporary events, it's usually historians, rather than social scientists, who tend to suffer from what one might call an epistemological twitch: they strive to demonstrate that what is happening now has already—*mutatis mutandis* and with all the specificities of the epoch—happened before. A good part of their intellectual prowess is devoted to uncovering this sometimes uncomfortable truth, so effectively camouflaged under the patina of the 'new'. This has a collateral effect: the underlying, unobserved assumption that—whatever the phenomenon being analysed—its deceitful novelty is bound to beach like an agonised whale onto the ever suspect, ideological shores of 'it's always been like this' or 'it happened before'.

But there is something that escapes such theorem, stubbornly refusing to undergo similar treatment: the internet. It is now being used by approximately 34 per cent of the world population, and counting. Its impact on the lives of those who can afford a computer, a smartphone and a web connection is invaluable, and, when it comes to the coefficient of novelty in the reshaping of material life, cannot be compared with anything that came before. Its latest developments, including Web 2.0, with its questionable bottom-up structure, safeguarded by social media and the *Brave New World*-sounding 'Internet of things', are having undisputed repercussions on the ways people interact economically, socially and culturally. These are particularly evident in political collective action, both in liberal democracies and in dictatorial regimes, where social media are put to the services of emancipatory as much as repressive purposes (and not necessarily in the same order).

Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action, by Helen Margetts, Peter John, Scott Hale and Taha Yasseri, is a study that courageously embarks on mapping these newly reshaped horizons. It does so by trying to make sense, through a necessarily interdisciplinary approach, of the immense amount of data produced, year after year and on an hourly basis, by relentless activity on Google, Facebook, Twitter and the likes. These colossal 'databergs'—amorphous aggregates of trillions of clicks floating in

cyberspace and bursting with self-representations, images, discussions, diatribes, conversations, videos—are better known as 'big data'. Very much sought after by mega-corporations and state institutions for commercial, security and political purposes, they are also pivotal in providing a substitute for enquiries and polls as instruments of sociological research. By performing a function comparable to that of a telescope in astronomy, they not only revolutionise a discipline: they are singlehandedly creating a new one.

In what is often referred to in Western liberal democracies as a post-political age (in itself a very political statement) and despite its quite contemporary emphasis on the individual rather than the collective dimension, social media activity reverberates intensely on politics. Online petitioning, for instance, thanks to its impressive cost-efficiency, strongly puts forward its claim to be a substitute (some will say a surrogate) for political participation. Its mechanisms rely on factors such as social information, which tells you what others are doing online about a specific cause, and trigger emulative behaviours that may—or, more often, may not—reach a tipping point. The authors refer to them as 'tiny acts of participation', depending on a handful of typologies of the user's personality that they identify. Yes, even the ocean is made out of little drops.

When the tipping point is reached, it can easily become a vehicle for social unrest, and spark major political changes. Events such as the Arab Spring, the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, the riots in Brazil ahead of the 2014 FIFA World Cup; but also the impressive rise of the populist anti-establishment Five Star Movement in Italy (25 per cent of the vote in the 2013 election), Podemos in Spain, 'hacktivist' groups such as Indymedia and Anonymous (oddly overlooked in this book) and, finally, the much vilified yet still irresistible ascent of an unlikely leader, summoned by the 'post-political' generation to breathe some refreshing utopianism back into the stiff carapace of the British Labour party: they all prove the point.

Much of this entails what the authors call 'low-cost' activity. Sticking to the ubiquitous monetary metaphor, a click of a mouse is immensely cheaper and far less time-consuming than joining a demonstration or a

public debate. But when the tipping points are not reached—and that is a rather common occurrence—then the reasonable charge of ‘slacktivism’ (obviously used in its pejorative sense) is raised. After all, the social media-triggered mobilisation in Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011 ended with the not-so-liberal Muslim Brotherhood plebiscitary takeover, to be followed by a even less liberal military coup. And the absence of leaders—so often worn like a badge of honour by many militants in the name of their supposedly new and truly egalitarian approach to politics—ends up being a hindrance more frequently than not.

That said, what the authors call ‘chaotic pluralism’, referring to the unstable and often unpredictable outcome of mobilisations, *does* make a difference, as proved by the case of Giulio Regeni, the Italian Cambridge University researcher allegedly murdered in Cairo by the Egyptian regime’s secret services: the British government petitions website was flooded with requests to open an official enquiry, which it eventually did. These are tiny acts of participation from below that will hopefully provide some traction toward the ascertainment of truth.

Sure, the overall uncertainty about the viability, effectiveness and, above all, predictability of myriads of these tiny acts—so often the result of conformist initiatives triggered by a social pressure the authors define as a tendency to ‘win praise and avoid chastisement’—remains. Just like the weather, it is impossible to foresee what outcome today’s digital initiatives will have in the next weeks or months, and even more so whether they will become ‘viral’. Hence the authors’ usage of the notion of turbulence (Latin for ‘full of commotion’) alongside an array of meanings in other disciplines, all converging around the notion of lack of balance, confusion, ‘chaotic property changes’: an unstable system whose unpredictability is based not on intrinsic randomness but on a degree of immeasurability.

This book heralds the dawn of a new field of research. Its authors represent a rather new academic figure: the social scientist whose toolbox is no longer the old ‘analogic’ assortment of instruments to measure and assess political participation, but rather an interdisciplinary synthesis of sociology,

physics, data and computational social science. A similar mutation has taken place in the world of journalism: let alone the deadly blow that the Internet has inflicted on the publishing industry, what used to be known as investigative journalism has nowadays become data journalism. One wonders what historical research will become once virtually every individual in the developed and developing world has, like a comet, her or his own immense tail of (partly insignificant) digital karma to scrutinise.

Maybe the authors could have at least *en passant* made a reference to the huge issue of the private ownership of this colossal amount of data, on which the course as much as the narration of present and future history depends, and the already tense confrontation that is already emerging between such private ownership and the authorities of national states. One thing seems certain: Habermas’s public sphere, in itself a fairly blurred notion, is gone forever. Still, there could be an element capable of vindicating the historians’ tic mentioned at the opening. Perhaps the feminist militants who coined the slogan ‘the private is political’ in 1968 were, although inadvertently and from an entirely different standpoint, not so far from prefiguring today’s dimension of digital activism. In a slogan like this, today’s political turbulence seems to resonate quite well.

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A study in (excessively) cautious radicalism

Patrick Diamond

The Labour Party under Ed Miliband: Trying but Failing to Renew British Social Democracy, by Eunice Goes. Manchester University Press. 224 pp. £19.99.

Despite high hopes that Labour might return to government after five years in opposition, the party went down to a devastating defeat in 2015. Since then, a post-mortem has been underway to better understand the underlying causes of Labour’s defeat. Some have blamed Ed Miliband himself for

displaying insufficient qualities of prime ministerial leadership. Others have focused on Labour's apparent shift to the left, its disavowal of the electoral centre ground and its inability to address the perception of economic incompetence. In contrast, another group of commentators insist it was Labour's refusal to attack austerity policies that led to the party's inevitable defeat in 2015—a claim that helped to secure Jeremy Corbyn's unexpected triumph in the subsequent leadership election.

Standing back from the fray of this increasingly divisive debate, Eunice Goes, an academic based at Richmond University, coolly dissects the Miliband agenda. *The Labour Party under Ed Miliband* is a convincing attempt to trace the ideas that lay behind the former leader's efforts to reinvigorate British social democracy in the wake of the worst financial crisis in Britain since the thirties. In taking ideas seriously in the context of British party politics, Goes makes an incisive and penetrating contribution to the literature. Moreover, the author points to a compelling paradox at the heart of Miliband's leadership.

On the one hand, Miliband was committed to developing a radical agenda which rejected the political and policy orthodoxies of the New Labour years, identifying a new strategic purpose for the left. This position recognised that social democracy across Europe was foundering, and the left had to develop new strategies for reforming the capitalist economy to achieve its traditional goals. Miliband stumbled across the idea of 'pre-distribution', a term coined by the Yale academic Professor Jacob Hacker, to denote policies that restructure markets, producing more egalitarian outcomes that rely less on traditional redistribution. As Goes explains, rising inequality was perceived to be the consequence not merely of technological change or rapid globalisation, but of a 'winner takes all economy' where the 'rules of the game' are stacked in favour of the wealthy and financial interests. In addition, the Labour leader emphasised the need to reform the structure of government and public services, creating a 'relational' state that is responsive to the needs of citizens, shaping a more egalitarian culture in Britain. The role of public services was to empower users and

communities through 'voice' rather than market-based 'choice', incentivising collaboration across the public, private and third sectors. While these vague abstractions may have had little currency with voters, no one can seriously doubt the intentions of Miliband's team, who engaged in hundreds of seminars and policy conferences during the five years of his leadership in an effort to forge a new social democratic agenda.

Despite this professed radicalism, Miliband was nonetheless overcome by an instinctive caution and small-'c' conservatism which meant his ideas became less bold, doubtless influenced in no small part by eight years working in Gordon Brown's Treasury. Goes argues that Miliband did not succeed in rejuvenating the Labour party because he lacked internal political support: having acquired the leadership by defeating his brother David, gaining votes particularly among the affiliated trade unions, Ed Miliband lacked allies where it mattered—that is, in the parliamentary Labour party. The tepid response to his ideas meant that he was encouraged to abandon or dilute proposed reforms. More fundamentally, Goes acknowledges the extent of the challenge facing Miliband because of the strength of neoliberalism in British political discourse. Against this backdrop, any proposal to challenge the dominance of the private sector while tilting the balance of power toward labour interests is usually met with the accusation that it is 'anti-business'. Moreover, framing a strategy for public investment in the wake of the great recession invites charges of fiscal profligacy and deficit denial. This has created a tough political climate for any party of the left in Britain.

What is often under-estimated is the sheer scale of the intellectual and political task involved in finding a genuine alternative to liberalisation and market hegemony in the UK. In the forties and fifties, the British left had a distinctive idea: it was believed that state planning would curtail the 'anarchy' of the market economy, and strengthen the productive potential of British industry. Yet, repeatedly, Labour governments in the forties and the sixties abandoned planning in the context of economic crisis, resorting to Keynesian 'fine-tuning' and demand management. Labour's uneasy relationship with

Keynesian ideas (for Keynes was, after all, a Liberal) meant that it never forged a convincing intellectual alternative to market liberalism and the policies of laissez-faire that had dominated the thirties. Harold Wilson came to believe that membership of the European Economic Community was a necessity by the late sixties precisely because of the failure of British planning policies.

By 1976, Labour faced a fundamental choice about whether to accede to the cuts imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to keep Britain integrated into the international economy, or whether to go it alone and pursue a strategy of 'socialism in one country'. Labour has always been a party broadly committed to international trade, which was perceived to be more conducive to rising working-class living standards in the late nineteenth century; despite the dominance of the left and the 'Alternative Economic Strategy' in the 1970s, the party was unlikely ever to embrace economic isolationism. Yet the disciplines imposed by the international markets have restricted Labour's room for manoeuvre ever since. The collapse of confidence in planning and the realities of governing in a globalised economy have exposed a void in Labour's intellectual armoury that remains unfilled. Miliband's efforts to provide British social democracy with renewed purpose were hardly equal to the challenge.

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A proponent of democracy red in tooth and claw

Paul Sagar

Political Political Theory. Essays on Institutions, by Jeremy Waldron. Harvard University Press. 416 pp. £29.95.

Jeremy Waldron has a clear goal in this fine collection of essays: to re-orientate Anglophone political theory toward what is, mundanely speaking, politics. To those unfamiliar with the past forty or so years of academic developments in the field, this will seem bizarre. What could political theory

possibly be about, if not politics? The standard answer has been: morality. The political theorist's job is to delineate the values that political practice ought to realise, or embody, or uphold, or be underpinned by, while the grubby business of politics itself remained largely beside the point. Following in particular the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, the questions that have dominated Anglophone political theory have been of the sort: what does justice demand from us, what is egalitarianism, or what exactly is liberty? Much less considered are questions like: how do we adjudicate when people disagree about what justice requires? What kind of constitutional structure is required to realise and protect citizens whom we deem to be each other's political equals? What is the role of law, and of the courts, in securing liberty for citizens who place themselves in contestation? It is these latter sorts of questions that Waldron believes have been unduly neglected, and that he wishes to put centre-stage.

The opening essay of this book, which gives the collection its title, was originally delivered as the inaugural lecture for the Chichele Chair in Social and Political Theory at the University of Oxford in 2012, a position Waldron held from 2010 to 2014 before returning to New York. It is, in part, a polemic. Waldron calls for less attention to be paid to questions of abstract value, and more to questions about institutions. This is because it is through institutions that large-scale modern politics must take place. Institutions have a profound bearing upon how we order our political lives, and therefore what we can ever hope to achieve on a collective scale. They are of central importance, insofar as they are able to liberate us, empower us and invest our lives with dignity—or do the precise opposite, with terrible results. Getting institutions right is thus not just a, but arguably *the*, priority of successful politics, and thus ought to be at the heart of *political* theory.

Waldron goes beyond his opening polemic, however, to show that what he advocates can not only be done, but done well. In doing so, he does not abandon what political theorists refer to as 'normative' engagement: evaluating the rightness or wrongness, the desirability or otherwise, of

political arrangements. Waldron's project is not a retreat from difficult evaluative questions into some dry political science, which seeks only to explain political processes without passing judgement on whether or not we should support or reform them. On the contrary, he aims to show how much there is to be said about a great range of neglected topics arising from consideration of political institutions.

Take two examples: the separation of powers, and the reasons for having a bicameral legislature. In both cases, evaluative questions are raised. *Why* should powers be separated, and for whose benefit? Is this merely a fuzzy inheritance of eighteenth-century rhetoric, or does it uphold and promote core values such as controlling abuse of power and political corruption? Similarly, what is the value of having a second legislative chamber? If it is not simply a redundant replication of the activities of the first, is there something important in the provision of oversight of legislation, as well as facilitating alternative and more comprehensive forms of representation in a diverse polity? Or take another area of controversy, more familiar to American readers: ought unelected judges be empowered to strike down legislation enacted by a democratically elected assembly? And if so, why on the basis of a bare majoritarian vote (typically 5–4 in the case of the US Supreme Court)? (In this latter regard, Waldron is at his most fiercely evaluative, charging the practice of 'judicial review' as being anathema to a genuinely democratic constitutional structure.) In all these cases, we are dealing with undoubtedly 'normative' questions, of profound importance to the theorist who actually cares about politics and not just a preferred moral vision.

Waldron consistently draws upon two areas of thought to which his original polemic called for greater attention: the role of law in modern societies, and the resources offered by the history of political thought. Waldron is a world expert in jurisprudence, but here also demonstrates his learning from the great political thinkers in our tradition. He gives particular emphasis to Madison and Montesquieu (and to eighteenth-century figures more generally) for their close attention to the challenges of establishing

institutions that could handle the pressures of large and diverse societies. But he ranges knowledgeably and insightfully from Aristotle to Hannah Arendt. Against philistines who dismiss the old books as irrelevant to modern research, and antiquarians who would claim the old books as inevitably cut off from our present concerns, Waldron shows that learning from our forerunners is one of the most productive things that we can do if wishing to be perceptive students of the present.

There is a unity and coherence to these essays unusual for a collection of this sort, but in this case it is not hard to explain. Waldron has long been committed to two principles—we might even call them axioms—of good political theory. The first he takes from Hannah Arendt, and is the truism (albeit too frequently forgotten) that 'there is politics ... because not man, but men inhabit the world'. The other is that questions of moral objectivity (or subjectivity) are ultimately irrelevant in matters of real-world politics, because whether or not there are 'truths' or 'right answers' on evaluative questions, it is inevitable that people in society will *disagree* about those matters. A key task of political theory is thus to understand how that disagreement can be made sense of and dealt with in ways that successfully avoid exclusion, injustice, oppression, corruption, exploitation, unfair marginalisation and all the other pathologies politics can readily come to exhibit. Keeping always these two principles in mind, Waldron maintains a coherence and unity that is continuous with a long career's reflection on these matters.

Finally, Waldron is also, red in tooth and claw, a proponent of democracy. Whereas some might be led to cynicism by the grub-biness of real-world legislatures and courts, he seeks instead to face them down—as his Enlightenment heroes did—by thinking about, and then advocating for, how we can make them better. For Waldron, making our politics better must go hand-in-hand with realising that the greatest, most successful and most inherently valuable institutions that we have are those that add up to make the practice of modern representative democracy. That practice is irreducibly messy and complex, recalcitrant in the face of simplifying theory or the purity of moral conviction.

But it is a practice worth defending, as well as trying to improve. These essays shows us how we might do a better job of that than has typically been managed in recent years.

King's College, Cambridge

Afghanistan: 'We were paying the wrong people'

David Loyn

Farewell Kabul: From Afghanistan to a More Dangerous World, by Christina Lamb. Harper Collins. 640 pp. £25.

Christina Lamb is frank about her love affair with Pakistan and Afghanistan. 'Benazir Bhutto had changed my life by inviting me to her wedding in 1987.' The author of this fine book never looked back, reporting from Afghanistan before the Russians left, moving to Pakistan, and making friends across the region. As an account of the Afghan war, in particular the period after 2005 when international military engagement became serious, the book cannot be bettered.

The author is a real reporter—travelling by motorbike in the 1980s with a young Hamid Karzai to meet mujahidin who were fighting the Russians, and coming under attack while on patrol with Royal Marines in Helmand almost twenty years later.

For almost all of that time, she was working for Sunday newspapers, a form of journalism that demands more colour, better interviews and a better writing style than most others. This book jogs along with an easy rhythm, full of well-turned phrases. The guerrilla leader Sayyaf is 'patron to a venerable who's who of terrorists'; British forces drop 'missiles the price of a Porsche'. The contrast between this and the Taliban, fighting in pyjamas and flip-flops, is similar to Kipling's poem 'Arithmetic on the Frontier': 'Two thousand pounds of education/Drops to a ten rupee *jezail*.'

It is revealed that the Defence Secretary who sent British troops into Helmand, John Reid, could not find Afghanistan on a globe. He will forever be remembered for his breezy forecast that 'We would be happy to leave in three years and without firing a

shot'. His successor, Des Browne, is condemned for describing the continued campaign as an 'operational decision', as if politicians had nothing to do with it. The author is rightly harsh on the MOD media machine, who attempted to paint a relentless optimistic glow rather than allowing reporters to find out for themselves. Access became even more restricted after Lamb came under attack, under the excuse that journalists would become casualties.

And the public relations failure did not just impact understanding at home; the Taliban were far better at it. One commander interviewed by Lamb says they he had been briefed that people in Helmand were not committed—they were on the fence. But because of better Taliban public relations, 'I'm not sure how close we ever came to the fence'. Constantly let down by political and developmental failure, British and American forces were left to pick up the pieces.

Lamb is consistently on the right side of an argument I have often made over the past twenty years—that however harsh and wrong the Taliban undoubtedly are, many of the old warlords are more of a threat to the country. These were the men backed by the West to defeat Russia, who formed their own private armies and returned to take up prominent positions in the new Afghanistan after the Taliban fell in 2001. She puts it simply: in 2001 'we were paying the wrong people'.

We share Lamb's emerging awareness of the worsening security of Pakistan. Her own most successful book was with the schoolgirl Malala, whose shooting exposed the horror of life in the frontier region. But I was left wanting more analysis of why things became so bad. There is only one mention of Saudi Arabia and the pernicious nature of its support for Wahhabism, the most extreme and retrograde version of Islam. The good eye for an anecdote is sometimes not quite enough.

It is a long book, and there are editing glitches. Karzai's chain-smoking is often described in detail, as if never referred to before. Is the Pakistani intelligence group Sector S or Directorate S? Both appear. These are quibbles, and after all, what is so impressive about this is that it is a real book, not a collection of articles, which would have been easy to do.

Is she too involved to be an objective witness? It is a dilemma of foreign correspondents as much as any other journalist—you can't report well unless you know what you are reporting, and the more you know, the more your contacts become friends. But there is an added challenge in war reporting—it is literally a matter of life and death. Hemingway put it best: 'It is very dangerous to write the truth in war, and the truth is dangerous to come by.'

We are left with a sense of violence and loss in what Lamb calls the 'forever war'. She is lucky to escape the bomb that killed her friend Benazir; one of her closest contacts in the Pakistani military, Colonel Imam, is murdered. In a last bizarre interview,

President Karzai sits alone and isolated in his palace, quoting Shelley who has 'seen murder on the way'. Lamb returns to Herat where, in an earlier book, she had recorded a women's sewing circle as an act of resistance to the Taliban. But the sewing circle has gone. And life for the women feels no better than during the Taliban years.

So was the war a failure? Lamb certainly thinks so. But despite setbacks, the country did not collapse into Taliban control as soon as NATO combat operations ended in 2014, as many predicted. The forever war is not over yet.

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