'Bows of pseudo-profundity' and 'moral certitude': Alan Johnson and Democratiya

The merger of the online journal Democratiya, with Dissent, provides an obvious point to begin assessing the role of Alan Johnson’s creation. The following is not intended as the last word on this subject, but as a contribution to a process of analysis. The approach here will be to focus on the argumentation used in Democratiya, specifically in the one article written for the journal by Johnson. “Camus’ Catch: How Democracies can defeat Totalitarian Political Islam” addresses both practical political initiatives and broader ideological responses to the threat of ‘totalitarian Islam’. It is an extended version of a speech that Johnson gave at a conference organized by the Medbridge Strategy Centre, an organization established by the European Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress to ‘promote a strong relationship between Europe and its Middle East partners that share the same values’, a group that lobbies for Israel.[1]

One of the objectives mentioned is the restoration of ‘the doctrine of the international community and the partnership between the US and Europe”. This is problematic, assuming as it does that the attitude of the US towards Europe is essentially benign. Witness here the thoughts of Kendall Myers, a State Department adviser, on the ‘Special Relationship’:

> It has been from the very beginning, very one-sided. There never really has been a special relationship, or at least not one we’ve noticed.[2]

It would seem likely that any European partnership with the US would be one governed by American priorities. Johnson argues
the need to ‘make urgent international solidarity with democrats in the Arab and Muslim world’. This is fraught with difficulty for, on the one hand Johnson lauds US ‘democracy-promotion’ but, on the other, even commentators sympathetic to American objectives identify US involvement as a major obstacle to the achievement of political reform.

In the current political climate in the Arab world, any opposition groups, or individual activists associated with the US are deeply suspect in the eyes of their fellow citizens.[3]

Dalcoura, is not a diehard of the ‘reactionary’ anti-American left, and, indeed, concludes her work with eight policy suggestions that might, in her view, enable the US to achieve its objectives. Another of Johnson’s objectives is to ‘promote global development-as-freedom’. Here, Johnson’s linkage between global economic development and freedom makes him sound like the IMF, particularly when they too refer to the ‘international community’.

The international community should endeavour… to help the poorest countries integrate into the world economy, grow more rapidly, and reduce poverty. That is the way to ensure all people in all countries have access to the benefits of globalization.[4]

In reality there is little that Johnson and his co-thinkers can actually do to achieve the three objectives listed above, beyond, that is, tail-ending the governments of the ‘coalition’. The only one of the objectives that can be accomplished is to ‘wage a cultural “cold war” of ideas.

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At the beginning of “Camus’ Catch” is a quotation from Gordon Brown, arguing that the Cold War between the West and the
Soviets was fought as much at the level of ideas as through the deployment of military power. Brown goes on to argue that a similar mobilisation is needed in the global conflict with militant Islam. Does Brown really believe that this was how the Cold War was won? Others take a rather different view:

Conceivably, had American agents not conspired in the overthrow of popularly based governments in Iran and Guatemala; had they not tried to assassinate Lumumba and Castro; had they not tampered with elections in the Philippines and Syria and elsewhere; had they not destabilized leftist regimes in Chile and other countries; had they not bombed Indonesian islands and mined Nicaraguan harbours; had the United States not provided arms and money to a score of repressive juntas from Cuba to Pakistan to Zaire; had the FBI not disrupted the lawful activities of legitimate political groups in the United States; had the CIA not violated its own charter and engaged in domestic espionage; had American armed forces not lost 50,000 dead in Korea and nearly 60,000 in Vietnam – conceivably, had the United States not committed these acts...communism might have conquered the world, or enough of it to render America significantly poorer, unhappier, and less secure.[5]

The US appears to have placed its trust in something more solid than ideas. The ruling elite of the USA may not have believed they could win the Cold War through the demonstration of their superior ideas, but they were very keen to sell the idea that such was the case. This essentially was the role of the Cold War intellectuals. Johnson offers no comment on the Brown quote. However, he cites, with approval the thoughts of Paul Berman. Berman makes absolutely explicit his admiration for the Cold War intellectuals, citing a list of them, including the contributors to *The God That Failed* edited by Richard Crossman. The flaws of this work parallel the flaws of today’s cold warriors. In Crossman’s piece he referred to the loss of faith in democracy of western intellectuals during the
1930s, a despair that led them towards communism.

> It is easy enough in retrospect to see that this despair was hysterical. Fascism after all, was overcome without the surrender of civil liberties which Communism involves.[6]

Of course, from the perspective of 1950, it was clear that the Democracies did defeat fascism, but it was not so clear that they had the will to in the 1930s. The writer Richard Wright, tells the story of a hyperactive party member who is subsequently discovered to be an escaped mental patient.

> ...what kind of club did we run that a lunatic could step into it and help run it? Were we all so mad that we could not detect a madman when we saw one? [7]

The implication of this is that the Party-run John Reed club to which Wright refers existed in a world in which it was impossible to distinguish between sanity and insanity. Stephen Spender focuses on the de-humanizing quality of communism.

> Often I found a human and sympathetic Communist was a bad Communist to the extent that he was human and sympathetic.[8]

Although presented by ‘real intellectuals’ *The God That Failed* is a work of demonization, rather than analysis. A similar approach was taken in a multitude of less elevated books by ex-communists, like Douglas Hyde, *I Believed* (1950). Stephen Spender was so impressed with the latter, that he was moved, in his review to declare:

> Alas, this book goes a long way to justify the Red scares emanating from America. [9]

Did Spender believe, as was claimed by Senator McCarthy in 1950, that there were 200 members of the Communist Party working in the US State Department, or did he believe, as
McCarthy claimed in 1951 that George C. Marshall was a communist agent? If he did, what does this say about Spender’s judgement? If some of the Cold War intellectuals cited by Berman are men of straw, other citations are suspect for different reasons. Hannah Arendt, the theorist of Totalitarianism, a concept at the heart of Berman’s analysis has been criticised for ignoring the distinctive features of the regimes – Soviet Communism and Nazi Germany – that she conflates as Totalitarianism. The ideas mobilised by many of the figures cited, from Spender to Berman seem more concerned with the ideological impact than intellectual coherence. How does Johnson fare in this respect?

In ‘Camus’ Catch’ Johnson draws a comparison between the alleged responses of the Left to ‘Totalitarian Political Islam’ and the responses of the citizens of Oran, in Camus’, *The Plague*, to the arrival of plague. These responses fall into three categories:

...denial (‘there are no rats’) or worse – incoherent anti-Americanism (‘the rats are to be defended’) or self-loathing (‘we are the rats’)[10]

The curious thing here is that the bracketed phrases are not quotes from *The Plague*; such sentiments are not expressed in the book. On p. 5 Michel, a door porter states that ‘There weren’t no rats here’, meaning in his building, which is clearly not the same the same as saying ‘there are no rats’. [11] Furthermore, far from being in denial, readers are told on page 7:

*Rieux soon discovered that the rats were the great topic of conversation in that part of town* [12]

It is true that there is reluctance on the part of the authorities to accept the diagnosis of Plague, but this is overcome and, by p.61 accepted and acted upon. At the very
At the heart of Johnson’s essay is Camus’ brief career as a goalkeeper with the junior side of the Algerian team, Racing Universitaire Algerios. His starting point for a rather clumsy simile, is Camus’ assertion that: ‘...what I know most surely about morality and the duty of man I owe to sport and learned it in the RUA.’ Where and why did Camus say this? According to the Camus Society he wrote it in an article for an alumni sports magazine, on his time with the RUA. So, it is likely that, rather than being the product of prolonged philosophical cogitation, the phrase was coined to flatter the team that he had played with in his youth. Johnson, though, having established, to his satisfaction, that Camus’ morality was securely grounded in soccer, goes on to link that vision to the cause of Liberal Democracy by likening the west’s opposition to Totalitarian Political Islam to a goalkeeper dealing with a dangerous high ball. The necessity for the West to observe the rule of law in international relations is, apparently, like a goalkeeper forming a cradle with his hands to catch the aforementioned high ball. The literalness of this is difficult to digest: Camus’ anti-totalitarian morality derived from soccer, therefore the ‘anti-totalitarian’ cause of the West can be likened to Camus’ goalkeeping activities. Also, the goalkeeper occupies an essentially defensive position, whereas the whole tenor of Johnson article is for the supporters of Liberal Democracy to go the offensive.

Why should Johnson strain to involve Camus? In answer one might recall his comments on Berman’s Terrorism and Liberalism:

It meets a widespread late-modern yearning for complex problems to be wrapped up in simplistic explanations, tied with bows of pseudo-profundity (in this case borrowed from Albert Camus) and moral certitude.[13]
Bermanism, as is apparent from the number of positive citations in ‘Camus’ Catch’, is clearly contagious. In 2003 it might have been “a measure of the disorder of our intellectual culture”, but now it is flavor of the month. Indeed Johnson’s assertion: ‘Camus warned us’, of ‘Totalitarian Political Islam’, only makes sense within the framework of Berman’s analysis.

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Despite his change of direction Johnson still presents himself as figure on the left; his star witness for this is the Arab socialist, Salah Jaber.[14 ]Jaber is used to demonstrate the reactionary nature of Islamic fundamentalism, and the need for the Left to resolutely oppose it. Salah Jaber is a pen-name used by the activist, Gilbert Achcar, professor at the School of African and Oriental Studies, London. Achcar recently reproduced a version of the 1981 article that Johnson has cited, in his collection, Eastern Cauldron, Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq (2004). This is interesting because Achcar draws very different conclusions about the role of the USA in the Middle East, to Johnson. In a 2006 interview Achcar stated:

We, the anti-war movement, were the people who were saying that if the invasion [of Iraq] took place, it would lead to chaos. .. The invasion took place, and exactly what we predicted happened. It led to a chaotic situation, a very dangerous situation.[15]

The curiosity is that Johnson cites Achcar as an example of a time when ‘the left used to know better’; but it would seem that Jaber/Achcar is now as misguided as the rest of the ‘reactionary left’. Why, though does he appear to continue to endorse his earlier good sense by re-publishing the 1981 article that Johnson cites? According to Johnson Jaber argued that in some respects ‘the fundamentalist movement is, in fact
more backward than was fascism’. What Jaber said in the original article was:

In the countries where it came to power fascism created a new margin of growth for the capitalist forces of production in a general situation of imperialist crisis. From this point of view, the fundamentalist movement is, in fact, more backward than was fascism.[16]

The phrase quoted by Johnson, does not refer to a general political backwardness, but to backwardness in one specific instance, that is the ability to create the possibility for further economic growth. In Johnson’s article he also quotes Jaber to the effect: ‘any compromises proposed by the fundamentalists...pose enormous dangers for all sections of the left, both moral and physical’. This quote is clearly meant to underscore, the view that the Left should adopt a position of absolute opposition to all manifestations of Islamic fundamentalism. The quote used forms part of Jaber’s argument that in some states where the fundamentalists’ struggle is primarily against capital it assumes a populist character, consequently:

It follows from this that revolutionaries are faced with mass struggles in which they find themselves on the same side of the barricades as the Islamic fundamentalists and have to fight with them against ‘the common enemy’, something which would be unthinkable in the case of fascism... [17]

So, fundamentalism is not, in a general sense worse than fascism as it can be cooperated with and, furthermore Jaber’s strictures about compromise would relate to compromises of a programmatic nature within a context of cooperation. Indeed what Jaber is advocating is the tactic of the united front where revolutionary socialists cooperate with other movements and parties around specific objectives, like opposing the invasion of Iraq, but retain their own programmatic
objectives, in this case the establishment of a secular, workers’ republic. So Jaber’s position is one that argues for cooperation between revolutionaries and Islamic militants against the common imperialist enemy, and, at the same the time, for revolutionaries to fight to win Islamic militants to a secular, proletarian program. This is entirely different from the position that Johnson advocates, using the Jaber article for support. It would seem that Johnson’s attempts to use Jaber as means of linking his current position with the lost wisdom of a vanished left are sadly flawed.

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Johnson’s work rests heavily on the analysis presented by Berman in Terror and Liberalism. There, it is argued that, as a consequence of links between their founders and the West, both Ba’athism and Islamism are Arab versions of European Totalitarianism. This approach conflates the politics of secular Ba’athism, with those of a theocratic Islamism. How did the western influences that Berman identifies, actually work in practice? He offers a clear outline of how this transmission occurred for one of the founders of Ba’athism, Michel Aflaq:

For as Michel Aflaq had so wisely said, “the philosophies and teachings that came from the West invade the Arab mind” – though Aflaq, in making that observation, had no idea that he was speaking about himself and his own radical doctrines.[18]

So the transmission is unconscious, a process that Aflaq was unaware of. This is a curious statement because only a few pages before its appearance Berman outlined the direct and conscious links that Ba’athist pioneers had with a number of European political movements; he quotes one of them to the effect:

We were racists, admiring Nazism, reading its books and the sources of its thought...[19]
He also notes that some Ba’athist leaders, pursuing their studies in Paris, wrote for the Communist press.[20] It seems unlikely that Aflaq was unaware of these links, as he too studied in Paris. Aflaq’s engagement with western political movements and ideas was, therefore, a conscious process. He rejected Communism, for example, because of the failure of French Stalinism to support movements for colonial independence in the Popular Front era.

The explanation for this stress on the idea of an unconscious transmission can be found in Berman’s attempt to link Ba’athism to Islamism, though Sayyid Qutb.

...he (Qutb) had to struggle...against his own liberal impulses – “the cultural influences which had penetrated my mind in spite of my Islamic attitudes and inclination.” He sounded like Michel Aflaq complaining about “the philosophies and teachings” which “invade the Arab mind” – quite as if these two men, the theoreticians respectively of radical Islamism and Baath Socialism, were speaking of identical mental struggles. [21]

So, it would seem that both branches of Islamic ‘totalitarianism’ are, in the persons of their key theorists, shaped by a similar dialectic of osmotic penetration by western concepts and ideas. On closer inspection it becomes clear the similarities between Aflaq and Qutb are less obvious than Berman claims. As Berman acknowledges Ba’athism was the product of an interaction between Arab nationalism and certain western-generated ideologies. Qutb’s politics, on the other hand, were the product of a conscious rejection of all western ideologies. It is for reasons that will become apparent vital for Berman to establish that both Qutb and Aflaq were shaped, in part, by western influences, consequently he suggests that Qutb was affected by such influences in an unconscious fashion; because Berman also wished to link Aflaq and Qutb he decided, against his own evidence, that Aflaq was shaped by a
similar process. When it comes to suggesting similarities between Qutb’s Islamism and western ideologies, Berman struggles, for example:

The concept of totality, he (Qutb – RS) thought, distinguished Islam from all other world views — Tawhid, or the oneness of God. (Then again you find the same belief among the Marxists: “the primacy of the category of totality” was, for George Lukacs, the defining characteristic of Marxism….)[22]

The flaw in this argument is that ‘totality’ is a concept that can be given different contents. It makes no sense to say that both Qutb and Lukacs believe in ‘totality’ per se. Qutb believed in the oneness of God, and Lukacs believed in the materialist interpretation of history. To link them because both possess concepts of totality ignores the fact that their respective totalities are fundamentally different.

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Berman’s attempts to link Qutb’s Islamism to western totalitarianism are also, at times frankly contradictory. In a passage quoted above, Berman talks about Qutb struggling against liberal impulses, later in Terror and Liberalism however, he tells us:

Here, Qutb was wonderfully clever. He arrived at his social criticism by taking a good portion of modern Western social commentary and pouring it through an Islamic filter; and he arrived at his vision of shariah by taking a good portion of Islam and pouring it through a filter of modern liberalism.[23]

The process described above suggests a blending of doctrines, rather than a struggle in favor of one against another. However, perhaps even more remarkable is Berman’s claim that
out of this blending process — of Islam and liberalism — came a doctrine that was both ‘originally and deeply Muslim’ and ‘one more version of the European totalitarian idea’.\[24\]

Qutb’s doctrine, a blend of Islam and western liberalism, had, we are told, a ‘utopian destiny’, in this case a belief in an extended and strengthened Islamic world, and a sense of being under threat from the non-Islamic world. Berman, employing the kind of logic that has been discussed earlier, declares that as European totalitarian movements, like Nazism, also had grand visions of modern civilization and of desperate predicaments and utopian destinies, this confirms that Qutb’s outlook is also totalitarian. This, again, ignores the content of the utopian destinies aspired to.

Berman’s work rests on Camus’ analysis of totalitarianism in *The Rebel* (1951). This is Camus’ attempt to come to terms with 20th century totalitarianism. For Camus rebellion was the rejection of the despair that might flow from existence in an absurd universe. Camus was, however, concerned to show that rebellion in the nineteenth century had moved to a point where, through the rejection of all values, following the rejection of God, it had, developed belief systems, like Marxism, which created secular gods. Marxist theory imposed a pattern on history which could only be maintained by coercion. In an absurd world there is no order in human affairs, and to impose, one was, in Camus’ view, to impose a tyranny, driven by its commitment to ‘historical necessity’.\[25\]

Camus’ analysis takes in a period of 200 years, from the French Revolution to the 1950s. Within it he links a variety of novelists, poets and philosophers, to demonstrate how the absolute rebellion of figures like, for example, Nietzsche and Baudelaire, contributed to the emergence of ‘state terrorist’ movements like Nazism, and Communism. Camus’ work is in many ways flawed, he takes no pains to prove the linkages he posits between the figures that he cites. Camus also refuses to examine specific historical contexts. He argues, for example, that the decision, taken by Stalin to eliminate the Kulaks as
a class, as part of the process of collectivization, flowed directly from Marx’s analysis of peasant societies.[26] This version of events takes no account of the fact that Stalin systematically misquoted and misinterpreted Marxism, to support the achievement of objectives diametrically opposed to Marx’s. However, the inconsistencies of The Rebel are to some degree excusable, because of Camus’ view of the status of the work:

The following pages do no more than set down some historical landmarks and a provisional hypothesis.[27]

Camus’ work was not, in his view, a fully formed historical interpretation. Berman, on the other hand, has gone on record to the effect that Terror and Liberalism which incorporates large elements of Camus’ narrative, is an historical interpretation. Berman accepts Camus’ ‘provisional hypothesis’ as undisputed fact.

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The ‘totalitarian’ movements of the 20th century were according to Berman, movements that rejected liberal democracy, therefore Ba’athism and Islamism, movements which also reject liberal democracy were simply Arab forms of classical European ‘totalitarianism’. The men of hyphenated identity – like Qutb and Aflaq – had carried these influences into the Arab world – even if they did not realize it.

Qutb’s vanguard…was going to inaugurate a rebellion…in the name of Islam, against the liberal values of the West. (Totalitarian movements always but always rise up in rebellion against the liberal values of the West).[28]

The brilliance of this analysis is that, by using his tenuous notion of hyphenated identity, Berman can characterize any expression of opposition to the policies of the West,
principally, of course, the policies of the United States, as totalitarian and therefore illegitimate. The use of the term ‘rebellion’ is extremely revealing. In what sense then can movements like Ba’athism and Islamism rebel against values they have never held? The only logical answer is that their rebellion was and is ultimately a challenge to American hegemony, and that Berman’s ‘historical interpretation’ is little more than an attempt to de-legitimize such challenges in a form palatable to those in the west who incline towards a liberal-left perspective.

In 2003 Johnson wrote:

The US is now the world’s hyperpower with a grand strategy to reshape global political and economic relations in its favor ....[29]

This sounds very similar to views endorsed by leading figures in George W. Bush’s administration.

At present the United States faces no global rival. America’s grand strategy should aim to preserve and extend this advantageous position as far into the future as possible[30]

Johnson’s analysis in 2003 appears credible because it sounds very similar to what the ideologues surrounding Bush were saying. In 2006, Johnson claimed that US policy had moved away from being a simple expression of self-interest, towards ‘democracy-promotion’. This view does not correspond either to the actions or the statements of the Bush government. It is worth noting that the PNAC document quoted above talked, in relation to Iraq, about ‘post-combat stability.’ It may well be that the institution of some form of democratic structure is part of the process of establishing ‘post-combat stability’ in Iraq, but that does not equal a general program of ‘democracy-promotion’. It seems, for example, unlikely that the US is suggesting democratic reform to those states in the
region which are seen as, in varying degrees, friendly, like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya.

In 2006 Johnson, convinced by the concept of ‘democracy-promotion’ endorsed the notion of military intervention as a general principle:

...in such a situation, the ‘international community’ needs an international military force ‘dedicated to the high moral purpose of defending fellow citizens of the global common life’. [31]

The only state that could support such an international force was the USA, and it follows that the decision to use it would come from the USA. In effect such a body would give the US and its allies carte blanche to intervene wherever they felt their interests were threatened, under the cover of ‘defending fellow citizens of the global common life’. Johnson, himself, in 2003, recognized the objections to the notion of an international police force, and quoted John Bolton, then US Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Affairs to demonstrate the reality behind such a proposal:

There is an international community that can be led by the only real power left in the world, and that is the United States, when it suits our interests....,[32]

Conclusions

Why did Johnson’s perspective change so completely in the years leading up to 2006? Johnson’s motives cannot be captured precisely, the meaning of his reorientation can. Consider this passage from Camus’ Catch:

Totalitarian Political Islam appeals to a bone-deep sense of humiliation. The anguished question: how did the very fulcrum of civilization become dependent, defeated, backward, corrupt and poverty-stricken? The Islamists answer: ‘They did it!’ —
The interesting thing about this passage is that, first of all, it talks about humiliation, but not the grievances upon which it might be based. It then uses this phrase ‘the very fulcrum of civilization’ to account for the humiliation. The phrase is imprecise, but its function is to focus the ‘humiliation’ of Islamic society on some distant and irrecoverable past; better to talk about the past, than the more recent disappearance of Palestine. The passage then refers to the ‘answers’ offered by Islamists. This is cunning on three counts: first of all the origins of the answers means that they are immediately discredited; secondly, within the answers there are a number of categories calculated to stimulate the ire of western liberals, ‘uppity women’ in particular; thirdly, Western Europe and the United States do not figure, except presumably, in the general category ‘infidels’. By not naming these political entities, Johnson effectively de-politicizes the grievances of the Muslim world, and renders them reactionary and religious, by the use of the archaic term: ‘infidel’. The passage is an exercise in nullifying the validity of the complaints of Muslims around the world, and, at the same time, pointing to one solution for the west: the destruction of Muslim movements which challenge its hegemony. This is the reality behind the call for ‘proactive defense of the liberal constitutional order…’[34]

Camus’ Catch is a work of persuasion, containing, questionable readings of dead intellectuals, selective citations, and unreferenced assertions. Johnson also employs countless ‘horror stories’: Camus’ Catch contains 12 ‘items’, these are paragraphs outlining the ‘evil deeds’ of opponents of US policy. They are not placed in context, and they are not commented on, they are stand-alone examples of the iniquities of those identified as enemies. The ‘items’ include quotations from George Galloway’s sycophantic speeches about dubious Arab
leaders. These ‘items’ do not constitute an argument: the follies of the opponents of US foreign policy do not automatically make a case for that policy. The purpose of the ‘items’ is to call into question the character of the individual mentioned, rather than answering their criticisms. In Camus’ Catch Johnson appears to have passed over to the ranks of the ideologues, those whose ‘analysis’ comes after the framing of policy, in other words those who justify policy to the mass of the population, in particular, for those of a liberal-left inclination.

Notes

1. See here on Medbridge Strategy Center.

2. “Britain’s special relationship ‘just a myth’”


4. The International Monetary Fund, ‘Globalization: Threat or Opportunity?’.


7. Ibid., p. 131.

8. Ibid., p. 261.


10. Camus’ Catch. Johnson also uses the same argument in two other places: Alan Johnson, ‘Alan Johnson pens an open letter to a comrade on the attacks today,’ Labour Friends of Iraq
website, and in an article in *The Guardian* July 13, 2008.


12. Ibid., p. 7.


17. Ibid., p. 111.


19. Ibid., p. 55.

20. Ibid.


22. Ibid., p. 66.

23. Ibid., p. 95.


25. Ibid., p. 16.


27. Ibid., p. 181.

28. Ibid., p. 16.


32. Ibid., p. 9.


34 Camus’ Catch, op. cit.

35. Ibid.