BLAIR, RUBBISH, AND THE DEMONS OF NOONTIME

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Professor Ankersmit's paper 'Political representation and political experience' is extremely rich, and my colleague, Professor Skinner has already given an extensive discussion on one of its central concepts, that of political representation, to which I could not hope to add anything. Thus, in my remarks I will focus on the second part of Professor Ankersmit's paper, and try to make three points: the first two concern aspects of the real and the conceptual relation that exists between the public and the private in contemporary politics; the third concerns the aesthetics of our experience of politics.

To start with the first point, Professor Ankersmit attacks a certain way in which those of us who live in liberal democratic states are encouraged to think about politics in those states. We are encouraged to see ourselves and others as isolated agents whose only relevant political properties are two: First we have certain opinions about what is the good, but these are construed as 'private' opinions which we entertain in our minds, and which, within reason, are held to be no body's business but our own. In addition, these opinions are assumed to be fundamentally self-interested, that is 'the good' when it appears in them is assumed essentially to be 'my good'. The way in which we have come to form those opinions, the reasons we might have for holding them, how they might change, how they are connected to each other — the whole historical dimension of belief-formation and change — is something that counts as a part of our private inner life, and this is politically to be treated as a black-box.

Second, we are thought to be essentially voters, where 'voting' is increasingly treated as a kind of one-time consumer choice, a decision to 'buy' one brand of political product that is on the market in preference to some other by marking a ballot or pulling a lever in a voting booth. We are assumed to vote our private interest. This voting is our only relevant political action, and by some magical transformation the cumulation of all these individual votes by citizens becomes a collective choice which enters into or even constitutes the public sphere of politics. Professor Ankersmit wishes to object most vehemently to this model of the politics and specifically to the conception of the relation between the private and public embedded in it. This is, in fact, as he very eloquently argues, an *incorrect* view of the real nature of politics in Western societies. Western voters, in fact, turn out to be perfectly capable of distinguishing their conception of their own interest — of what is good *for them* — from what they take to be in the *general* interest of all, and, in fact, unsurprisingly enough, many voters actually do vote for what they take to be in the general interest rather than for what they assume is their own private good. Professor Ankersmit draws from this the conclusion, which seems to me an eminently reasonable one to draw, that we cannot usefully makes the traditional distinction between 'public' and 'private'. On the 'traditional' view there is, on the one hand, my 'private' sphere, that is the realm of opinions and preferences inhabiting a purely mental space that is inaccessible to others'; these preferences and opinions are assumed always to be deeply self-centred and self-regarding. To this is contrasted a 'public sphere' of intersubjective discussion, overt action, and purportedly disinterested public policy. So, the distinction between the 'private' and the 'public' cannot quite be as simple as we are sometimes encouraged to take it to be. Citizen's 'privately held' opinions are, however, not always self-interested preferences and no magic wand exists by virtue of which the preferences externally expressed in observable voting behaviour necessarily come to instantiate the general interest and are embodied in state-policy. Public policy is often taken hostage by groups with deeply self-interested projects, and the public/ private split *also* falls *within* the windowless monads which the voters of advanced liberal democracies are taken to be, occurring there as a tension between self-interested impulses and relatively disinterested, reflective views about what is in the general interest.

The second part of Professor Ankersmit's paper contains a brief historical narrative of some of the most important elements in the relation between public and private as it has developed in European society during the past three centuries. Feudal society was one with a very undeveloped public sphere. Political, legal, and military offices were in some sense the private property of those who held them; they could sometimes be bequeathed, sold, or otherwise transferred at the will of those individuals who happened to occupy them at any given time. The secular movement beginning with the French Revolution and lasting until the second half of the 20th century was one in which a distinct 'public sphere' was first established and then gradually collected into its wide embrace a wide variety of functions that were previously discharged by private individuals, corporations, or voluntary groups. Political and legal functions stop being hereditary; military offices can no longer be bought and sold; state schools are founded; starting in Bismarck's Germany in the late 19th century and eventually moving out to encompass most European societies, some form of state-sponsored social security system with retirement benefits and unemployment and disability insurance is set up. A professional civil service based on 'merit' is established. In the most advanced countries transport, heavy industry, and essential services are brought into the public realm with governments taking over important control functions and setting levels of investment, and national health services are constructed. In the very late 1970s and early 1980s a reaction sets in. Public services and national industries are re-assigned to large corporations, often sold to them at knock-down prices, thereby reducing or eliminating the ability of the society to exercise direct collective control over the basic conditions of its own self-maintenance. This is called 'privatisation'. In Britain we date the beginning of this movement to the period during which Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, but it seems to acquire irreversible momentum when the Labour Party under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown adopt the basic features of Thatcher's economic and political vision and implement it with a thoroughness which she herself and her associates never succeeded in attaining.[1]

An important thread in Professor Ankersmit's account is the general claim that the way we represent politics to ourselves is itself a factor of great political importance, and the first part of his paper demonstrates very convincingly that the split between public and private, as

traditionally construed, does not really mirror the reality of political life in an advanced Western democracy. Nevertheless, this distinction came increasingly to have significant political influence through the imaginative hold it established over the minds of large numbers of citizens; it is, as it were, a politically highly effective illusion. The obvious implication of this — at least it seems obvious to me — is that the uncritical use of the sharply construed, dichotomous and purportedly all-encompassing distinction between public and private is politically at best perilous and at worst actively harmful. The distinction should perhaps be replaced by a set of categories that is more flexible and more discriminating. In a sense one can see much of the most interesting social theory of the twentieth century as engaged in precisely trying to do this. I will mention only two thinkers whose work is important here. Max Weber, probably the most powerful and incisive political thinker of the 20th century, analysed the phenomenon of 'bureaucratisation' as a tendency at work in parliaments, administrative agencies, political parties, and large 'private' economic entities,[2] and discussed in some detail the relation of this tendency to the formation of public policy. Second, Michel Foucault in a series of important works proposed a certain model of the way in which what he called 'disciplinary power' is established and implemented in a wide variety of spheres of contemporary human social life.[3] Toward the end of his life Foucault proposed to write a history of the way in which in the West complex structures of 'governmentality' have gradually developed that were unknown in antiquity, and in particular unknown to Roman Law.[4] Neither 'bureaucratisation' nor 'disciplinary power' nor yet the forms of 'governmentality' can, however, be adequately and appropriately grasped through a simple dichotomy like that between 'public' and 'private'.

Taking some of these points together then, the question for me is: Is it really right and illuminating to think of what we have been experiencing in Western Europe as 'privatisation'? Isn't there a serious ideological bias built into describing and thinking about it in that way? Control, after all, is being shifted from a government which is at least in principle responsive to some kind of minimal electoral scrutiny to powerful agents who are not thus accountable. The main beneficiaries of the government's disburdening itself of responsibility for the rail system, the post office, the water supply or the telephone company are in fact large corporations and these organisations are, to be sure,

subject to what we call 'private law', but they are not 'private' in any other important sense, least of all in any sense which connects them to any given human individual; they are *collective* entities, and the major discipline to which they are subject is that of impersonal, nowadays overwhelmingly international, market forces.

It has often been pointed out, but will nonetheless bear repetition that the interpretative construal of large corrections as sufficiently 'like' individual persons to have assigned to them some of the historically hard-won rights, powers, immunities and privileges of human individuals is one of the cornerstones of the ideology of the contemporary capitalism, which requires for its acceptance an imaginative leap of faith which not everyone can manage. Calling the transfer of public assets to large corporations, some of them international in their operations and extra-territorial in their governance, 'privatisation' is a highly clever rhetorical move in that it suggests that it is 'private individuals' who are the owners or beneficiaries of the process, and this gives the impression of significantly greater cosiness, humanity, and decentralisation than is the case . The impression that might be generated, namely that '*we*' in Britain now have more control over the railway system than when they were run by the State, is clearly false. So perhaps the answer is not to try to force what is called 'privatisation' into the straight-jacket of 'public/private', but to try to think about it in terms of a *distinct* third category, e.g. the 'corporate', as opposed both to the public and the private. Or perhaps one needs a whole new set of several novel categories. *A mere* recategorisation won't in itself solve the difficulties which Professor Ankersmit diagnoses, but perhaps it would help us avoid making a difficult situation even worse by allowing our imaginations to remain infested with some palpably misleading associations.

In the final part of his paper Professor Ankersmit discusses the aesthetics that is most appropriate to our experience of the contemporary political world, and discusses this in terms that connect it with certain elements of Kant's philosophy, such as the distinction between the empirical and the transcendental(al) and with traditional treatments of the category of the sublime, and finally, also with the 'ancient topos of "the demons of noontime"'. Ancient writers spoke of an appearance of or an encounter with the demons of noontime when humans experienced ' a sudden caesura in the meaningful relationships we

entertain with the world outside ourselves'(p.38). In Mediterranean countries at most times of the day things and their shadows intermingle, giving us a basic orientation in the world. We have a sense of objects as being meaningfully connected to each other and of our location in a densely significant environment. At noon, however, the sun is right above us and things coincide with their shadows, or, to put it another way, the shadows disappear. Then 'things … leave us alone in an alien world that momentarily becomes indifferent to us' (p.38). Our experience is one of dehumanisation and alienation, of cold nothingness, and of a loss of the sense of our own identity and our status as subjects. One natural reaction to this is terror or panic in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful, but undifferentiated and radically meaningless world (p.40).[5]

I wonder, however, whether the category of the 'sublime' and the 'demons of noontime' can as easily be assimilated to one another as Professor Ankersmit suggests. The two phenomena seem to me to be very different. Very crudely speaking, the traditional experience of the sublime was an experience that was overwhelming, and potentially terrifying, but this was by virtue of being excessively substantial, not empty; it was satiated with *too much* meaning. One of the traditional examples of the 'sublime' which is very often used is from the Book of *Genesis*: 'God said: Let there be light! And there was light!'. This actually occurs in Pseudo-Longinus (9.9), the ancient treatise in which the category of 'the sublime' is first introduced. This passage from *Genesis* is 'sublime' not because it expresses a special experience of an alienated loss of meaning, but because it is an extremely simple expression of the *Urstiftung* of *all* meaningfulness — certainly all human meaningfulness — itself. Pseudo-Longinus then immediately (9.10) adds to this citation from *Genesis* a discussion of a passage from Book XVII of the *Iliad*. Patroklos has been killed and the Greeks and Trojan are fighting to recover his corpse, but the Greeks are having much the worse of it. Zeus, in fact, is favouring the Trojans, and has spread a mist and darkness over the struggle. As the terrified Greeks begin to break ranks and flee, Ajax prays to Zeus:

> 'Father Zeus, draw the sons of the Achaians out from the mist
> and make bright day. Grant to our eyes to see,
> and kill us in the light, since this is now what pleases you'.[6]
> [XVII. 645-7]

Pseudo-Longinus comments that what makes this 'sublime' is that Ajax does not pray for life, but only for light so that he can find a worthy death [(9.10)]. This is seen to be sublime because here the human spirit is construed as in some sense exhibiting an edifying capacity to triumph over adversity and endow even the most unpropitious of circumstances with 'meaning.' For Kant, too, part of the effect of the sublime is that it generates in us a sense of elevation or edification (*Erhebung*), but he has a very narrow conception of how that edification is to be understood: it must be seen as essentially and exclusively *moral* in character. Thus he summarises his discussion of the sublime by stating:

> Also ist die Erhabenheit in keinem Dinge der Natur, sondern nur in unserem Gemüthe enthalten, sofern wir der Natur in uns und dadurch auch der Natur (sofern sie auf uns einfließt) außer uns überlegen zu sein uns bewußt werden können.[7]
>
> [So the sublime is contained in no thing of nature, but only in our faculty of feeling, insofar as we are able to be aware of ourselves as superior to nature in ourselves and thereby also to nature outside us (insofar as it influences us).]

We become aware that we are 'superior' to nature when we notice that no matter how overpowering natural forces are, we always (Kant believes) have the ability to imagine that we have the power to prevent ourselves from being coerced into acting against what our duty requires us to do. This, Kant thinks, is the origin of the feeling of the sublime, which is a kind of moral respect or esteem which we experience toward our own ability to endow the world with meaning by activating our practical reason and following the law of duty no matter what. Kant further develops this thought by associating the experience of the sublime with (true) religion and contrasting it with 'superstition'.[8] Terrified self-abnegation in the face of overwhelming power — 'Furcht und Angst vor dem übermächtigen Wesen, dessen Willen der erschreckte Mensch sich unterworfen sieht' — is the affect associated with superstition. The experience of the `sublime', on the other hand, depends on quiet contemplation — ' eine Stimmung zur ruhigen Contemplation' — and a free judgment —'ganz freies Urtheil' — that the power to which one is subject is 'just' and deserves our moral esteem ('bewundern', 'hochschätzen').

The experience of the sublime for Kant is thus almost the exact reverse of the experience of terror induced by the encounter with the mere, uncontrollable, meaningless power of the 'demons of noontime'. Although there may be something extra-human or even super-human about these demons, there is nothing even remotely morally edifying about coming into contact with them.

As an example of the specifically modern aesthetic reaction to our political world, Professor Ankersmit cites the film *The Truman Show*. I wonder, though, whether this example is really an appropriate one. The eponymous protagonist in this film discovers one day that he has been living his whole life on an elaborate stage-set. This discovery is, to be sure, disorienting, but it is not, it seems to me, really either at all appropriately analysed in terms of the Kantian distinction between the empirical and the transcendental or through the use of the category of the sublime. The reason for this is that the 'new' world Truman discovers is not really in any important way *different* from the world in which he lived. The 'house' in which he lives on the film set of his life is, after all, made of brick and wood, just like 'real' houses. There is nothing at all 'transcendental' or even 'different' about real houses. The people with whom he interacts are actors, but they are humans. Truman's world is made to *be* real, and it is composed of real things: That is the point of the exercise. If, when he escapes, he thinks he is going to encounter something radically different, he is deeply mistaken. This is the reverse of the sublime. There is nothing radically different and deserving of special moral approval: all there is 'out there' in the 'real' world is more of exactly what he knows already from the stage set. In a way the film is about the disappointment of a world in which there is nothing else than the tired, conventional narratives of a well-shaded street in an affluent small town, although this was probably not the intention of those who made the film.

To be sure, there are films that try to provide a bit more of a profound *frisson* at the disruption of normal human identity. Thus in a film like *The Matrix* some humans 'wake up' to discover they are really living in a very different kind of life from the one they think they are living — they are actually naked and lying in slime-filled pods while electrodes stimulate their brains to imagine they are walking the streets of late 20th century cities, having dinner in posh restaurants, and concluding various kinds of business deals. Still *The Matrix* doesn't seem imbued with a deep sense of the lack of *meaningfulness*

— the world of *The Matrix* is perfectly 'meaningful'; it simply has a different meaning from the one we are inclined to see in it. Complete meaninglessness, however, was supposed to be characteristic of the world in which the 'demons of noontime' made their appearance and were at home, and it also does not seem to me at all a good image of the world of *The Matrix*.

In fact, *neither* of these two films, *Truman* or *The Matrix* seems to me to give a convincing representation of the appropriate aesthetics of contemporary politics. Still, I think there is something to be said for Professor Ankersmit's view of our world as one of uncanny meaninglessness, a world without shadows, haunted by the 'demons of noontime'. A world with shadows is one with historical substance and depth, with foreground and background, with a significant, relevant past and connected to an anticipated future. One of the most striking features of the politician Tony Blair was that his constant appeals to 'History' — to the larger-than-life significance of the choices he faced and the policies he pursued — was coupled with a complete lack of any historical knowledge, or indeed genuine interest in real history. Thus, Blair seems simply not to have known about the British invasion of Iraq (or Mesopotamia as it then was) at the end of World War One, about the British military defeat at Kut', or about the Treaty of Mosul. He reports thinking that a Slovak student should be grateful to the US for the 'liberation' of his country. In a well reported speech he spoke with great fervour about the way the US had stood by Britain as our only ally during the dark days of the *blitz*, although in the autumn of 1940 and the winter of 1940/1, during the so-called *blitz*, the US had been not an ally, but officially neutral in the war between the UK and Nazi Germany. The US did not, of course, join the war until a year later in December 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaration of war on the US. Examples of this kind of gross ignorance could be multiplied.[9] The real past doesn't count for Blair; it has no substance and casts no shadows. It is *mere words* and thus infinitely malleable to suit present purposes. This is perhaps connected with his penchant for thinking that once a decision is made, it is immediately time to 'move on', although admittedly he showed this tendency most strongly when the decision in question had been a catastrophic one with which he was very publicly identified as the prime mover. Equally, in this world without history prudential thought about the future real consequences of any policy

decision seemed to play a remarkably limited role in his thinking. Before the invasion of Iraq a group of experts on the Middle East met with Blair to warn him: the situation in Iraq, they claimed, was complex; one would have to have a very clear idea of what one planned to do, how one would organise the occupation and reconstruction of the country, etc. Blair is said to have listened with evident annoyance and increasing disinterest, and to have repeatedly interrupted the experts with the rhetorical question: 'But Saddam is evil, isn't he?' Presumably what is to take the place of history and foresight is religion and faith. With knowledge of the past and attempted prudential calculations about the future cancelled out, policy is made in an eternal present in which the basic material is the results of electoral polls, the expressed preferences of focus groups, and the headlines and leaders of a select group of influential newspapers and these are to be finally evaluated by a human mind which is directly illuminated by moral intuitions and divine inspiration.

Where is one, then, to find a good instance of the kind of aesthetic that would be appropriate to the bare, wind-swept, noon-day landscape in which contemporary politics plays itself out? For that, I suggest, we must turn to an ancient literary work which Professor Ankersmit mentions, but does not discuss in detail. He cites the *Antigone* (p.38) as one of the places in literature, where the demons of noontime make an early appearance. He doesn't cite I specific passage, but I assume he is referring to the second long speech by the Guard whom Kreon has sent out to watch over the body of the dead Polyneikes and prevent it from being buried. The Guard describes keeping watch:

> 'So things were for a time until the bright circle of the
> sun stood in the middle of the sky
> and it beat down glowingly and then suddenly from the ground
> a whirlwind raised a column <of dust>, troubling heaven,[10]
> it filled the plain defiling all the foliage
> of the woods on the plain and the great sky was replete <with it>.
> Having shut our eyes we endured the divine affliction.'
>
> (ed. Lloyd-Jones & Wilson, ll. 415ff)

The demon of noontime here is a storm, a torrid whirlwind of filthy rubbish, obscuring the bright-light of day. Sophokles might as well have been speaking of the Blair-government: in constant motion, al-

ways over-excited, perpetually obfuscating, a constantly rotating airy mass of garbage, insubstantial but destructive, and sordidly defiling all it comes into contact with. This, I submit, is completely different from the Kantian sublime, but it is an appropriate metaphor for one important kind of contemporary experience of neo-liberal politics in the era of 'privatisation'.

NOTES

1. See also Slavoj Zizek *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), pp.189f.
2. Max Weber *Politik als Beruf* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot), 1977, also his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr) 1973, pp. 128-130; 854-68.
3. Michel Foucault *Surveiller punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), and also his 'Le nuage et la poussière' in *L'impossible prison* (Paris: Seuil, 1980)
4. Michel Foucault *Sécurité, territoire, population* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004)
5. Disorientation is not the *only* reaction one can have to a Mediterranean noon. See Friedrich Niezche *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* ed. Colli and Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967), vol 4, pp.406-8; vol 6, pp. 80-1. See also 'Celan's Meridian' in Raymond Geuss *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2009).
6. Translations from Greek and German are mine.
7. Immanuel Kant *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Berlin: Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften,1908), p. 109.
8. Immanuel Kant *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Berlin: Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1908), p. 107-9.
9. See David Runciman *The Politics of Good Intentions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) for numerous further examples.
10. or, perhaps: 'a trouble in the heavens {for us}'