

BOOK REVIEW

SANE DEMOCRACY

Going Sane. By Adam Phillips. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005. 245 pp. £14.99 hb.
Violent Democracy. By Daniel Ross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 183 pp. £15.99 hb.

The likelihood of young Muslims, whether in Britain or elsewhere, being attracted to terrorism was increased by our action in Iraq. We attacked a Muslim country on grounds which turned out to be empty. We broke international law. We faced no serious threat from Saddam Hussein and received no authority from the security council. We brought about the deaths of thousands of innocent Iraqis. (D Hurd, article in the *Independent*, 28 July 2005)

You can tell a lot about people by what they insist on, and more still by what they understand of it. So whether you're more Gucci or Burberry, Labour or socialist, drip fed, corn fed, overfed, underfed or just plain fed up, the contemporary Western injunction is that you *must be* sanely democratic (and if not wanting this, dead or in detention). 'Wow – that's a little harsh James', you might retort, but I'm just reading out loud from the opening salvos Phillips and Ross offer us – images whose truth is not diminished by their being snapshots. Open up *Going Sane* and you are greeted by the plight of Charles Singleton, who in 2003 was ordered by the US Court of Appeal to be forcibly treated for psychosis. He had previously stabbed a shop worker to death in 1979 but was presently seized by the belief that his prison cell was

possessed by demons, that a prison doctor had implanted a device in his ear and that he was both God and the Supreme Court. However, his treatment was only to be in the service of making him 'sane enough to be executed', which is to say 'sentient enough, responsible enough, guilty enough to experience the punishment as punishment rather than as something else' (Phillips, p. 1), like say, another *unofficial* murder. With Ross, the first blow is delivered with even more immediacy as we are greeted by the image of two camouflage-clad, 'guardians of freedom' marching a barefooted, sense-deprived, bent-over, brown-skinned man in an orange boiler suit towards the sardonic silhouettes of five of their bull-necked colleagues, all standing at ease, thumbs in belts. The image is beautifully framed with a jus of steel mesh and a drizzle of razor wire, although it's not clear where the men have just been or where anyone's going. Indeed, following Lindsay Graham's sneaky last minute amendment to a Pentagon *Finance Bill* (my italics) in the second week of November 2005, things could get murkier still: if successful, 'unlawful enemy combatants' will be stripped of almost all the scant legal rights they have latterly been allowed. This is to say that their legal representatives will again be denied any access to them and they will once again be entirely dependent for representation on 'happy-slapping red-necks' making and distributing images of entertaining acts of torture for the folks back home. Meanwhile, those of us less persuaded

by the integrity or reliability of the ‘Abu-Ghraib-Alsatian-snapping-at-naked-testicles-school-of-inquiry’ will be left reflecting on the quality of the evidence gathered from them, to be used against them. It seems impossible even to begin conversations about sanity or democracy if one has not first attempted to be honest about truth so Phillips’ concluding comments leave us with much to meditate on: ‘... It would be sane . . . to take it for granted that everyone is more confused than they seem. Havoc is always wreaked in fast cures for confusion . . . Sanity should not be our word for the alternatives to madness; it should refer to whatever resources we have to prevent humiliation’ (p. 245).

What both authors introduce are images of violent democracy where repeatedly rehearsed ends are deployed to justify systematically obscured means. For Ross, one of the hallmarks of our contemporary era has been the conceptual muddle, if not outright madness, which has followed the 9/11 bombings. He observes that, ‘The War on Terror is formulated as a potentially endless struggle against an infinitely extended enemy, that permeates all borders and may inhabit any sphere. The new system is essentially militarized, the sovereignty of individual states less important than a co-ordinated and integrated system of “security”’ (Ross, p. 2) In these circumstances the satisfaction of the ‘needs of security’ – an imperative abstract enough to satisfy any rogue with and agenda – eclipses others such that, ‘... democracy becomes merely one value among others, a preference, but potentially and perpetually deferrable’ (p. 2). Thus the imposition of martial law, trial without jury, seemingly endless detention without charge and the curtailment of free speech have all become ‘necessary’ tools in democracy’s attempt to assert how it *can* be in order to recover what it *was*. In this light,

the torture of its ‘enemies’ in order to acquire ‘sound’ information to support the security effort is quite ‘sanely’ regarded as less often necessary than it is in dictatorships. So, whether Comical Ali’s announcements that the Republican Guard had struck such fear into the US forces they were committing suicide at the gates of Baghdad, or Bush and Blair’s ‘it’s true we’re threatened by WMD’, later followed by ‘it’s true we thought there were WMD’ and then more latterly ‘it’s true we’re massively destructive when we feel threatened’ turn out to be the more tragic will be for history to decide. But, given that it’s maddening when we can’t get to the truth, Phillips rightly cautions us to be mindful of our data and processes suggesting we are duly sceptical about who’s defining democracy and to what end. He writes that:

It is an important implication of *1984* that sanity and its definitions would not be so manipulable if they could be more freely and openly considered . . . Designs for a good life, of which the whole notion of sanity must form a part, have been left to political theorists; and the descriptions of a life lived in the thrall of one of the modern pathologies, have been left to neurologists, psychiatrists and psychologists, the masters of modern mental health. (Phillips, pp. 219–20)

Phillips’ project is to rethink sanity, which he views as a neglected concept relative to its highly publicized and putative ‘opposite’ madness. He is interested in what it might mean to be sane, whether sanity can be measured and, if it can, how it can be sustained. To this end, in the first section of the book, he riffs on ideas of madness and sanity culled from literature, unusually leaving one with the sense of having got a demo instead of a final mix. For me, the latter would have meant cuts as the overall effect of this section is more enervating than engaging. This said, form is recovered in the following sections

in which he considers, amongst other things, what sane sex might be like and what the 'madness for money' is a wish for. These chapters are full of his more familiar élan, clinical references and the deconstructive rigour that have become his stock in trade. His most striking section, though, is the final one, 'Sane now', in which he attempts provisional definitions of sanity, much reminiscent of those he made of democracy in *Equals* (Phillips, 2002). Echoing his cautions against splitting he writes that, 'For the more deeply sane, whatever else sanity might be it is a container of madness, not a denier of it.' (Phillips, p. 223). And echoing his cautions against idealization, he makes agonistic formulations of sanity to remind us of the perils of treating our ideals '... as if they are our achievement rather than our goals' (Taylor, 2003, 151). Anyone hoping for a simple, 'diagnostic manual' of sanity will be sorely disappointed as Phillips' definitive accounts of what sanity and democracy include are circumstances in which ordinary people are free to keep trying to make ever more persuasive stories about what these things are. Like Ross, dynamism is central to what he is describing: something quite at odds with the unrepresentative, conservative, and executive efficiencies we are invited to believe constitute sane, modern government.

What both authors crucially offer is pause for thought; space for us to consider what we imagine about ourselves and the systems we more-or-less choose to live with. Space to consider what sane or democratic choices might be, whether indeed it is sane to imagine we have much choice and the extent to which we and others suffer from or realize what we imagine. From Phillips' point of view we lack a recuperative space in which desire is allowed to crystallize, where restlessness might be something we can feel and think about rather than deify in acts of consump-

tion. He suggests we suffer from our long hours of competitive activity, of being told what we want and that we ought to be out getting it. He notices how much unhappiness exists alongside such unprecedented wealth and notices that it is ourselves that we are most unhappy with. In essence, that when we are humans having or humans doing we somehow lose our capacity to be human beings. Ross's project is closely related in that he forces us to think about how integral to democracy violence is and, thus, that if democracy is the best way we have to organize ourselves we cannot and should not shirk the fact that, whoever 'we' are at any point, 'we' will always be excluding and most likely be engaged in some form of attack on those who are not 'one of us'. (The epilogue to this drama is found in his scintillating account of the tensions between apology, forgiveness and reconciliation in his chapter 'Sorry we killed you'.) Writing of democracy's conflictual and layered meanings he notes that:

Firstly, democracy signifies those states in which the citizenry elect some form of representative parliament, in which the separation of the executive, legislative, and judicial powers is embraced and on those grounds refer to themselves as 'democracies.' *Secondly* 'democracy' refers to the fundamental concept of the sovereignty of the people... But there is a third understanding... [which] only occasionally surfaces explicitly... Both the first two meanings... are grounded in the concept of sovereign rule... in an understanding that democracy is a *system*... based on the will of the people, *organizing* that will and standing independently of it.

Politics always includes the possibility of disruption. Understanding democracy as a closed system eliminates what makes it political... It is to see democracy as the system *already* instituted... rather than as a political force, a possibility of what is still to come, *potentially threatening* whatever currently is. If the will of the people is understood as always capable of new forms, then it can never be *finally and eternally* settled in any system or constitution.

However successful they may be, institutions and constitutions always contain the possibility that it will be discovered that they are utterly wrong. Democracy is, then, a constant possibility, directed towards the future, a potential threat to any political whole, and a kind of promise. (Ross, pp. 6–7)

This account of democracy has much in common with analytic accounts of the relations between id, ego and superego, and for me shows Ross, like Phillips, trying to be honest about the truth. Both are suggesting that, whether we wish to or not, we cannot eschew complexity but, mindful of this, we may be more agonistic than antagonistic in our conflicts. Both are suspicious of authority and explicitly refute global capitalism's attempts to peddle the simplistic dream of conflict being remedied by trade or consumption but rather suggest we can be all too easily diverted from politics and psychology if we listen to politicians and psychologists. For both it is vital that individuals can speak and be heard. Indeed Phillips sounds very much like Ross when he notices:

There does seem to be a loss of confidence in politicians and in the idea of participatory democracy . . . there is also a lack of genuinely competing political visions. That I think is worrying for our collective well-being. People need an arena where they can think, argue and engage their passions and . . . feel they are being listened to. That's what politics is for essentially. And, that's also what psychoanalysis is for – to speak in order to find out what's on one's mind, what impact that has on others and what it evokes in them. (A Phillips, interview with Sean O'Hagan in *Observer Magazine*, 13 February 2005)

Ross and Phillips are two of the sharpest knives on the block and, although *Going*

Sane is flawed, they deserve to be acknowledged as such. Both books point to things that matter, things that affect us daily, and as such they will probably not sell very well. If I am right, the avoidance of 'Violent Democracy' will amount to the rage of Caliban seeing his face in the glass while the avoidance of 'Going Sane' will amount to the rage of Caliban not seeing his face in the glass. At the time of writing the fires not long out in Birmingham still rage from Les Banlieux to Baghdad. We urgently need to figure out ways of holding the levels of complexity Phillips and Ross describe in our political processes. While democracy continues to neither express the sovereignty of the people nor represent the majority of the people in Western 'democracies' the decisions made in the name of democracy give democracy a bad name. Of even more concern is that our executives seem increasingly organized to avoid the possibility of democracy in Ross's third sense. Perhaps it would be better for the West to cease trying to 'export democracy' until it has been established and maintained within our own boundaries. That way, when we have the audacity to suggest to other people that they need to rethink their political systems, we'll know we're not asking anything we weren't prepared to do first.

Phillips A. *Equals*. London: Faber & Faber, 2002.
Taylor J. *Recovering democracy*. *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 2003; 1(2): 149–51.

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