

REITH LECTURES 2004: Climate of Fear

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Lecture 2: Power and Freedom

TRANSMISSION: 14 April 2004 – Radio 4

The totalitarian state is easy to define, easy to identify and thus, offers a recognizable target at which the archers of human freedom can direct their darts. Not so obliging is what I refer to as the quasi-state, that elusive entity that may cover the full gamut of ideologies and religions, contends for power but is not defined by physical boundaries that mark the sovereign state. Especially frustrating is the fact that the quasi-state commences with a position whose basic aim - a challenge to an unjust status quo - makes it difficult to separate from progressive movements of dissent, and with which it sometimes forms alliances of common purpose. At the same time however, there lurks within its social intent an identical contempt for those virtues that constitute the goals of other lovers of freedom. Thus, to fully grasp the essence of Power, we must look beyond the open 'show of force', the demonstration of overt power whose purpose is to instruct a people just who is master. In short, we are obliged to include, indeed regard as an equal partner in the project of power, the elusive entity that is conveniently described here as the quasi- state, the shadowy corporation of power that mimics the formal state and exercises some form of authority or control over both the willing and the unwilling. We shall return to that mimic but potent entity in a few moments.

The formal state, in its dictatorial mutation, usually represents power at its crudest - the tramp of conquering jackboots through a prostrate city etc. Equally familiar, to many, are the daylight or night-time shock troops of state, storming the homes and offices of dissidents of a political order, carting away their victims with total disdain for open or hidden resentment. The saturation of society by near-invisible secret agents, the cooption of friends and family members - as has been notoriously documented in Ethiopia of The Dergue, former East Germany, Idi Amin's Uganda or Iran of the Shah Palahvi and the Ayatollahs prior to the Reformist movement - all compelled to report on the tiniest nuances of discontent with, or indifference towards the state - they all constitute part of the overt, mostly structured forces of subjugation. To fully apprehend the neutrality of the suzerainty of fear in recent times, indifferent to either religious or ideological base, one need only compare the testimonies of Ethiopian victims under the atheistic order of Mariam Mengistu, and the theocratic bastion of Iran under the purification orgy of her religious leaders, or indeed the Taliban of Afghanistan and the atheistic order of a Stalinist Soviet Union.

Tragic Role

Stalin's Soviet Union is gone; Afghanistan of the Taliban is no more. It is this quasi-state that today instills the greatest fear and, to complicate matters even more, often boasts a liberating manifesto of seductive ideals. Only rarely does it make the mistake of showing its hand in advance, as happened in Algeria. In that nation, decades of neglect, state corruption and alienation of the ruling elite swung the disenchanted populace at the democratic elections of 1992 towards a radical movement, the

electorate remaining more or less indifferent to the fact that the change threatened to place a theocratic lid on much of the secular liberties that they had learnt to take for granted. Employment, bread and shelter are more pressing issues, in the immediate, than notions of freedom of taste. Thus: we shall ascend to power on the democratic ladder - declared the evidently popular Islamist party - after which we shall pull up the ladder, and there shall be no more democracy. Let us spend a little time on the Algerian scenario; it holds many lessons for us and of course, occupies the tragic role of being one of the unwitting dispersal agencies for our current climate of fear.

Algeria is merely a convenient example, but it is also a subjective choice. My generation grew up under the indirect education of a singularly vicious anti-colonial struggle - the Algerian. That nation played a key role in the formation of the radical corps of African - and even black American - nationalism in the fifties and sixties, served as a source of reference, solidarity and material aid for many African revolutionary leaders. So it is perhaps inevitable that some of us would take more than a passing interest in her contemporary fortunes. A newly independent entity, Algeria's experiments in post-colonial reconstruction provided study models in the quest for the developmental transformation of other emergent African nation.

For some of us therefore, to watch such a people plunged into a state of social retrogression, from whatever cause, is a harrowing cautionary tale, truly tragic, a reminder of the Sisyphean burden that unforeseen forces often place on the shoulders of would-be progressive movements. It is a daily reminder never to take any political situation for granted, never to underestimate the focused energy of the quasi-state whose instinctive recourse to the rule of fear as a weapon of struggle may drive even participants in the liberation struggle, into exile, liquidate others, and paralyse the creative drive of a dynamic people.

Algeria, in 1992, was a dilemma posed to try the credentials of the hardest democrat anywhere in the world but, most pertinently, her African co-habitants across the Sahara who, in many cases, were then struggling to free themselves from the stranglehold of military dictatorship. That dilemma can be summed up thus: if you believe in democracy, are you not thereby obliged to accept, without discrimination, the fallouts that come with a democratic choice, even if this means the termination of the democratic process itself? This was the crux of the electoral choice that was freely made by the Algerian people. Why indeed should a people not, in effect, redeem Hegel from Karl Marx? They would only be paying Marx back in his own coins, since Marx's boast was that he began with the model of Hegel's schema of history but then turned Hegel on his head. He replaced Hegel's idealism with a materialist basis and the class struggle. Both are agreed on the dialectical process that leads to the fulfilment of history as the emasculation of the state order. Social contradictions are resolved and thus political strife is eliminated. Rulership becomes indistinct from the followership - in one case, through the benevolent embodiment of enlightened rule, in the other, through the eradication of classes.

Concept of the Chosen

What the Islamic Party of Algeria did was simply to embody Hegel's Historic Will, or Spirit, in the Koran. Ironically, this ought to be regarded as a democratic advance on Hegel, since the process of this annulment of History - whose annunciation was made

quite recently by Francis Fukuyama - was reached through popular choice, and the mantle of administrators of the Historic Will has been bestowed on the theocratic class by the electorate itself. Choice remains the bedrock of the democratic process, and if a people have made a choice that eliminates all further necessity for the ritual rounds of choosing, well....that argument appears to have reached its terminal point. History has been fulfilled.

The perennial problem with that proposition of course is that this denies the dynamic nature of human society, and preaches that the purely fortuitous can substitute, at any time, for the eternal and immutable. Such a position opens the way for the triumph of a social order that is based on the concept of The Chosen - a mockery of the principle of choice - and totally eliminates the impulse to change, or even experimentation, as a factor of human development. On the political field, it entrusts power in the hands of a clique of rulers, whose qualification could rightly range from membership of a military class to that of a Masonic order, a labour or clerical union. Revelation replaces enquiry, dictation dismisses debate. For us in Nigeria, in 1992, these were no abstract issues, much as we wished Algeria would simply go away or choose another time to pose a dilemma that provided ammunition for our own stubborn dictatorial order.

Let us quickly recapitulate, for those to whom both Nigeria and Algeria belong on an alien planet or, in some encounters I have had, are indeed the same nation since they sound alike. What happened was that in both countries, in 1992 in one case, 1993 in the other, a recognized political party looked all set to win an election. At that point however, the process was truncated by the military for no other reason than that it did not like the face of the winners. There was a critical difference however. The victorious party in Nigeria did not promote a manifesto that would abrogate all further democratic ventures while, in the Algerian, this formed the core of its manifesto. Easy enough to simplify the issue and say, yes, take the democratic walk to its logical conclusion but then, as I have attempted to question, just what is the logical conclusion of the democratic option?

We could try and approach this dilemma obliquely, citing a very recent, and instructive development within Nigeria, one that is however only a partial and tepid echo of the Algerian situation. Following the May 2003 elections, the second since that nation's return to democracy, a state in the North, Zamfara State - progressively followed by nine others in the nation - declared that its governance would henceforth be based on the Sharia - a code of strict Islamic laws. One of later subscribers to Sharia rule was the Plateau State. In December that same year, the governor, himself a Moslem, found himself obliged to take stern measures against an extremist movement that named itself after the Taliban. This group rose against his government, claiming that it had failed to keep strict adherence to the Sharia. It launched an insurrection, took over some police stations - one of which, incidentally, it renamed Afghanistan - inflicted a number of casualties and sought to overthrow the elected government. It was subdued by state forces, the movement banned and the Council of Ulamas, the religious leaders, dissolved. Would it be totally illogical to project that this could also easily have been the fate of Algeria if indeed the victorious party had succeeded in forming a government? Once Righteousness replaces Political Rights in the exercise of power, the way is paved for a permanent contest based on the primacy of the holier-than-thou.

Competitive Bestiality

However, this is mere speculation. What we do know, as fact, is that since the undemocratic choice was imposed on Algeria, an estimated one hundred and fifty thousand lives have been lost, several of these in a most grisly manner. And not just writers, cineastes, painters, journalists, intellectuals - those purveyors of impure thought, always the primary target of fundamentalist reformers - we are speaking here of entire villages and sectors of urban society that were considered guilty of flouting the purist laws of the opposition, now transformed into a quasi-state. A resistance movement that began as a legitimate reaction to the thwarting of popular will, expressed along democratic usage, has degenerated into an orgy of competitive bestiality. State and quasi-state are locked in a deadly struggle, marked by a complete abandonment of the final vestiges of known norms of civilized society.

Such extremism could not stay localized for long. We have only to recollect that some of the leaders of this new insurgency cut their teeth in the struggle for the liberation of Afghanistan, a struggle that triumphed with the expulsion of Soviet forces of occupation from that nation, then recollect that such mujihaddin are pitted against a regime whose leaders are also veterans in the bruising war of liberation against French colonialism. And the consequence of these antecedents for global politics? The notion of a nationalist war that would remain strictly within nation confines was ended. Perhaps such a notion had long dissipated - only not much notice was paid at the time - since the Vietnam war, a war that sought no more than the liberation of its land from the domination of foreigners.

Regarding that war, I must acknowledge a puzzle. Vietnam, then known as IndoChina, fought two wars of liberation, first from France whom she defeated at the famous battle of Dien-bien-Phu, then against the United States of America which felt that she knew a thing or two that France did not. Who dare forget the saturation bombing carried out by the United States in the latter stages of the war, or the earlier barrage of defoliants whose effects have yet to wear off completely in that nation, the deadly chemical weapon, napalm, author of horrendous images of inhuman disfigurement. Now, the puzzle is this. I find it curious that the North Vietnamese, victims of two world powers in rapid succession, did not ever consider designating the entire world a war arena where innocents and guilty alike would be legitimately targeted. Not one incident of hijacking took place during those wars, neither did the taking of hostages or the random detonation of bombs in places of tourist attraction, or of religious worship. United Nations agencies, as well as humanitarian organizations appear to have enjoyed the respect due to neutrals in conflict.

Certainly, during the entire Vietnam wars, it would have been hyperbolic to suggest that the world was trapped in a climate of fear. While we may dispute in the end what lessons must be drawn from this contrast; it is one that deserves close study. In the fifth lecture of these series - I am Right, You are Dead - I hope to be able to offer some pointers. Certainly we cannot ignore the antecedent histories of victim peoples, their philosophies and their religions. The same observation applies, albeit in a different vein, to the anti-apartheid struggle that was waged with no less commitment and intensity against a ruthless foe. The oppressed peoples of South Africa did not pronounce the outside world guilty of the crime of continuing to prosper while a majority race was being ground to earth by an implacable machinery of racist governance. There are lessons in these studies in contrast, lessons that may enable us,

after acknowledging the principal sources of the current climate of fear, to seek remedies that go beyond the rectification of glaring and sustained injustices undergone by peoples.

Strange Impulse

It is always easy enough to address the material factors of conflict, and we do know that in most cases, such will be found as the primary causes. They can be identified and grasped, and usually provide a basis for negotiations even in the most intense moments of conflict. Nations fight over land, over water supply, oil, and other material resources - these are accessible causes of hostilities. They go to the heart of a people's sense of social security and struggle for survival. Intermeshed with these however, but not so intricately as to be totally inseparable is a much neglected factor in its own right - the quotient of power, the will to dominate, to control, that strange impulse that persuades certain temperaments that they can realize their existence either individually or collectively only through the domination of others. We are speaking here of that phase when a struggle moves beyond its material causes - to restore parity to an exploitative order or whatever - and becomes one that is dedicated to the seizure and exercise of raw power. It goes to the heart of the phenomenon of those dictators who, long past their creative usefulness, still cling ruthlessly to the seat of power, a contemporary instance of which can be seen in the pitiable condition of the once revolutionary, now merely embarrassing ruler of Zimbabwe whose governance is sustained today, not by popular acceptance but by the agency of terror.

Let us not therefore limit the thrill of power only to its structured manifestations and territorial embodiment - that is, the physical. We are speaking of the silent thrill of power by means other than actual governance, power as a pursuit in its own right, an addictive concentrate, extract or essence. The conduct of the child, taunting and circumscribing the motions of a captive insect, or the well-known antics of the school bully - these are early forays into the laboratory of power, from where a taste may develop into major assaults on entire communities. The complementary emotion of the victim - insect or school pupil - that is, what the tormentor loves to see, that reward is of course, the expression of fear, accompanied by an abject surrender of volition.

To what I have termed the quasi state belongs the major credit for our contemporary climate of fear. With the rise of the quasi-state, the state that is not an entity in the geographical sense or through a certificate of membership of the United Nations, I believe that it is time to confront a heightened reality - heightened, because not exactly new -and accept the factor of power, the instinct to power as a motivating component of the human personality, an unquantifiable element that has always governed much of social and nation relationships. History concedes to exceptional figures, past and present - Alexander, Suleyman, King Darius, Chaka the Zulu, Ataturk, Indira Ghandi etc - the temperaments of nation builders as well as nurturers of power. That latter impulsion is not glossed, neither by historians, nor by the psychoanalysts of supermen and women. What differs in our contemporary situation is that the relishing of power is no longer an attribute of the outstanding, exceptional individual, but is increasingly accessible even to the nondescript individual whose membership of a clique, or activities on behalf of The Chosen more than fulfils this hunger for a share in the menu of power. Is it strictly out of a commitment to the

moral law -Thou shall not kill - that the Christian anti-abortion crusader in the United States stalks and kills abortion doctors, patients and innocent passers-by, sometimes operating from within a network of protective cells? Or is there also an element of the thrill of membership of a quasi-state, exercising a form of power that transcends all mainstream social accords? We shall turn more fully to the theme of The Chosen in the fifth part of these lectures.

For now, let me assure you that if you wish to observe the face of power at its most mundane, you do not have far to seek. You do not need to pay to see Marlon Brando in his role as the Godfather at the head of a Mafia combine. That face is omnipresent - from the clerical assistant on whom the emergence of a critical file depends, to anonymous members of an unacknowledged terrorist organization in the United States known as the IRS - the Inland Revenue Service. Simply be on the receiving end of a letter of demand from that body and you immediately construct the driven personality of the writer!

Warped Genius

Actually, that ogre has long been displaced in my estimation by a creature against whom I readily confess that I nurse a deep, murderous loathing. To him belongs the modern crown of furtive, invisible power. I refer to the domination freak whose warped genius creates those invisible, proliferating Frankensteins from his dingy computer den and sends them in virtual space to invade and destroy the work of individuals and institutions. These monsters are without an ounce of hatred in their veins, with no wrong to avenge, no cause to promote, without physical territorial ambition, indeed with no motivation other than the lust for power over unknown millions, both the meek and the powerful, the affluent and the deprived, the professor and the school pupil alike. The most recent of these, like Mr. 'Call me God' the Maryland sniper, is not without a message for his captive world - "Have the Guts to call the name of Jesus" is the name of the stalking horse on which his cannibal creation rides in cyber space to wage his war of destruction on the unsuspecting . It takes little imagination to picture this figure at his computer, with, literally, the whole world at his fingertips, locked in a competitive lust with unknown others for the power to inflict the maximum injury on industrious humanity. This - usually youthful - individual is of course impelled by a genuine passion for discovery, but the space between that motion of a technological curiosity and the gesture that launches a virus on the world is the space that separates the explorer from the conqueror, the adventurer from the imperialist, the liberator from the dictator: it is the space of pure, unadulterated ecstasy of power.

Science fiction literature, of which I used to be an avid fan, and films in the same genre are actually very instructive. Take *The Day of the Triffyds*, where plants attempt to take over human society, or films of alien body snatchers, that most subversively imaginative way of taking over the key elements in a community, its government, progressively taking over the nation by assuming the physical shapes of a nation's ruling cadre. We may ask the question: what is the most basic element that twangs a chord of trepidation in the human viscera? What gives that piquant edge to one's apprehension in much of science-fiction and horror literature? I suggest that it is very simply the notion of coming under the control of another being, of finding oneself dominated by an alien force, an alien bundle of values, sensibilities, tastes, concerns,

beliefs and direction - in short, being robbed of one's personality and social anchor. Apart from a fear of the loss of identity to those goblins from outer space, with heaven knows what nasty habits - one recognizable source of that repulsion is, very simply, the ancestral adversary of human freedom that we designate as Power.

So now, finally to the conundrum - just what is power? We know that it has been credited with the founding of society under such related expressions as the need for recognition, acknowledgement etc from one's fellow beings etc. but, just what is it? Victims of rape frequently testify that, next to the horror of bodily violation, the most humiliating aspect of the experience is that of being totally subjected to another's control. And the more sadistic the rapist, the greater his need to exact an acknowledgement from the victim of submission to his dominance. Sexual gratification is of course at the heart of such violations, but preeminent also is the satisfaction of dominating another, making him or her totally subject to his whims, some of which may not even be sexual in nature. In whatever proportion we choose to present these cravings, there is no question that a sense of power generates its own satisfaction, and is an important element in the drive towards rape. So, once again, back to the question - just what is power?

Is it perhaps no more than a deadly mutation of ambition, one that may or may not translate into social activity? Any fool, any moron, any psychopath can aspire to the exercise of Power, and of course the more psychopathic, the more efficient - Hitler, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Sergeant Doe and the latest in the line of the unconscionably driven, my own lately departed General Sanni Abacha - all have proved that Power - as long as you are sufficiently ruthless, amoral and manipulative - Power is within the grasp of even the mentally deficient. So, power is really neither efficacy nor a product of vision.

Glitzy Brothel

Trying to cope with, or at least come to terms with the phenomenon of the will to dominate others - as if the endeavour to regulate one's individual existence is not sufficient burden for any mortal - I ended up with a notion that perhaps this tendency is no more than an attempt to appropriate the forces that one observes in Nature herself. After all, the manifestation of raw Power is an encounter that is inevitable right from infancy, and through the normal course of existence - be it in a rainstorm, the force of lightning, or an earthquake. Even the casual wind that takes down a rotten branch or a roof or two is a manifestation of the hidden force of Nature that suddenly exercises its authority from time to time, and without any intervention from man. Nature, therefore, sometimes reveals herself as a pure expression of power - and it is perhaps no more than an anthropomorphic conceit to suggest that man, in those activities that incline him towards the exercise of dominance, is merely attempting a crude appropriation of that elemental attribute that is an expression of the very forces that surround and threaten to overwhelm him, not least of which is - Mortality. In short, Power is the precipitate of man's neurotic will to match himself with the force of Nature, that agency through which the various apprehensions of God, under whatever name, are filtered. You cannot, however contain within yourself the elemental force of a thunderstorm, an earthquake or a volcano. Those who believe they can are subject matter for the rites of exorcism, and it is for this reason that ancient societies devised a number of ritualized scenarios for the banalisation of

power. As a dramatist, I have myself experimented with a number of rituals towards that end. Here is one, designed however only for the formal, not his shadowy counterpart. It takes off from the French playwright and exorcist, Jean Genet:

A glitzy brothel, most appropriately, is the setting for Jean Genet's ritualisation of the promiscuous facilitator - Power, in his play, *The Balcony*. There, the power obsessed come periodically to act out their fantasies. Here now is a summary of my variation on Jean Genet:

Suppose we modernised Genet's rather primitive stage mechanics to embrace the very latest in special effects. Society would then proceed to offer its ruler a chance to erupt with the earthquake, soar on flues of the thunderstorm and become virtually one with the convulsion that attends the birth of new planets. Encased in a Virtual Reality capsule, a super Jacuzzi, the Maximum Leader would dominate the universe every day before breakfast. As a finale - and here I must acknowledge the inspiration of the television innovation of that late leader Mobutu Sese Seko - he would watch the morning product of his bodily functions morph into a celestial orb - the sun, no less - rising over the horizon, heralding a new day for his nation. After such an immersion in the utter sublimity of galactic power, any mortal must emerge with nothing but contempt for the mere pittance of awe and terror that are the normal dues from his miserable subjects. He would leave them - us - to wallow in our now unappealing state of - unbroken freedom, and the absence of fear.

I am persuaded that this is a ritualistic offering that no man-eating dictator, with the innate theatrics of that breed, could ever reject.