

Naked Protest and the Politics of Personalism

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I.

In the Canadian winter of 1903, members of a Christian sect called the Doukhobors became the first modern naked protestors. Similar to the Anabaptist/Mennonite sects of Western Europe, the Russian Doukhobors rejected ecclesiastical hierarchy, traditional Orthodox liturgy and modern forms of social organisation in favour of individual spirituality, radically simplified worship and anti-modern communitarianism. To some degree, their heterodox attitudes were tolerated by church and political authorities. But when, in 1896, they made bonfires from their own weapons to protest conscription in the Czar's army, stiff repression was inevitable. By 1899, as many as 8000 Doukhobors fled the post-bonfire crackdowns for the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. Considering conditions in the failing Czarist regime, Canada was probably an improvement, especially for a group that had little interest in political revolution. Even so, radical Doukhor emigrants calling themselves the *Svobodniki* (Freedomites) or 'Sons of Freedom' soon began agitating again, moving outside of their settlements to spread their radical understanding of the gospel. Initially, the *Svobodniki* punctuated their preaching marches by untethering their animals, discarding their metal tools and starting bonfires of leather. By 1903, the Sons of Freedom had added nudity to their repertoire, seeking through nakedness to walk with the simplicity and moral purity of Christ. The Doukhobors brought their nude proselytisation to surrounding towns, where beatings and jailings only served to fortify their religious zeal. For the next fifty years, public nakedness remained a central aspect of their proselytisation and political dissent.

One hundred years after the Doukhobors first disobeyed, naked protest has re-emerged on the political scene. From anarchists and activists to soccer moms and sex workers, nudity has become a familiar term within the broadly progressive political vocabulary. In sheer numbers, the re-emergence of naked protest is dominated by Western women, many of them protesting US militarism in Iraq by spelling out anti-war slogans with their naked bodies. Taken as a whole, however, naked protest crosses race, nationality and gender and includes protestors of almost every stripe. They include anti-globalisation activists of all colours: British men and women protesting fox hunting, South African women protesting slum clearance and Indian women resisting police and army brutality. Even the naked anti-

war movement is diverse enough that on one weekend in March 2003, the California women (60 people spelling “Peace”) and Australian women (250 people spelling “No War”) were outdrawn by the Chilean unisex group photo (300 people – no word spelled); Aussies take the weekend prize only if the separate men’s photo (250 people spelling “Peace, Man”) is included in the tally. In an era where modes of public dissent have experienced a surge in popularity and innovation, naked protest is undoubtedly ascendant.

Apart from a shared affection for nudity as a form of political speech, the connection between the Doukhobors and today’s naked protestors may seem distant. A group of utopian Christians protesting Czarist repression seemingly have little in common with modern protestors, engaged as they are in generally secular challenges to contemporary regimes of state and capitalist power. As the stories of the Doukhobors are either mostly forgotten, or else sullied by the arson and property destruction popular amongst the most radical members of the sect, today’s naked protestors neither act in the name of what the first naked protestors stood for, nor even carry the name of the Doukhobors upon their lips. But though the Doukhobors and today’s naked protestors share little in the way of motivation, they do share a common political heritage. In the terms of this article, the tie that binds the Doukhobors and today’s naked protestors will be called political personalism.

In philosophical terminology, personalism refers to a broad array of movements and tendencies that privilege individual subjects over abstract systems. While 19th century Romantic thinkers, most notably the German Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), were the first to explicitly claim the term, personalism of some form could be traced all the way back to the ancient Greeks. In the 20th century, Christian thinkers, including Pope John Paul II, have been the most ardent proponents of personalism, founding journals and societies, and even extending the interpretive apparatus of personalism into sub-fields such as economic personalism. Though diverse, personalists remain united by their rejection of abstract (especially materialist) system building and by their dedication to a subjectivist ethics that understands human affairs through the prism of individual consciousness.

Building on the basic personalist frame of reference, political personalism can be understood as the adoption of a subject-oriented perspective towards politics that privileges the attainment and expression of individual moral truths. Though never a self-conscious school of political thought, political personalism aptly describes a variety of 19th and 20th-century movements and thinkers who are linked not only by their attention to individuals, but more importantly for the understanding of naked protest, by their reliance on peaceful, personally redemptive, symbolic forms of speech and action. From the perspective of this article, the history of political personalism is the crucial hermeneutic key for understanding the techniques and motivations of naked protestors. From the perspective of this collection, political personalism can also be seen as a vital aspect in the political theory and practice of the “bare act”.

II.

The Doukhobors’ passage to Canada was underwritten in part by Count Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), who donated the proceeds from his 1899 novel *Resurrection* to their cause. The connection is not incidental: famous for his novelistic achievements, Tolstoy’s political

philosophy, often referred to as Christian anarchism, represents one of the founding moments in the history of political personalism. Presented in writings such as *What I Believe* (1884), *The Slavery of Our Times* (1900), and most notably, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1893), Tolstoy's Christian anarchism injected a shocking dose of political personalism into his political milieu. In some ways, the great author's voice was easily integrated into the tone of revolutionary ferment – who better to describe the oppression endemic to Czarism and capitalism than the country's greatest writer? But when impassioned critiques of private property, wage labour and bourgeois nationalism were followed by a Christian pacifist repudiation of violent revolution, they became harder to disseminate. The key to Tolstoy's personalism was his faith. Unlike his leftist peers, most of whom viewed religion as a source of regressive hierarchy and “false consciousness”, Tolstoy saw an individualistic religiosity as essential to ethical action. With the certainty of a believer, he argued forcefully against political philosophies built upon moral compromises. If Tolstoy's models were explicitly Christian, however, his impact on the landscape of modern politics would extend far beyond his fellow believers.

In assessing the depredations of Czarism and capitalism, Tolstoy explored established lines of radical thought through compelling narrative and emotional rhetoric. Though capable of methodical argumentation, Tolstoy was most convincing as a storyteller and raconteur. His talent for capturing the personal and psychological implications of political trends is most evident in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, a polemic that features soldiers deluded into killing “their famishing fellow creatures”; merchants “profiting by the misery of cultivators”; and government officials who “violate every human duty” in the name of their post. The combination of such vivid portraits with Biblical quotations and appeals to Christian ethics breathed fresh life into leftist critiques of authoritarian, capitalist and liberal forms of social organisation. Impressed by his presentation, even Lenin, who in the main thought Tolstoy's pacifist anarchism a “crackpot preaching of submission”, lauded the “absolute clearness” with which the author “laid bare the inner falsity of all those institutions by which modern society is maintained: the church, the law courts, militarism, ‘lawful’ wedlock, [and] bourgeois science”.¹ Anarchists, who appreciated Tolstoy's uncompromising attitudes and his acknowledged reliance on the French anarchist Proudhon, were even more admiring; writing in the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Potemkin glowed in his praise of Tolstoy, who “took the anarchist position as regards the state and property rights”.²

From well-worn leftist tracks, however, Tolstoy diverged onto a path that used religious moralising to interrogate the relationship between political means and ends. Even when critiquing modern power relations, Tolstoy's concerns were couched in religious terms. Though conscious of the mundane conflicts of class versus class, he saw the ultimate tension of his age in the “acute contradictions”³ between the entire social order and the uncompromising moral teachings of Christ (and a few like-minded sages that he subsumed into his philosophy with a gregarious orientalism). From this perspective of universal morality, the compromises endemic to most theories of social change were wholly inadequate. Liberals and reformers, whom all leftists saw as self-interested sycophants of power, were the easiest target. But Tolstoy reserved ample ammunition for the left itself – socialist, communist and anarchist – which he derided for its materialism, hyper-rationalism and

tendency towards very un-Christian violence. To satisfy his moral standards, only the example of history's greatest revolutionary would suffice: "You have been taught to oppose violence by violence, but I teach you: turn the other cheek when you are struck, that is, suffer violence, but do not employ it".⁴ Or, as Tolstoy rendered it in his own words: "Do not resist evil, but also do not yourselves participate in evil – in the violent deeds of the administration of the law courts, the collection of taxes and, what is more important, of the soldiers".⁵

Tolstoy was not the first romantic or utopian figure on the left. Decades before him, utopian socialists such as Saint Simon and Fourier argued for a romantic communitarianism based on a belief in human perfectibility and the power of small-scale socialist experiments to influence history. Likewise, anarchists from Proudhon to Bakhtin predicated their theories on a romantic and utopian view of human nature left to its own devices. And even Marx, the father of 'scientific' socialism, is credited with more than one romantic passage about the possibilities of the communist society. Rather than simple romanticism or utopianism, Tolstoy's special contribution to leftist thought is tied to his politically personalist themes. Even Tolstoy's most romantic leftist peers saw themselves as looking down from great heights and charting the forward-march of history. In contrast, the great novelist preferred to swoop from the precipice of abstract power relations in order to examine the psychological and moral conditions of individuals, especially an idealised Russian peasantry. When combined with a spiritualist Christianity that raised morality and godliness above worldly political concerns, the product was a political philosophy that saw individuals, as opposed to social bodies, as the ultimate point of reference. In its original form, such a contrarian political theory could do little more than mark one man's spiritual confrontation with modernity. Indeed, Tolstoy's uncompromising outlook made it so difficult to practically apply his theories that, in order to do so, his successors would be forced to alter their character.

If Tolstoy represents one of the opening volleys of political personalism on the left, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), who preceded and influenced the Russian novelist, occupies an analogous place in a history of political personalist ideals within the liberal tradition. Like Tolstoy, Thoreau's political personalism, recorded most memorably in *Civil Disobedience* (1849), rejected not only dominant power structures, but also the moral compromises required to overturn them. Though delivered with a special mix of aphoristic verve and self-aggrandising anecdote, Thoreau's attacks on the corruption of the powerful were hardly unprecedented. Far more unique were his criticisms of liberal modes of dissent. By the standards of European politics at the time, America's democracy was radically populist. Even so, its distinctive features – universal white male suffrage, majoritarian representative government, and judicial due process – were unable to pass Thoreau's ethical litmus test. Rather than lauding America's relative advances, Thoreau attacked its fundamental political assumptions by famously reconsidering traditional approaches to minority politics as little more than shallow endorsements of the existing regime. In place of voting, public assembly and petition, Thoreau offered up a contrarian individualism that celebrated personal moral behaviour over compromised attempts to reform the social and political order. Though largely rhetorical, his contribution to a liberal version of political personalism also included a sketch of a new technique – civil disobedience – that would become central to movements that abided by the ideals of political personalism.

For Thoreau, civil disobedience, which today refers to the idea that unjust laws can be changed through strategic defiance, was part of a broader attack on the basic tenets of liberalism. This is not to say that *Civil Disobedience* does not provide the inspiration for the many movements that have claimed its title. Among other things, the text is a record of Thoreau's refusal to pay the poll tax in protest against American militarism in Mexico. What's more, it includes direct calls to principled lawbreaking: "Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavour to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?" But though Thoreau undoubtedly broke the law as a form of protest, he also explicitly distanced himself from simple reformism through criminality. "It is for no particular item in the tax bill that I refuse to pay it [the poll tax]. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State...I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man a musket to shoot one with..."

Instead of a proposal for reform-oriented dissent, Thoreau's civil disobedience was part of an individualist critique that rejected not simply the immoralities of the powerful but more crucially the systems by which they secure affirmation for their deeds. Thus, he heaps scorn on voting, "a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge..." while expressing distaste for any mass political action, which has "but little virtue". He distrusts the market, preferring the economic self-reliance depicted in *Walden*, and even rejects the basic notions of a liberal social contract: "It is not necessary that [I] should be petitioning the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me".

From its mainly symbolic role in *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau's notion of principled lawbreaking would become an important aspect of more organised forms of political personalism. But even as they adapted his techniques, Thoreau's heirs would have trouble matching the force of his defiant independence. Inspired by American transcendentalism, a radical yeoman's celebration of anti-clerical religiosity, material simplicity and nature worship, Thoreau's attack on liberalism thrived on an unapologetic mix of romanticism and moral surety. While his society created unjust rules, he answered to a "higher law" that respects not what is lawful but what is "right". From this vantage, institutions of state and capital possessed no assumed moral legitimacy. Provided one was willing to live in independence from the benefits which these regimes provide, as "a majority of one", the moral force of the individual was not simply equal but unsurpassed, such that, "if one honest man, in this State of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this co-partnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefore, it would be the abolition of slavery in America".

Although such claims can seem deeply problematic, even reactionary, in today's political environment, their moral force remains compelling. As was the case with Tolstoy, whose Christian beliefs only magnified the force of his moral hectoring, Thoreau's romantic individualism set the tone for a political tradition focused on personal moral redemption as a central aspect of political life.

III.

Thoreau and Tolstoy's rejection of the politics of social change in favour of individualist moralising produced a tension within the politically personalist themes they helped inaugurate. On the one hand, politically personalist orientations drew their strength from an

uncompromising moral attitude; on the other, there was little the willing political personalist could do outside from an unorganised proclamation of independence and dissent that would not reek of compromise, either by dint of collaboration with power or infection by it. Unresolved in the work of Thoreau and Tolstoy, this tension was confronted by their political heirs, most of whom were considerably less free than the wealthy Russian aristocratic and the independent American intellectual to simply reject capitalist, imperialist and state repression. Even as they retained the fascination with individual redemption typical of their political mentors, 20th century personalists tended to look for ways to harness the power of personal moralising in the service of goal-oriented political movements. As they shaped politically personalist ideas into an effective base for political action, the heirs of Tolstoy and Thoreau cultivated a vast array of personalist techniques – marches, boycotts, sit-ins, hunger strikes, lawbreaking, political rallies and political performances – that focused on dissenting bodies as symbols of contestation and resistance.

The shift from theoretical, psychological and spiritual critique to forms of bodily action was natural, for while political oppression could take many non-physical forms, resistance to that oppression was demonstrated most convincingly through a focus on the most concrete and universally recognisable site of oppression. In terms of the essential tension between moral purity and political efficacy, the shift from uncompromising rhetoric to politically engaged bodily dissent was not so much a resolution as a reorientation. While the techniques of political personalism proved wildly successful in the 20th century, their every achievement entailed at some level a movement away from the uncompromising attitudes so typical of the writings of Tolstoy and Thoreau.

The single most important figure to contribute to the recalibration of political personalism as an effective political tool was Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), the so-called “father of the Indian nation”. An admirer of Thoreau and a correspondent of Tolstoy, Gandhi’s version of political personalism fused elements from both men’s political philosophies. From Thoreau, whose *Civil Disobedience* he called a “masterly treatise”,⁶ Gandhi borrowed the basic notion of principled lawbreaking, which he would adapt into a form of mass political dissent. He also followed Thoreau in his embrace of self-reliant economic production. For Gandhi, the most important mark of economic self-reliance was the willingness to eschew imported English textiles for *khadi* (homespun cotton cloth), which he asked members of the nationalist movement to spin daily. Economic self-reliance also extended to boycotts of English goods and the famous resistance to laws prohibiting the making of salt. From Tolstoy, who exchanged views with the Indian leader in his famous *Letter to a Hindu* (1909), Gandhi borrowed the Christian model of passive resistance, especially the notion that one could shame the evildoer into bettering himself by refusing to resist his abuses.

In Gandhi’s terminology, this translated into *satyagraha*, or “truth force”, a doctrine of non-violent political persuasion built upon an inner search for truth. Gandhi’s philosophy also echoed the themes of Thoreau and Tolstoy in its valorisation of pre-modern moral communities, which he understood through the rubric of the Indian village, an essentially good and sufficient institution corrupted by the developments of modernity. To this potent mix of politically personalist themes, however, Gandhi added a crucially innovative element: the willingness to deploy the attitudes and techniques of political personalism in the name

of an organised social and political movement.

Fittingly, the character of Gandhi's political personalism is most evident in the record of his own political acts. This is not to minimise Gandhi's intellectual output or his capacity as a political organiser. Rather, it is to suggest that the essence of both Gandhi's writings and his political allegiances are expressed in his bodily acts of political dissent. Gandhi's initial political awakening came in 1893, when he refused to accept apartheid-seating on a train in South Africa. From there, his career was marked by a series of encounters that speak to the essence of political personalism: the focus on individual moral action as the essence of politics. Whether sitting at his spinning wheel making *khadi* or marching to the sea to defy the English ban on homemade salt, Gandhi's wiry frame was not simply a rallying symbol for millions; in many ways it represented the essence of the nationalist movement. Gandhi melded the personal and political so completely that by the 1940s his hunger strikes effectively pitted his moral and religious potency against the very fate of his nation's history. While the force of these acts was multiplied in a South Asian religious context that comprehended his force of character as akin to divinity, the basic example would resound in regions far removed from his particular religious surround.

If Gandhi's own example provides the most indelible memories of his politically personalist philosophy, the movements that he led give the best estimation of its import. Building on a tradition premised on individual redemption through morally uncompromising dissent, Gandhi's willingness to enter the fray of anti-colonial politics was an epiphany. Under his leadership, the impulses behind political personalism were translated into organised political techniques such as marches, boycotts, mass civil disobedience, abstention from representative government and self-reliant economic production. From inspired peasants to elite leaders, application of these techniques formed the backbone of a nationalist movement that shocked the world by rapidly evicting the seemingly entrenched British colonists. The successful integration of politically personalist ideals into mass politics, however, did not come without costs. Once a refuge for the uncompromising political individualist, political personalism would henceforth be deployed most frequently in large-scale movements dedicated to the achievement of specific political goals. Moral compromise – with existing regimes of power and with the often quite conservative forces of social change (in Gandhi's case, the traditional and capitalist elites that dominated Indian nationalism, not to mention his own religious and social conservatism) – was an inevitable outcome of this shift.

While Gandhi fought against the dilution and instrumentalisation of his version of political personalism, especially in his insistence that his Congress Party should retire from politics upon achievement of the nationalist goals, the trend was inevitable. By the time Gandhi was pushed out of a nationalist movement torn asunder by communal politics and bourgeois self-interest, the die was cast: though the individual search for moral truth that Gandhi dubbed *satyagraha* would continue to provide the capital of politically personalist movements, this capital would no longer be generated for its own sake, but rather would be spent willingly in the service of limited political ends.

Of the immediate heirs to Gandhi's re-conception of political personalism as a system of mass politics, the most notable is the American Baptist minister and political leader Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968). A powerful orator and effective organiser, King shaped a

movement that built explicitly on Gandhian techniques in its effort to secure basic human rights for oppressed Southern blacks. Like Gandhi's nationalist movement, King's civil rights movement was built around acts of civil disobedience, communal solidarity and performative acts of speech and dissent. Sit-ins, boycotts and marches were the fuel that sustained the movement, both in terms of the motivation provided by individually redemptive acts, and the ability of those acts to function as effective modes of speech within a national debate.

In terms of the continued development of a Gandhian mass political personalism, the special genius of King's movement lay in its ability to multiply the force of politically personalist dissent through visual media. In the technologically advanced United States, the core images of Civil Rights personalism – black men and women being sprayed with fire hoses and chased by dogs; thousands of whites and blacks marching together on Washington; the tired body of Rosa Parks, who refused to move to the back of the bus – were easily transferred outside of their immediate context. Such images not only conveyed eloquently the abuses borne by black bodies and the moral force entailed in peaceful resistance to those abuses, they spread the message throughout the nation, and even the world.

King's civil rights movement represents the apotheosis of political personalism as a form of compromising political reform: though revolutionary in context, his ultimate aim was not social revolution but simply equal treatment under existing law. Not long after King, American counter-cultural movements began to reinvigorate the more romantic, individualistic and uncompromising tendencies within political personalism. From Ken Kesey's *Merry Pranksters* to Timothy Leary's drug sloganeering, counter-cultural reprisals of anti-political personalism echoed the fathers of personalism: in their valorisation of communal self sufficiency; in their fascination with Eastern wisdom (both Thoreau and Tolstoy were avid orientalists); and in their celebration of individual redemption over political organisation. The counter-culture's take on political personalism also spoke to more historically specific problems of social conformity within an advanced bourgeois society. As an answer to conformity, the counter-culture offered hedonism and self-expression, as realised in sit-ins, be-ins, rock concerts and student takeovers.

In a political tradition that had until then thrived on the spare religious puritanism of Thoreau, Tolstoy, Gandhi and King, the shift was profound. Individual bodies, symbols of violent repression in the movements of Gandhi and King, became spaces where more subtle forms of oppression were resisted through alternative forms of social organisation, leisure and public comportment, including nudity, the ultimate sign of anti-establishment self-expression. Even as the counter-culture reasserted romantic and utopian forms of political personalism, however, it also reflected the post-Gandhian realignment of political personalism as a tool of mass politics, with much of the rhetorical and performative force of counter-culture personalism being channelled into movements protesting the Vietnam War.

The romantic turn of the 1960s counter-culture was connected to a groundswell of world utopian spirit that saw real possibilities for fundamentally altering the post-War social and political landscape. Peaking in 1968 in a surge of student protest movements, hope for wholesale change soon crumbled in the face of external repression and internal disorganisation. In its wake, movements that applied the attitudes and techniques of political personalism to sectional reformism once again rose to the fore. As was the case

in the 1960s, most of these movements – environmentalism, feminism, gay rights, nuclear disarmament and anti-apartheid, to name only the most effective – can be divided into a radical fringe that tended towards romantic statements of individual morality (tree sitting for environmentalists, direct action for gay rights activists) and a mainstream that mixed politically personalist techniques such as boycotts, demonstrations and organised civil disobedience with traditional tools of liberal dissent, such as petitions and lobbying.

In an ever-more sophisticated media environment, the ability of both radical and conservative applications of political personalism to attract media coverage assured their continued relevance. At the same time, the increasing post-1968 skepticism about the possibility of large-scale political reform made the existential transcendence offered by personalist techniques ever more attractive, especially in movements that protested broad and seemingly immutable social patterns such as warfare or the existence of nuclear weapons.

IV.

While nudity as a form of political speech has been a noticeable facet of political personalist trends since the 1960s, it seems to have found a niche in the age of media-savvy protest ushered in by the 1999 anti-IMF protests in Seattle, Washington. The backdrop for the increased popularity of naked protest is the rise of an amorphous, US-dominated global system characterised by ever-more sophisticated methods of repression and persuasion. In the face of a post-Cold War historical narrative that, if not “dead”, at least appears paused, the progressive left (especially in the developed world) has leaned towards modes of dissent that foreground issues of representation and identity. With its power for symbolic speech and resistance, naked protest is ideally suited to this context, especially in the West, where sensational forms of individual resistance appeal to veterans of the 1960s counter-culture uncomfortable with their own level of bourgeois cooptation.

But if naked protest gains motivation from certain trends within the contemporary left, its considerable impact is dependant on the rise of an international, 24-hour, entertainment-news cycle fuelled by satellite technology, cable and the Internet; in other words, the ascendancy of mediainment. In a world where spectacular news images are circulated and spun at an ever-increasing rate, the media-savvy tactics of naked protestors are a perfect fit.

In utilising a form of personally redemptive political speech as a means of garnering support for specific political ends, naked protestors confront the essential tension of political personalism: between moments of individual moral expression on the one hand, and effective political calculation on the other. As a form of personally redemptive speech, the ability of public nudity to express freedom and independence from abstruse systems of power is significant. Nudity implies a righteous innocence, especially for the scores of women whose nakedness defies a masculine culture of violence that is deeply connected to late capitalism's sexualisation and commodification of the female body. In this sense, public nakedness is a truly ‘bare’ act of politically personalist expression: by stripping in public, nude protestors create moments of dissent predicated on a simple but profound verb. And yet, by dedicating their individually redemptive political speech to reformist political causes such as resistance to the Iraq war, naked protestors necessarily compromise a certain moral purity in the name of pragmatic political goals. As they attempt to negotiate tensions that are inherent to political

personalism, naked protestors thus continue to reflect them.

From the perspective of goal-oriented politics, naked protest's romantic and performative nature challenges the consequentialist assumptions of contemporary reformist and radical movements, which tend to assign value to action based on its efficacy in achieving specific political goals. From this broadly utilitarian standpoint, naked protest tends to appear self-indulgent, flaky, even flippant – a celebration of individual gratification and symbolic contestation at the expense of the 'real' work of organising unions, pressure groups and political candidates. At the same time, naked protest remains insufficient to the strict personalist individualism of Tolstoy and Thoreau. Unlike the earliest contributors to the tradition of political personalism, who brooked no compromise in their quest for individual moral redemption, naked protestors have few qualms about instrumentalising the moral force of their acts in the name of mass politics, including deeply reformist cause.

In assessing the capacity of naked protest to mediate and transcend the basic tension in political personalism between individual morality and political calculation, one potentially fruitful approach is provided by Andrew Boyd and Stephen Duncomb, whose recent article in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* (Issue III)⁷ argues intelligently for a "politics of spectacle". For Duncomb and Boyd, experienced organisers in anarchist-inspired direct action movements like Reclaim the Streets and Billionaires for Bush, the present climate of intentionally vacuous public discourse demands symbolically compelling, media-oriented politics that comprehend a culture of "persuasion and manipulation" by engaging in a "propaganda of the truth" and "a manufacture of dissent". As contemporary exemplars of the politics of spectacle, Boyd and Duncomb present small but visible leftist groups and individuals such as The Ruckus Society, Critical Resistance and Reverend Billy, all of whom advance their generally anarcho-reformist agendas through a mix of direct action and absurdist public performance. The authors also claim historical heroes of spectacle, from obvious choices such as Yippie leader Abbie Hoffman and dramatist Bertolt Brecht to less expected names like Civil Rights figure Rosa Parks, the activist turned mythical "Everywoman", Zapatista leader Sub-Commandante Marcos, practitioner of the theatre of military insurrection, and the populist post-modernism of architectural theorists Diane Scott and Robert Venturi, patrons of the fabulously democratic Vegas Strip.

As a means of interpreting naked protest, Boyd and Duncomb's notion of a politics of spectacle is compelling. Mediainstitutional institutions are built largely around the packaging of the barely clothed female figure. Presented with public nudity that speaks to an entire different set of concerns, mainstream media cannot resist. And so, though they make anchormen squirm and force newspaper editors to make hard choices about photo editing, these subversive nude bodies inevitably receive coverage that far outstrips their frequency or mass appeal. In America and Australia especially, naked anti-war protests have garnered extensive coverage, with 50 naked women from Marin county making it onto the docket for CBS Sunday morning in 2003. In India, the naked protest of 13 Manipuri women in July 2004 sparked serious national debate over an issue – the abuses of the Indian army in quelling separatist movements in the country's troubled North-East – that had been dormant in the national consciousness for most of its thirty-year history. In England, Steve Gough (the naked hiker) and his friend Russell Biggs, two idiosyncratic naked protestors and social critics, continue to

receive considerable attention in a media environment particularly attuned to spectacle.

Considering naked protest as an almost archetypal form of personalist politics however, Boyd and Duncomb's politics of spectacle in the end only covers half of the story. For while naked protest is without doubt a spectacular form of mass communication, its capacity to create effective political spectacle cannot be divorced from its ability to provide moments of personal moral speech and redemption. As a personalist act, naked protest allows its practitioners to achieve a sense of autonomy and empowerment in the face of political realities over which they have little control. Through their nudity, naked protestors reject available terms of political debate in favour of a type of performative speech that is at once absurd and penetratingly incisive. Whether preformed by Western bourgeois elites or Asian subalterns, the act of stripping in public forces spectators to engage with the sense of personal moral outrage that it conveys.

In the end, the result of naked protest is undoubtedly political spectacle of the first order. But the power of such spectacle resides ultimately in the pursuit of individual moral redemption that it communicates. By baring their bodies, naked protestors create bodily tableaux of "truth force" that cannot be ignored. While they do not therefore resolve the tensions inherent to all versions of political personalism, they do remain true to its most basic assumption: that the public expression of individual morality is the ground of political dissent.

NOTES

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