Discourses of Democracy in the Aftermath of 9/11 and Other Events: protectivism versus humanitarianism

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In responding to the events of 11 September 2001—the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington—George W. Bush announced to the world that democracy itself was under attack, and that such an attack¹ represented a threat to democracy. Such an interpretation of these events, along with portraying Western democracy as a victim in need of protection and as ‘good’—and establishing thereby the moral high ground—also represented one of the main discourses in which the *Tampa* refugees were discussed in Australia, and has continued to be a prominent discourse in public discussion within Australia about the War on Terror, the Bali Bombings and both refugees and detention centres. Drawing on a detailed analysis of letters to the editor published in *The Australian* in the aftermath of 9/11, this paper seeks to show not only that discussion of the events of 2001 and 2002 has tended to coalesce around two apparently irreconcilable discourses²—that of the aforementioned desire to protect democracy or ‘our way of life’ versus that expressive of a kind of ‘globalized humanitarianism’—but that these discourses are indeed not so much irreconcilable but share a common ground along with common stakes and ends.

The first parts of this paper thus focus on unpacking these two contrasting discourses as initially foregrounded in letters to the editor published in *The Australian* in the aftermath of 9/11. The second section will then go on to consider the way in which these discourses are centred around democracy, suggesting that, despite their apparent irreconcilability, each discourse makes very similar assumptions about and deployments of democracy. Finally, we consider these discourses in the light of Chantal Mouffe’s and Slavoj Žižek’s concerns about these assumptions and conclude that, given these discrepancies concerning the nature of democracy, the time has come for a re-evaluation of democracy itself.

Context

Distributed nationally six days of the week, with almost a full page devoted to letters, *The Australian* provides a national forum for public expression concerning current events. We followed these letters for a period of twelve weeks (11 September to 3 December 2001), a period encompassing 9/11, the arrival of the *Tampa*, and the beginning of the War on Terror, and also Australia’s federal election of 11 November 2001. We specifically chose to concentrate on this period as it appeared to be these events at the end of 2001 that led to certain positions and attitudes being foregrounded

and legitimated in the public sphere³—attitudes that have remained prominent in both public and political expression about such later events as the continuing War on Terror, the Bali Bombings and events concerning refugees and Australia's detention centres. It must be stressed, however, that this paper is not a media analysis of news content or newspapers. Rather, we are interested in exploring the way in which certain types of discourses—ways of speaking—have been normalized within the public sphere exemplified by these letters.

However, before we begin our discussion of these discourses, we do need to briefly mention a couple of general points with regards to the forum of letters to the editor. To begin with, in receiving approximately 150 letters a day, *The Australian's* letters editor chooses to publish each day those letters most concerned with similar subjects.⁴ Foregrounding thereby common themes, letters thus tend to be concerned with current public debates or issues. At the same time, newspapers such as *The Australian* also select and edit letters in order to construct strong unambiguous positions. Indeed, given that conflict and drama sells newspapers, journalists are constantly engaged in an editing process to remove any ambiguity (from the front page to the letters page) and create drama.⁵ From this point of view, public opinion appears to be constructed through this editing process. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, for example, contends in her research with letters editors that letters are selected on the basis of four rules: 'relevance, entertainment, brevity, and authority' (2002b, p. 70).⁶ Selection of letters is hence based on both content and form, with their needing to be well written, grammatically correct, and persuasive. Through this selection process, then, letter writers who want to be published learn to present well-written, strong and unambiguous positions, with the resultant letters delivering passionately held beliefs containing no doubts as to the letter writer's standpoint. These four rules thus work against the inclusion of a diversity of opinions and voices in the letters pages, and would further tend to suggest, as Grey and Brown have classically noted, that the letters are, at best, only 'hazy reflections of public opinion' (Grey and Brown, 1970, p. 450).

Despite these factors, however, we contend here that the general public treats the letters forum in a national newspaper such as *The Australian* as if it is an expression of public opinion. Such a focus is, of course, premised upon the assumptions that letters to the editor firstly do provide an intersubjective arena for public discussion of current events, and secondly that they are representative of public opinion to at least some extent. Now, without going into too much detail here, Wahl-Jorgensen notes in her analyses of the role of letters to the editor that most letters editors see this section as a 'wide open public forum' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002a, p. 130). Although it has been recognized that this belief is unrealistic, given the role of letters editors in selecting and editing letters for publication and given that letter writers tend not to be representative of the general population,⁷ Wahl-Jorgensen nonetheless concludes that letters to the editor are 'conducive to the creation of social solidarity' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, p. 304). They are, in other words, conducive to the creation of public opinion itself. For instance, as Ryfe has noted, letter writers tend to assume 'the voice of the collective "we"', seeing themselves as speaking 'for me and for everyone else' (Ryfe, 2001). Hence, in writing on behalf of all 'Australians', 'patriots', 'fellow human beings', etc., letter writers not only assume that their views are embodiments of public opinion—an assumption that is partially borne out by the tendency of *The Australian* to publish letters that are already representative of perceived common themes—but in effect legitimate certain discourses as proper to the public discussion of current events. In other words, despite the very real constraints preventing us from seeing letters to the editor either as a simple reflection of

public opinion or as the sort of unmediated public sphere desired by Habermas, it is by the very foregrounding of certain discourses within these published letters (each asserting or supporting a collectivity) that these discourses are normalized within public opinion.

A further note before considering the letters of this period concerns our interpretation of them as foregrounding two main discourses. Specifically, each of these discursive positions, called by us respectively 'protecting our way of life' and 'globalized humanitarianism', should not be seen as fully homogeneous. Each does not, for instance, make up a strongly unified and bounded whole. Rather, each is comprised of several loosely connected threads informed by the same basic imperative. With regards to 'protecting our way of life', this basic imperative consists of the belief that 'we' need to protect our way of life from threat. For the threads constituting 'globalized humanitarianism', the fundamental imperative is simply that our actions and responses with respect to events should be determined by the principles and demands of a globalized humanitarianism.

Discursive Attitudes I: Protecting Our Way of Life

How can we even consider letting people into our country that we don't know anything about, let alone their past and what they might be running or escaping from? ... I have numerous friends who in one way or another are so-called migrants, but we do not need people like this who would sooner kill their mother or sister for what they believe in (Fraser, 18/10/2001).⁸

Now, as noted previously, the call to protect our way of life is, of course, exemplified in the rhetoric of the Bush administration since 9/11. In such rhetoric the events of 9/11 represent a threat to 'everything that is worth fighting for in democratic freedoms' (Žižek, 2002, p. 50) and the nations of the world must, as Chomsky describes this prevailing rhetoric, either 'join us or face destruction' (Chomsky, 2001, p. 75). Such rhetoric is, of course, premised on a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them' which also marks a distinction between the 'civilized' and the 'barbaric'. As Ronald Steel of the *New York Times* assured us on 14 September 2001: 'They hate us because we champion a "new world order" of capitalism, individualism, secularism and democracy that should be the norm everywhere' (cited in Chomsky, 2001, p. 117). Similarly, John Howard in his open letter to Australia in the aftermath of the Bali Bombings assured us that the bombings were committed by 'a murderous group of Islamic fanatics who despise the liberal democratic, open life of Western nations, such as Australia' (*The Australian*, 26/11/2002). Hence we get letters asserting:

This is not a battle for territory or the spoils of war. It is a clash of values. Western, liberal, multi-party, free market, individual notions of freedom, liberty and equality. The freedom to live our lives the way we choose. Not to be told by a Mullah that we may not watch TV (Schmulow, 4/10/2001).

What needs to be considered, however, is just what comprises each side of this distinction of the 'us' versus 'them', civilized versus the barbaric. Now in many of the letters we considered 'our way of life' is used interchangeably with the concept of being civilized, where 'civilization' is in turn strongly associated with the values of individual liberty: the 'freedom to live our lives the way we choose' (Schmulow, 4/10/2001) and 'act according to our own moral codes' (Morgan, 5/10/2001). Additionally, civilization is seen as premised upon ideals of reason, equality and associated social practices,

whereby societies that do not uphold such ideals and practices are seen as inherently 'barbaric':

Surely the Taliban's treatment of women—who are not allowed to be educated and are beaten, even killed for exposing parts of their body in public or talking to a male who is not a relative—should be reason enough to oppose their murderous regime (Vaitsas, 11/10/2001; cf. Bain, 11/9/2001).

Civilization and our way of life is also associated in the letters with adherence to societal laws and regulations (Stevens, 13/9/2001; Name and address supplied, 15–16/9/2001; Buick, 13–14/10/2001; Wheeler, 1/11/2001; James, 21/11/2001). Hence arising from this association of civilization with the cherishing of the 'rule of law' is a certain set of negative attitudes toward the *Tampa* refugees. Asylum seekers who are seen as not following the regulations are also seen as lawless, as 'cheat[ing] the system' (Ruston, 15/11/2001), as 'queue-jumpers' (Kath, 20–21/10/2001) who are 'breaking our laws before they even arrive' (Stevens, 13/9/2001), and as therefore not supporting 'our way of life'. Such reasoning in turn gives rise to a protectivism, where borders must be secured, illegal entry is a matter of 'national security' (Gunn, 13/9/2001),⁹ and refugees are described as perhaps including 'sleeper agents' (Schuck, 3/10/2001), and as an 'army in waiting' (Gill, 18/9/2001). It is these attitudes, then, that appear to underpin Howard's assertion that 'we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' (Howard, cited in Marchant, 2/11/2001; cf. Andrews, 26/10/2001).

This difference perceived between 'civilization' and 'barbarism' with its associated imperative of protecting 'civilization', in turn gives rise to several connected threads. The first of these refers to the terrorist attacks of 11 September where there can be seen in the letters a strong support for the War on Terror, seen as eliminating the 'scourge of terrorism from the planet' (Golding, 18/9/2001):¹⁰

A WHITE feather to all those people who seek to denigrate Australia's commitment to the action against terrorism.

If our nation were threatened I guess you would invoke the Brisbane Line, and allow us patriots to man the barricades, while you sipped your pinots and sent appeasing emails to the invaders (Lovelock, 19/10/2001).

The second thread which arises from this 'civilized'/'barbaric' distinction is that of a strong call for assimilation. That is, from this delineation of our way of life as civilized and in need of protection arises the demand that all elements of our society need to be assimilated into our culture. Under this view multiculturalism is seen as a destabilizing and 'divisive force' (Williams, 30/11/2001; cf. Ashton, 28/11/2001), a view that has enabled some writers to argue with respect to certain minority groups that 'some level of assimilation is essential' (Raiche, 19/11/2001; Ashton, 28/11/2001). Overall, then, many of these letters that define civilization as 'our way of life' are pro-assimilation and, generally, anti-multiculturalism:

Perhaps many Australians supported a tough stand by the Government because they saw the latest boatpeople as different from all others that have come.

They saw people who were aggressive in their demands and who belonged to a religious culture that in various parts of the world, rightly or wrongly, seemed to be in conflict with the mainstream host nations.

They saw a religious culture that in Western democracies seemed to put its identity and concerns ahead of those of its adopted country ...

They instinctively and genuinely feared for social cohesion and the impact of a culture that seemed to be making its own rules, unlike any previous migrant group ... They saw it as being careful (James, 21/11/2001).

In such a view, then, what consistently emerges is the belief that Muslims/Islam cannot be assimilated into Australian culture because of a clash of values; ultimately, 'they' (all Muslims and the Islamic religion) are considered too 'other'.¹¹

The final standpoint tied into the discourses and attitudes substantiating the distinction between 'civilization' and 'barbarism' insists, along with Bush, that 'if you're not for us, then you're against us'.¹² Protectivism, construed as protecting our way of life from disruption, is thus extended to entail not only a demand for security and assimilation but a disallowance of internal criticism of these protectionist policies (Veisazadeh, 8/10/2001; Millonog, 5/11/2001). As one letter writer puts it, criticism 'should be reserved for bin Laden and the like' (Saunders, 11/10/2001). Critics of US foreign policy and Australian policy are thus construed as 'simple-minded' (Bird, 2/10/2001), 'Anti-Western' and 'Anti-American' through a process of name calling which is continuous throughout the three-month period.¹³ Critics are further decried as 'the chattering classes' (Bretz, 27/9/2001), 'well meaning ineffectuals' (Bradby, 11/10/2001) and, sarcastically, the 'intellectual elite and left-wing academics and bleeding hearts' (Ash, 1/11/2001; cf. Williams, 30/11/2001).

To sum up this position, 'protecting our way of life' is based upon a distinction holding between 'civilization' and 'barbarism', with the imperative being to protect our way of life, that is, to protect 'civilization' from 'barbarism'. This in turn entails strong support for the 'War on Terror', and Howard's 'tough stand' (James, 21/11/2001) on illegal refugees. These attitudes, in their turn, give rise to a belief that 'if you're not for us, then you're against us' and, as a consequence, a silencing of any internal criticism or dissent.¹⁴ This reasoning, then, can be seen as dependent on the binary logic of 'either/or'. That is, according to the discourses and attitudes comprising this position, we are either 'civilized' or 'barbaric', and are shown to be either against or for terrorism depending on whether or not we support the 'War on Terror'. If we are 'civilized', then we are seen as thereby accepting that our 'way of life' needs to be protected, necessitating, therefore, support for the 'War on Terror' and for Howard's 'tough stand' re the *Tampa* refugees.

Discursive Attitudes II: Globalized Humanitarianism

These 'civilians' ... are our brothers and sisters in the human family. By deciding to bomb the cities of Afghanistan, the US (and the UK) expose their blatant disregard for the sanctity of human life. I feel sickened and disappointed. How many more innocent civilians will be pulverised by weapons of hatred, before US militarism is acknowledged as a problem, not a solution? (Bruhns, 10/10/2001).

In contrast to the previous discursive position, that of a 'globalized humanitarianism' is not premised on the exclusive and divisive (see Evans, 19/10/2001; cf. Ruddock, 27/9/2001) logic of 'us' versus 'them', but on an inclusive logic emphasizing the common identity of being human, of shared humanity. Specifically, it frames itself through and substantiates a discourse of human rights. This appeal to a common identity and the associated call to treat others as we would be treated (e.g. Hilton, 25/9/2001) is thus at the heart of these letters which demand compassion in the face of suffering,

regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation: 'Please listen to this Afghan Australian, this Muslim, this human being. Please spare the Afghan people more suffering' (Salehi, 24/9/2001).

Such a claim to a common humanity is also at the base of a recognition of obligation and responsibility. In this case, 'we' (the Australian nation) are delineated as having an obligation both individually and as a nation not only toward the observance of human rights, but also toward asylum seekers. In other words, a globalized humanitarianism necessitates the rejection of the protectionist rhetoric considered above. Asylum seekers should be seen as part of a shared humanity, towards whom we bear certain responsibilities:

We know Australia's current treatment of asylum-seekers, those in the camps as well as the boats, is morally indefensible and completely at odds with our responsibilities as one of the most privileged members of the world community and our vision of ourselves as a mature, civilised society (Hoy, 18/10/2001).

What is being invoked here with the idea of the 'human family' and our obligations to it is thus an idealized global community that is not divided by cultural differences.¹⁵

As such, a major thread which can be discerned in letters supportive of a globalized humanitarianism is the rejection of the 'either/or' logic of 'us versus them' that informs the views of those wanting to 'protect our way of life'. Whilst for proponents of 'protecting our way of life' one is either against or for the 'War on Terror', against or for the terrorists, etc., for proponents of a 'Globalised Humanitarianism' the issues are not so 'black or white' (Webber, 2/10/2001; Mattocks, 19/9/2001). Hence, instead of seeing a clear victim/villain distinction, proponents of a globalized humanitarianism see a complex situation which has arisen from a multitude of causes, a recognition which forms the basis of much of their criticism of (US and Australian) government rhetoric and policy. For example, it is from this position of a globalized humanitarianism that not only what one writer calls Howard's 'demonising' of refugees but also US foreign policy can be criticized. From this viewpoint, a globalized humanitarianism questions and disrupts the binary logic of 'protecting our way of life'. Indeed, it institutes a critical questioning of governmental policies and societal trends which gives rise to a demand for humane, UN-based and -sponsored solutions (e.g. Gray, 25/9/2001; Reynolds and McDonald-Toone, 16/10/2001): specifically delineated as a demand for '21st globalisation' rather than '19th century colonialism' (McKenna, 9/10/2001).

Now this call for globalization can also be seen as a support for multiculturalism and an acceptance of difference. In one writer's words: 'We must ensure that the collapse of New York's World Trade Centre is not mirrored by the collapse of multiculturalism here' (Rugg, 19/9/2001; cf. Sheehan, 9/11/2001). Far from seeing multiculturalism as 'divisive' (Williams, 30/11/2001; cf. Ashton, 28/11/2001), it is seen rather as a strength. Indeed, one particular claim made here asserts that 'when we can respect each other's culture we will all grow and learn from the experience' (Page, 2/10/2001). As another letter writer comments:

It is necessarily a question of paying respect to the differences among different individuals who all share one thing in common—being Australian despite these differences (Nanva, 3/12/2001).

Under this view, multiculturalism, plurality and difference are to be affirmed (as opposed to the pro-assimilation drive of 'protecting our way of life'). Such a view is also stressed through criticism of (and shame felt before) the apparent desired 'return to the White Australia Policy' (Hamilton-Smith, 26/9/2001; cf. Organ, 3/12/2001) and what

one letter writer has called the 'lowering of the portcullis on Fortress Australia' (Bickley, 25/9/2001).

A number of these writers within this position were also appalled by the attempted silencing of criticism of US foreign and Australian government policy, seeing it as a form of censorship and, as a consequence, undemocratic. Additionally, with criticism of Australia's immigration policies, in particular recent policies on asylum seekers, being silenced through the form of 'hate letters from anonymous writers' (Kabir, 3–4/11/2001), there is to be seen a stifling of both reasoned views and reasoned debate, both perceived here as essential to the democratic process.

In summing up this position, it can be seen that a globalized humanitarianism challenges both the logic, attitudes and discourses informing the position and imperative of 'protecting our way of life'. Premised upon shared humanity and a discourse of human rights, with key terms of suffering, compassion and obligation, a globalized humanitarianism is a demand for humane solutions—for dialogue and an 'international court' rather than war (Francis, 24/9/2001). Lastly, it must be noted that from within this position and its demands, proponents for 'protecting our way of life' are seen as prejudiced, xenophobic and racist (e.g. MacKenzie, 28/11/2001).

Difference and Democracy

Overall, then, if we consider each discourse as establishing a particular world view circumscribed by highly specific stakes and ends, it can be argued that these two discursive positions are constitutively irreconcilable. For instance, what is at stake for the discourse of 'protecting our way of life' is civilization (i.e. democracy) itself, wherein it then promotes an end of protection and assimilation. In contrast, the discourse of 'globalized humanitarianism' sees human rights and dignity as being at stake, and in its turn promotes an end of sustained multiculturalism and global obligation. Now as Jean-François Lyotard has pointed out, it is the various stakes and ends specific to a discourse that determine how a particular object or situation is able to be presented and verified within that discourse.¹⁶ Consequently, for those in support of 'protecting our way of life', such events as 9/11 and the arrival of the *Tampa* are to be construed as a possible threat to a 'civilized' way of life. Conversely, for those supporting a 'globalized humanitarianism', these events are construed with reference to the need to uphold fundamental human rights and the sanctity of human life, based on the idea that we share the identity of being human.

In a more specific instance, the notion of 'multiculturalism' can be seen to be construed quite differently, depending on the discursive position. Whilst those in support of 'protecting our way of life' present multiculturalism as 'divisive', and as consequently weakening Australian society; those supporting a 'globalized humanitarianism' construct it as one of the greatest strengths of Australian society. In other words, the description of multiculturalism within 'protecting our way of life' is neither applicable nor indeed permissible within the discourse of 'globalized humanitarianism'. This irreconcilability is also stressed through the interactions of the positions themselves, where interaction is marked by an ongoing process of name calling and attempted silencing. For instance, from the perspective of those in support of 'protecting our way of life', non-adherents represent the 'ineffectual elite, left-wing academics, and bleeding hearts'. In contrast, from the perspective of those supporting a 'globalized humanitarianism', proponents of the other are seen as 'prejudiced, xenophobic and racist'.

Based on this analysis, then, it seems clear that these two positions are irreconcilable.

Each, after all, has different stakes and ends, and establishes a different world view from the other. Although the same phrases occur within each of the positions, different stakes and ends mean that these phrases are framed and understood in completely different ways. Each thereby remains incomprehensible to the other to the extent that any exchange between them seems to result almost inevitably in name calling and attempted silencing. However, what nonetheless needs to be noted is that, despite this apparent irreconcilability, each of these positions is in effect centred around the same issue, that of democracy itself. That is, we could say that democracy itself is both what is at stake and the desired end of each of these discursive positions. Not only do both positions consider democracy to be under threat—either by terrorism/barbarism or by an imposed protectivism—but each also deploys this notion of (liberal) democracy¹⁷ to legitimate the ‘rightness’ of its position.

In other words, these two discourses can be seen to be concerned with the same issue: democracy and the protection of democracy. On the one hand, for proponents of ‘protecting our way of life’, democracy—considered in terms of highly specific definitions of civilization, individual freedoms and reason—needs protection from terrorism/barbarism. This need thus justifies not only the War on Terror but also such exclusionary practices as border protection, the detention of transgressors of these borders, and the possible institution of a national identity card. Under such a logic, the ends—protection of democracy and civilization—are seen to justify the means. In contrast, for proponents of ‘globalized humanitarianism’, democracy is considered in terms of the recognition of such human rights as the freedom from oppression or persecution, the freedom of speech, and the freedom to practise a religion. So considered, democracy is thus under threat from the very policies proposed and instituted to protect ‘our way of life’, and its need for protection justifies criticism of government policies and public attitudes.

On this analysis, then, despite their having common ends in the protection and deployment of democracy, these discourses are still to be seen as irreconcilable because of these differing conceptions of democracy. However, what we want to suggest here is that this apparent irreconcilability only marks the surface of these two discursive positions, and that they rather both, as Žižek says, ‘belong to the same field’ (Žižek, 2002, pp. 50–51). Both discourses are, for instance, clearly grounded in the liberal tradition in their desire to affirm and protect human values or rights. On the one hand, proponents of ‘protecting our way of life’ are concerned to protect such values as individual freedoms and reason. On the other, adherents of a ‘globalized humanitarianism’ are concerned to protect such values as the sanctity of human life, along with a universalized conception of human rights and corresponding obligations. In both instances, however, democracy has been identified with what Mouffe calls ‘the *Rechtsstaat* and the defence of human rights’ and is instantiated very much as the ‘solution that other people will necessarily adopt when they cease to be “irrational” ’ (Mouffe, 2000, pp. 3, 65). Hence these conceptions of democracy are both constitutively rights-centred, both, furthermore, affirming reason and the rule of law whether it is with respect to national (and nationalist) sovereignty or the charters of the United Nations.

Problems and Possibilities

As Mouffe has pointed out, however, there are several issues needing consideration in the affirmation and deployment of a rights-centred democracy. For instance, as Mouffe argues, rights-centred conceptions of democracy assume a consensus on these rights and,

more generally, the common good. This assumes, of course, that any differences are able to be (and should be) subsumed, and that the democratic project is in turn identifiable with a single agreed upon conception of the common good that must then be defended. This in turn entails an inability to tolerate either dissension or undecidability, and it is this that Mouffe then sees as the ‘real threat to democracy’ (Mouffe, 2000, p. 22), noting that ‘the belief that a final resolution of conflict is eventually possible ... [itself] puts [democracy] at risk’ (Mouffe, 2000, p. 8).

What seems to have been forgotten, then, in these two main stories about the events of 2001 and 2002 is that the democracy that both discourses are desirous of protecting should itself be constituted by what Mouffe calls ‘a vibrant clash of political positions and an open conflict of interests’ (1993, p. 6). Hence, in so far as both discourses project themselves as the only rational response to these events—decrying the other (and, of course, the other other of terrorism/barbarism) as unreasonable and ‘un-Australian’—their interactions are marked by mutual incomprehension, name calling and attempted silencing. In other words, despite their common deployment of a notion of democracy in legitimation of their respective world views, neither of these discursive positions can be seen as democratic by Mouffe’s criteria. We suggest in conclusion, then, that far from simply noting that these two discursive positions are irreconcilable—albeit as holding common ends and exemplifying a common notion and deployment of democracy—what is needed to escape this double bind is a detailed consideration of democracy itself. Certainly, if we are not to end up accepting Žižek’s assertion that democracy ‘is no longer “alive”’ (Žižek, 2002, p. 151), we need to move from the either/or of these two positions and think about what democracy might mean and entail in the aftermath of 9/11.

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Notes

- [1] In his Address to the Nation, Bush described the 9/11 attacks as ‘evil despicable acts of terror’ (Bush, 2001).
- [2] Žižek also outlines and criticizes similar two main stories with respect to 9/11—outlined here as the stories of the right and the left respectively—in his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. He argues here that they both offer ‘the temptation of a double blackmail’ and mark ‘the limit of moral reasoning’ (Žižek, 2002, p. 50). As he notes, ‘If we simply, only and unconditionally condemn it [the WTC attacks], we simply appear to endorse the blatantly ideological position of American innocence under attack by Third World Evil; if we draw attention to the deeper sociopolitical causes of Arab extremism, we simply appear to blame the victim which ultimately got what it deserved’ (Žižek, 2002, p. 50).
- [3] By this we mean, broadly speaking, Habermas’s notion of an arena for public debate free of explicit government interference which is ‘both accessible to and open to inspection by the citizenry. It is here, in this public sphere, that public opinion is formed’ (Holub, cited in Webster, 1995, pp. 101–102).
- [4] Although there are regular letter writers who can be relied upon to express themselves clearly, *The Australian* tries to alternate those who are published. *The Australian* also claims the right to edit letters—for example, editing out overly emotional and insulting phrases (Marr, telephone conversation, 18/6/2002).
- [5] We are grateful to Steve Mickler for his comments about newspaper editing when we presented a version of this paper at the Pubtalk seminar series (Fremantle, Western Australia) on 25 July 2002.
- [6] For a detailed discussion of editorial policy concerning letters to the editor, see Karin Wahl-Jorgensen’s ‘Understanding the conditions for public discourse: four rules for selecting letters to the editor’,

Journalism Studies; and 'Letters to the editor as a forum for public deliberation: modes of publicity and democratic debate', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*.

- [7] In investigating the extent to which letter writers are representative of the general population, most research has found that letter writers tend to be 'white, middle-aged and well-educated males who are firmly situated in a community and have the excess time and energy required for a commitment to political activism' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002b, p. 77; cf. Sparks and Perez, 1991).
- [8] All letter extracts are from letters published in the letters to the editor section of *The Australian* on the date given in 2001.
- [9] This concern for security has a strong presence in the letters of this period. Shown not only as support for the 'War on Terror', such concern also gives rise to a discussion of the need for border protection (e.g. Turner, 10/10/2001; Herring, 10/10/2001; Williams, 11/10/2001; Schiemer, 3–4/11/2001; Palk, 5/11/2001; Emery, 7/11/2001; Petras, 8/11/2001; Farnsworth, 10–11/11/2001; Raiche, 19/11/2001; Quinlan, 26/11/2001) and the possible institution of a national identity card (e.g. Fisher, 3/10/2001; Morgan, 3/10/2001; and Koehne, 4/10/2001).
- [10] In a letter of 17 September 2001, Taft also argues that '[t]he only possible thing to do is to combat terrorism in any way that might eradicate it...'.
- [11] What we can see here is a conflation of Islam with terrorism (e.g. Jelavic, 15–16/9/2001). It must also be noted that such positioning can be regarded as fundamentally pro-Hansonite. Other letter writers appropriated and legitimated terms used during the debate on racism by Pauline Hanson, the then member for Oxley. Hanson was legitimated for speaking for a silenced group 'the aussie battler'.
- [12] In a speech to Congress President Bush stated: 'either you are with us, or the terrorists'. See the ABC broadcast of *Four Corners*, 18/2/2002.
- [13] The Editor of *The Australian* intervenes (30/11/2001) and states that no more 'name-calling letters' will be published. The letters page editor states: 'Thanks for the amusing contributions, but "reverse abuse" will not be a continuing theme on the Letters page.'
- [14] This attitude is, of course, also that held by Samuel P. Huntington who, in his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Huntington, 1996), urges Western unity. He argues here, as David Skidmore puts it, that the West must not only 'gird itself to meet expected challenges mounted by non-Western civilizations' but also 'reject or purge itself of those elements within its own midst who call for multiculturalism, relativism or serious critical appraisal of the West's own flaws and deficiencies' (Skidmore, 1998, p. 186).
- [15] It must be noted, however, that the premise which informs this position of globalized humanitarianism—the notion that we all share an 'essential' humanity—also marks it as problematic. That is, this premise asserts a form of cultural relativism. To put it another way, with its essential foundation being our shared humanness, cultural identity is construed as something which is layered over the top, as opposed to something one is born into and which is inextricably linked with being human.
- [16] For Lyotard's delineation of these processes, see *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*.
- [17] Both positions can be seen as drawing on the liberal tradition where, as Mouffe notes, democracy is outlined in terms of 'the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty' (Mouffe, 2000, p. 3).

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