



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Trump, Democracy, and Empire

Kwok Pui-lan, *Candler School of Theology - Emory*

Blog Series: Teaching, Religion, Politics

May 11, 2017

Tags: power and privilege | teaching critical thinking | critical reflection

On election night last year when Donald Trump won the presidential election, I was traveling in Greece visiting the historical and religious sites. Several days before the election, I visited the Acropolis and climbed up Mars Hill where Paul delivered his sermon to the Athenians (Acts 17:22-31). The fact that I was in Athens, the cradle of Western democracy, prompted me to think about the development of democratic institutions and their relationships to an empire.

The word “democracy” in Greek combines the elements *dêmos* and *krátos*, and means literally, “people power.” However, only adult male citizens who owned land could participate in Athenian democracy. Women, slaves, children, and lower-class people were excluded. Athens once had the strongest military power among the Greek city-states and harbored imperialistic impulses. The Delian League, created by the Athenians in the 5th century BCE, captured cities, colonized and enslaved peoples. Athens suppressed revolts among the League’s members and collected dues from them in exchange for protection.

In our modern day, democracy has not prevented countries from turning into imperialistic powers. The British once ruled an empire so vast that the sun never set on the empire. While British subjects enjoyed democracy at home, colonized subjects did not have self-autonomy and had to obey British rule and laws. In the US, Donald Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again” appealed to deep-seated American imperialistic desire, especially among non-college educated white men.

I began teaching a class on liberation theology shortly after Trump’s inauguration. My

reflection on the relationship between democracy and empire prompted me to find ways to heighten my students' consciousness about the image of the US and the impact of American policies abroad. During our first class, we discussed the changing political and social contexts in which we studied liberation theology. There were a significant number of international students from Asia and Africa in the class. I invited them to share reactions to Trump's election from news reports from their countries. I also asked them to share their thoughts on the slogan "Make America Great Again." A number of them said that the US is already the most powerful country and has a major effect in their own countries. They were concerned about how Trump's presidency would affect global stability and foreign policies.

After Hillary Clinton lost the election, some commentators discussed what Clinton's loss would mean for the future of feminism. Others wondered why her coalition of women, racial and ethnic minorities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people could not pull off a win. I discussed with students Columbia University professor Mark Lilla's widely read essay "The End of Identity Liberalism."^[1] He warns that American liberalism has focused too much on identity politics and diversity issues, such as race, gender, and sexuality. This focus is disastrous for democratic politics for it fails to provide a unifying principle. Instead, he argues that we have to engage more in conversations about class, war, political economy, and the common good. Lilla's essay has created a lot of debates, and some said that "identity politics" addresses real problems of discrimination. In our class discussion, I helped students to see two important points. First, we have to take an intersectional approach and see the various forms of oppression as mutually constitutive. Second, we have to avoid the tendency of focusing too narrowly on identity issues in the US, without paying attention to larger social, economic, and political forces shaping the world at the macro-level.

Commentators outside of the US have taken the election of Donald Trump and raised it up as an example of how democracy can become dysfunctional. Some of my students were shocked when Trump was elected, and his first 100 days in office have created chaos and presented us with "alternative truths." When my students felt depressed by the current political situation, I reminded them that democracy is a project and it requires vigilance in protecting it. We should not think that American democracy is the best institution, for it has been polluted by big money and big donors. Trump said during his campaign that he was free from Wall Street's influences. But his cabinet and close advisors include many billionaires and people from Goldman Sachs. His currently proposed health care policy and tax reforms will benefit the rich and take away from the elderly, the sick, and the poor.

I reminded students that democracy has been used as an ideology to further the cause of empire. In the 19th century, the spread of Christianity was part and parcel of the "civilizing mission" of the West. In the 20th and 21st centuries, the protection of democracy has been given as a reason for military intervention and regime change. In the name of democracy, the U.S. has supported military coups, toppled governments, and created regional animosity and instability. Democracy has taken several centuries to develop in Western countries, and cannot be superimposed by power and might from without.

Within the course of one week, Trump ordered a military strike in Syria and the U.S. dropped a 22,000-pound bomb on ISIS forces in Afghanistan. It is vitally important to educate students to become global citizens who understand the consequences of US actions in the wider context of the world. A good beginning is to understand how democracy and populism can be used to serve imperial interests.

[1] Mark Lilla, "The End of Identity Liberalism," New York Times, November 18, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/05/trump-democracy-and-empire/>