Niall Lucy and Steve Mickler. *The War on Democracy: Conservative Opinion in the Australian Press*.

Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2006.

ISBN: 1 920694 90 0

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No one dies in *The War on Democracy*, as the authors' incipit reads. Like the "History Wars" (and unlike the War on Terror), the war on democracy is *only* a war of ideas. Lucy and Mickler analyse seven conservative commentators in the Australian media – Luke Slattery, Miranda Devine, Gerard Handerson, Janet Albrechtsen, Andrew Bolt, Michael Duffy and Christopher Pearson – to argue that, in their newspaper columns or public interventions, they "oppose the spread of democratic ideas" and thus "oppose the very idea and ideal of democracy itself" (4). In the contemporary cultural climate, and especially in countries which, like Australia, are experiencing a "conservative revolution," an analysis of the conservative media is badly needed and this book offers interesting insights into the mechanisms and arguments of the "opinion makers" of the Howard Right. This book is a response by two academics to the continuous attacks of the political and media establishment on academia as the stronghold of "leftist" or "postmodern" ideas that are dubbed "anti-democratic" by the conservative side. The war is thus principally a war about the definition of democracy.

Lucy and Mickler oppose the "minimalist" definition adopted by the conservatives: democracy for them is not (or not only) a system of representative government "fully formed in 18th century Europe" (2). According to this definition, the Howard conservatives in Australia can "claim a 'mandate'

to govern representatively, as a democratic expression of the values, attitudes and beliefs of 'real' and 'ordinary' Australians" (5). Conservatives thus restrict the definition of democracy to mean "nothing *but* a system of representative government" (7), "never anything more than an electoral outcome of universal suffrage" (75).

For the authors, democracy exceeds the mere historical fact of the election result and is rather "an idea and an ideal"; parliamentary representation is far from the most important aspect of it, "since it implies that democratic projects are enacted only by governments" (7). A strong definition of what democracy means to the authors, however, remains vague: it is defined here and there in the book as a "social emancipatory force" (7), a "call for justice on behalf of the least powerful groups and members of a society" (7), or the "spirit of inclusiveness that makes liberal society liberal" (31). The authors seem to embrace the Derridean definition of democracy based on the notion of *difference*: "an 'impossible' radical promise of freedom without limit, openness to difference, hospitality to all" (37). Thus something always remaining to come. This is in fact a rejection of the definition of democracy merely as a political system, which *only* represents the views and interests of a majority, at the expenses of minorities, alternatives and differences. Far from being an "event that happened in the past," democracy is thus defined as a "project *without origins* and which remains, and must remain, *forever unfinished*" (135). The conservative war on democracy, for the authors, is not then a war waged on democracy as a system of representative government, but rather an attack, in the name of this political system (the rule of the majority), to "*the unfinished project of democracy* as an idea and an ideal" (135). Democracy as an idea and an ideal "can never arrive at a point of completion; democracy is not just an unfinished project, but an unfinishable one. Every aspect of society remains always open to question or inspection for failing to live up to democracy as an idea" (136).

The problem with this definition is that it identifies democracy with the critical spirit of modernity tout-court. In a very Enlightenment-like narrative, the authors characterise modernity as "the will to question" and "the freedom of interpretation" (26), the democratising force of civilization sweeping away the evils of obscurantism, privilege and prejudice. That is, the conservative forces. In this move, they fall into the trap of demonising their opponents and erasing the very differences they claim to defend. The major shortcoming of their discourse is in fact that they use the term "conservative" as a very general concept embracing all the forces they perceive as anti-democracy. The target of the book is certainly the "less then magnificent seven" journalists whose newspapers columns are analysed and discussed, but far too often the textual analysis or the personal attack is

broadened to “conservatism” in general, a generalization that erases all differences. There is, for example, no consideration of the “classical conservatism” which constituted an important player in the development of Western democracies; no difference is identified between historical conservatives (although Hume and Bourke are cited, 116), Tories and the so called “neo-cons,” who are the real targets of the book; no difference is acknowledged within the conservative camp, which is treated as a monolithic identity devoted to stopping the democratic forces. As the authors declare, conservatism is merely and generally “an opposing force to the spirit of inclusiveness that makes liberal society liberal” (31), or also a force opposed “to what the Enlightenment saw as imperative to the very idea of liberal society – the capacity of citizens to think and act critically” (40). They even coin neologisms, “mod cons” (modern conservatives, 32) and “hon cons” (honest conservatives, 51), but only as mock-differentiations within a compact camp with only one goal: to stop the democratic project.

Lucy and Mickler certainly do have a point though, and the strength of this book lies in the deconstruction of the seven journalists’ arguments against the “Left,” “Postmodernism” and difference in the name of mainstream Australia. Significantly, the trait characterizing the conservative opinion–makers here analysed is the extreme simplification and generalization of their views in their violent attacks to anything that differs from the conservative political agenda. As they claim to be the champions of the democratic order, any dissenting position is accused of “totalitarianism”: thus feminism, Marxism, postmodernism, unionists, Indigenous rights claimants – all that is “to the left of the Right” is thrown together into one big category under the banner of “the Left,” made identical to Stalinism and thus deemed antidemocratic and totalitarian. The war on democracy is thus carried out by the conservative commentators in the name of democracy against the totalitarian “Left.” And it is also conducted in the name of ordinary people against what they call “social elites” – that is, academia. With passion, irony and wit the authors show that the attacks against the “leftist elites” in universities and high school English classes hide a fundamental anti-intellectualism, a rejection of any kind of cultural theory that becomes an anti-theory in the name of common sense. The conservative political goal is thus “to make it seem that any challenge to the authority of ‘traditional’ values and common sense is associated with a sinister ‘leftist’ plot to undermine the established order of society” (24). The authority of common sense conceals the “anti-intellectual resistance to ideas” (35), to what Janet Albrechtsen calls “abstractionism” (74): pragmatism, real-life experience, good sense, what “works” – these are the catchwords of the conservative political agenda, and the great merit of Lucy and Mickler is to unveil its bad

faith, incoherence, contradictions and the political and economic interests it defends.

It is a pity then that this important analysis often falls into invective and attacks ad personam, and that the simplifications and generalizations of the conservative journalists are at times contrasted with other simplifications and generalizations. What drives the analysis in this book is the understandable and shareable moral indignation of two academics who live in a regime of anti-intellectual arrogance. Their indignation, though, too often carry them away and leads them to make as many black-and-white assumptions and speculations, like when they defend leftist symbology as redeemable (unlike the Nazi symbology) because "political symbols of the left are always inscribed with relation to democratic principles and ideas" (66); or when they attack the church with these kinds of generalizations: "if organized religion requires the ruthless monopolization of goodness…" (67), or the "Catholic institutional paedophilia…" (131). This passionate and colourful language, which makes the book witty and conversational, risks undermining the force of its argument and the power of its critique.

Certainly this is not – and does not claim to be – a book on political theory nor a cold and scholarly analysis of the Australian media with a theoretical apparatus and a long bibliography. Nevertheless, I doubt that the right strategy to fight the war on democracy is to engage the enemy using its own weaponry. The book is certainly interesting and instructing reading, but in the war of ideas against the arrogance and violence of contemporary conservative media we should raise the bar of argumentation rather than lower the argument to the anti-intellectual level of invective established by the enemy.

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