

Review - The Politics of Evasion

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DAVID CASTILLO, AUG 24 2016

The Politics of Evasion: A Post-Globalization Dialogue Along the Edge of the State

by Robert Latham

Abingdon: Routledge, 2016

This book successfully captures the tension in two of the most relevant debates of the past decade: theory/praxis and security/individual rights. Through a rigorous tet-a-tet between the author and a fictitious *Mr. V*, issues regarding privacy, mobility and security are deconstructed to reveal inherent biases and inclinations, yielding a unique insight into the thinking behind their effects. In *Politics of Evasion*, Robert Latham, Associate Professor at York University in the Department of Political Science, presents a guiding framework useful in the conceptualization of many of the recent debates inspired by Edward Snowden, the Occupy movement, and the securitization processes most evident in North America and Europe. It is a timely contribution given the current climate of fear and violence emerging from the recent political violence seen occurring in Western states. Latham is simultaneously commenting on the nature of the ongoing debate between the institutions of academia and the public service. Filled with disagreements about the applicability of certain objects of study, this debate is bound to continue beyond the sometimes narrow conceptualizations presented in this book. Indeed, the characters in this book serve as placeholders for these competing empirical perspectives. The end result, though unique and accessible in its exposition, ultimately falls short of contributing much to this specific question of appropriateness. Due to the demands of modern governance structures, the type of criticality Latham suggests is often met with implementation obstacles. It does, however, infuse the debate with a diverse amount of theoretical perspectives, which is arguably Latham's ultimate objective.

Through a modern adaptation of the Socratic method, Latham is able to articulate the positions both he and *Mr. V* represent. This is effective in several ways. Though both participants are engaged in the rigorous task of manipulating theoretical concepts, the conversational style allows the reader to not only follow the development of the argument closely, but also be privy to the benefits of Latham's presentation. By introducing two speakers and ensuring the reader understands each one's point-of-view, the writing style channels one important theme of the book, the construction of binaries. Privacy and security, the social and the individual, resistance and complacency, and national and international are all explored in this unique manner. In one instance, *Mr. V* introduces the idea of state dependency and question the merits of anarchic thought. Latham responds through a demonstration of the privileged status the concept of state holds in political discourse. Therefore, his position is not firmly anarchist, but rather one that is committed to the deconstruction and critique of "common sense". Latham encourages this deconstruction of these binary relationships, making references to their interrelated nature. This argument emphasizes the fact that constructing both sides as opposing ideas creates rifts in public discourse. The result is the production of government policies and social norms that are firmly in opposition to the other. Indeed, this rift between binaries is where *Mr. V* draws most of his frustration, given his commitment to state focused solutions as opposed to Latham's critical suggestions.

The character *Mr. V*, though fictitious in nature, is painted as a progressive, government employee who is concerned with state related questions. Though a bit overdeveloped in his characterization, *Mr. V* serves the purpose of voicing the concerns of so-called progressive statist. By yearning for a return to a balance between the aforementioned binaries, *Mr. V* is the guilty pleasure of reflexive pragmatists who tend to look for solutions to social issues within the status-quo. Latham, through his own character, pushes against these binaries, and, indeed, the idea of balance

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itself. Arguing that these divisions and their hybrid forms perpetuate a conceptualization of the state, and indeed, a liberal order that demands control and regulation, Latham suggests alternative ways of conceptualizing both the state and its opposing forces through the development of concepts like evasion, deployment, re-collectivity and passage. One might say that these concepts are Latham's offering to an already saturated field of study. This critique is voiced through Mr. V's counterarguments, questioning Latham's formulations and demanding a justification for his linguistic and conceptual choices. However, this demonstrates the point of exercising conceptual rigor when discussing these issues.

Latham's overall narrative can, at times, be lost in some stray observations. For example, this can lead to segments of conversation where the reader is more inclined to lose sight of the argument due to tangential observations about the nature of power or different interpretations of the concept of enclosure. However, this is minimally counteracted by the commitment to a conceptual narrative. In other words, the evolution of the idea of evasion and Latham's suggestion to counter it serves to guide the reader through the often dense theoretical contributions. Through Mr. V, Latham is pushed to constantly demonstrate how the state impacts spatial politics and refine his interpretation of the effects on the individual, the collective, and for the state itself. It is this repartee where the benefits of the choice of style are most evident.

So, does it work? The reader may be left feeling as Mr. V does in the conclusion—intrigued but empty-handed. If the reader tends to agree with Mr. V's perspective (while fully recognizing his fictitious nature), she will share the same frustration he does regarding his conversations with Latham. This frustration lies with Latham's tendency to engulf concepts in several layers of complexity. For example, when discussing deployment—collective interventions in specific locales meant to reconstitute/transform some aspect of its makeup—and ways to counteract state intrusions, Mr. V suggests that these deployments may be harnessed by sub-state and even quasi-state groups to address any state driven bias. However, as is common in many of the exchanges, Latham is quick to point out that Mr. V is using conceptual norms to suggest change, which, according to Latham's understanding, is a failed project. Therefore, in this example, Latham argues that a deployment will retain its inherent nature—that of a permanent, powerful state. The reader can understand and even identify with Mr. V's accusation of Latham being a defeatist Anarchist.

And yet, a more meta level analysis of this conversation might demonstrate Latham's genius in constructing the exchange as he has. Employing a method of self-critique using Mr. V's voice, Latham is able to portray the critiques many readers would have with his work. He is also able to respond to these critiques in a way which might prove more accessible than traditional writing styles. Though Mr. V is based off several conversations Latham has had with public servants over several years, his responses, articulation and general argumentation are all Latham's construction. Meaning that Latham is able to both present and critique his ideas at the same time. The result is a well-rounded, complex discussion that deconstructs many aspects of modern life, leaving the reader, like Mr. V, with more questions than answers.

About the author:

David Castillo is a Masters in Political Science candidate at Carleton University. His research is concerned with the routines, practices and training involved in North American border enforcement. David is currently working on a major research project and hopes to continue his research at the doctoral level. His other interests include biometric technologies, national security and international political sociology.