

THE PROPAGANDA OF THE HARNESS: ON THE REASONABLE VOICE OF REASON

*Vasi van Deventer
Department of Psychology
University of South Africa
Pretoria*

Anita Craig's call to live for a future is a warning. The entire article is governed by the fear of unknown circumstances, a possible danger lurking ahead. And against this background she delivers her message with conviction. The danger she speaks of is all too clear. Our flirtation with unreasonable practices endangers our practical and theoretical prosperity. We may be heading for an impoverished future, which may not allow us to live well. We should learn to treasure reason and reasonableness, she says, because this and this alone would enable us to harness a future which would serve us well.

We have here the rhetorical style of the prophet, the one who can see the future, the one who has a message for the future, a message which cannot be refuted in the present because its truth is still to come. Therefore, what is at stake at present (and in this present) is not the truth of the message but rather the message of truth. The content of the prophet's message is not disputed, at least not now. What has to be debated (in the name of reasonableness) is the way in which a message is compiled and delivered (in the name of truth). In other words, what concerns us here and now (in this country, in this decade) is not the call to live reasonably but the reasonableness of the call itself, that is, the reasonableness of a voice of reason whose goal it is to harness a future, to deliver us to a harnessed future. We should inspect with close attention the textual flirtations of this prophet.

There are, to begin with, flirtations which aim to establish reasonableness over unreasonableness. Unreasonableness is posed as the danger of strange faiths, beliefs without coherence, argument or evidence; as fashionable trends deliberately throwing caution to the wind in the name of what feels right or good; and thin readings of postmodernism. But why, if it is a fashionable trend, is this so dangerous? The danger it seems lies in the refusal to be harnessed! Being reasonable means *following dictates*, falling in with the *overarching project of reason* which *ties people* into communities where one has to *furnish reasons for one's actions and believes*, communities where competing beliefs are eradicated under the banner of *adjudication*. The harnessing of a future, which holds the promise of living well, has a price it seems. It asks nothing less but to surrender to the harness of reasonableness. And this, indeed, is a question of surrendering because there is a fight, a dirty fight in which reasonableness casts its harness without reason.

Harness, which comes from *herr* (army) and *nest* (provisions) to form *harneis* (military equipment): No wonder Reason comes as an active attack, asserting a godlike Reason (in whose name the prophet speaks), a reason which does not have to justify itself, a reason which goes without reason, a *bios theoretikos*, a theoretical ambition which subjects the practical reasoning of the common person, ridiculing it as a thinking with the foxes. It is this kind of active attack, this kind of godlike Reason, which allows the prophet to forge reasonableness on the basis of unreasonableness. A particular reading of postmodernism is presented without reason. Postmodernist thinking is impoverished without explanation or justification. Because, to say that postmodernism is that collection of views which ridicules talk of standards and truth is to attack by ridiculing the meticulous logic and rationality with which postmodernists such as Jacques Derrida question the project of rationality. To suggest that postmodernists have a feel for alternative things simply for the sake of being alternative is to ridicule the deconstructionist project of opening up theories and believes for further debate, which is (by the prophet's own words) the very possibility of reason. When the prophet blames the eruption of unreason on such thin readings of postmodernism she has already treated postmodernism in an unreasonable manner, and it is this unreasonable treatment which allows her to cast reasonableness and unreasonableness as opposites. The unreasonableness of postmodernism is not the simple opposite of reasonableness. It still questions, asks for reasons in its close readings to expose textual seams. Unreasonableness is the constant questioning of reasonableness, the subjection of reasonableness to its own criteria of being reasonable. If it pulls into an opposite direction than that of reasonableness it is not a move against reasonableness itself but a move against the harnessing effects of reasonableness. It questions the military precision with which reasonableness tries to rid itself of unreason (the distortions in thinking and living, and the suspicions of the destructive effects of postmodern thinking) in its attempts (in the name of truth, knowledge, rightness and goodness) to organise and direct (we need discourses marked by reasonableness and organised future directedness) and regulate (we need these regulative ideas). When the prophet defines reason as a commitment to critical, public debate; and reasonableness as following the dictates of that which has been debated and is in the process justified and defended, she has excluded already the possibility of debating the godlikeness of Reason. The possibility that unexpected events and turns of history may redefine the movements of Reason has been excluded already as distortions in thinking and living (madness, strange faiths, and fashionable trends throwing caution to the wind). Thus reasonableness can carry on its suppressive work of a justifying defence.

Therefore do not trust the prophet when she turns to a justifying defence of reason and reasonableness. Do not believe the one who wants to harness a future, and who wants to harness you in future, when she says: "I do believe that it is unreasonable nowadays to deny the evils perpetrated in the name of Western Rationality as a totalitarian project." Be wary when she adds the but: "Taking these lessons seriously ought not to paralyse one Such paralysis and fear might be behind some of our more irrational moves away from objective evidence, and towards emotion and feelings." The rhetoric of a politician, a doublespeak we know all too well in this country where we will not repeat the evils of the past despite continuing the same old practices.

The prophet turning politician, a prophetising politician, makes for an unholy alliance, providing us with the most dangerous rhetoric of all: A message which postpones its truth by doublespeak. No matter how hard one tries, here knowledge cannot be known, and one is bound to drown in a certain fear of the unknown. The justifying defence

signals an attempt to be liked, preaching change but denying it in practice, a doublespeak which obscures distinctions, denouncing the evils of the past whilst perpetuating them in the present. All the evils the prophet delivers in her message returns in the very constitution of her message.

But Craig is more than a prophet, more than a politician and more than a prophetising politician. She is always also a common person, a citizen of our time, here in this country in this decade. She is surrounded by, and she listens to the oral, the particular, the local and the timely where she catches a whiff which signals danger and where she feels a certain fear rising in her chest. On the one hand the oral, the particular, the local and the timely may drift off and disappear in the mist of time unless being written in codes and preserved in texts which reach beyond the immediate towards the universal, the general and the timeless. On the other hand the oral, the particular, the local and the timely may grow to overpower and replace the universal, the general and the timeless. The fear Craig experiences is the fear of her own postmodern condition, of her existential reality which denies her the safety harness of reason and reasonableness. She lives in a world where the common citizen has to take personal responsibility for each and every aspect of his/her life, a time and place where numerous discourses (of unreason) are cutting through the straps of reason.

But herein lies the power of Craig's writing: She is a common citizen in contact with her world, equipped to catch a whiff which signals danger. She is brave enough to acknowledge her fear and to respond. She declares herself a prophet and calls on the gods to deliver a powerful message. She does not shy away from adding political rhetoric to convince the masses. Yet she remains a common person, a citizen of our time, using the practical reason of this decade, of this country at the very moment she delivers a message in theoretical (general/universal) Reason. ("My investigation is obviously limited by my situation", she says). This double movement exposes Craig at work behind her message, and she is brave enough to acknowledge this ("I make some points rhetorically and I configure patterns of coherence"), an acknowledgement which allows her to move from the harnessing of a future (in the beginning of her text) to a warning against limiting the possibilities for the future (towards the end of the text). She works from critical debate and *justifying defence* towards scrutinising *beliefs about beliefs* which situates reasonableness not only as justification but as *justification or change*.

Thus Craig opens her own message and keeps her own message open by inscribing unreason into Reason. She cuts through the harness to write with an honest conviction, delivering an honest message, because she speaks from the fear in her own heart, and she is not afraid to show it.