

cross currents in culture ●●

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The reality of my desires

Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt

Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority

Edited by Josh MacPhee & Erik Reuland
Oakland & Edinburgh: AK Press, 2007, 324 pp; £16

Do it Yourself: A Handbook for Changing our World

Edited by the Trapeze Collective
London & Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007

Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms

Benjamin Franks
Oakland & Edinburgh: AK Press, 2006, 480 pp; £15



Two books, both purporting to encourage social change according to the tenets of anarchism, have been published recently. The first of these, *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority*, advocates a role for creative practice in prompting questions about how society is constructed and providing alternative models. In contrast to this proactive approach to visual culture, *Do it Yourself: A Handbook for Changing our World* claims to be a step-by-step guide to changing our immediate surroundings, for developing new communities based on direct democracy and sustainability.

Realizing the Impossible asserts that, while Marxism constrains art to the prevailing economic conditions and capitalism harnesses it to the market system, “anarchism is not a singular political program so much as a thorough commitment to substantive equality and the potential for human liberation,”¹ thereby promoting artistic freedom. On this basis, some fairly tenuous attempts are made to link Modernist artists to anarchism, not least in Patricia Leighton’s unsubstantiated assertion that:

“In pre-World War I France, many modernists – including Pablo Picasso, Maurice Vlaminck and Kees van Dongen – thought anarchist politics to be inherent in the idea of an artistic avant-garde and created new languages of form [...] expressive of their desire to effect revolutionary changes in art and society. [...] Anarchism as a political philosophy was, without question, more influential on turn-of-the-century artists than socialism, in part because anarchist theory specifically called for the participation of artists in social transformation, and in part because anarchism at one end of its spectrum stood for absolute individualism fully compatible with a politicized bohemianism.”²

Elsewhere, claims are made that artists associated with anarchism include Pissarro, Tolstoy and Wilde, as well as those who turned to Communism – from Malevich to Picasso³ – while references are made to the “Situationist-inspired anarchist art movements like the Neoists,”⁴ an attribution with which former Neoist and persistent critic of

anarchism, Stewart Home, would no doubt take issue.⁵

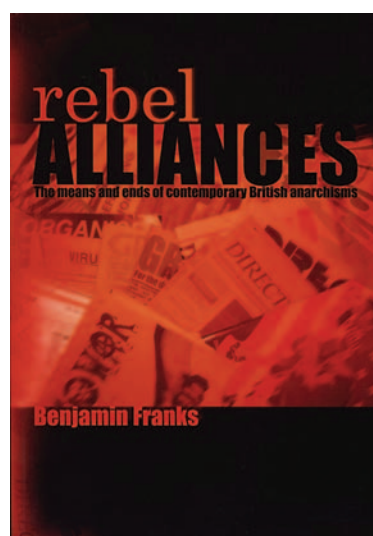
A transcribed discussion between contemporary printmakers in *Realizing the Impossible* gives a clue to its ethos and should be restaged by anyone entering arts education, posing questions such as: What do you think about art as a commodity? If you sell your work, how do you decide the price of a piece? What do you think is the role(s) of an artist in society? What role do you think art plays in social change? What roles do you think art plays in our lives?⁶ In another section, Cindy Millstein attempts to reconcile some contradictions, asking “Why is anarchist art so often a parody of itself, predictable and uninteresting?”⁷

At its most convincing, *Realizing the Impossible* ignores the market-driven contemporary art world; when it does engage, it does so uncritically. Gee Vaucher – who notoriously designed graphics for punk band Crass – goes on record with the misguided confession “I’ve shown in 96 Gillespie in London several times, and although it is a private gallery, it has the feel of a public space, probably due to the fact that is [sic] opposite the old Arsenal football ground and on home-weekends you’d have several thousands [sic] fans peering into the show. I’ve also had a good experience showing at Gavin Brown’s in New York. I’m liking the mixture of art worlds at the moment.”⁸ This *laissez faire* attitude to the commercial art world – a microcosm of capitalism and a pervasive influence on creativity – is repeated throughout the volume. This is consistent with co-editor Josh MacPhee’s defeatist stance: “Unfortunately, we live in a society where the dominant economic model is one where the value of things is defined by how much you can sell them for. This isn’t a good thing, but I’m not a purist. I sell art because I don’t know how else to survive while making it.”⁹

Two articles that stand out for further consideration are a lyrical account of the rise and fall of stencil art on the streets of Argentina, and a pragmatic treatment of the capitalist nature of much ostensibly anti-corporate activism. The first of these begins with a consideration of financial meltdown in Argentina in December 2001, during which the government’s IMF debt and adherence to free market neoliberalism caused capital flight (the large-scale withdrawal of international funds from banks for fear the country would default on its external debt) and the subsequent implementation of restrictions:

“...what was so remarkable about the protests in Argentina at that time was that upper and middle class people were active participants in the street protest and direct democracy. The *ahorristas*, or savers, were a movement of more or less affluent people who had lost their life’s savings to the government restrictions on money withdrawal from banks. Weekly protests of these upper class folks were black bloc protest-reels of smashed windows and spray-painted bank facades – only carried out in broad daylight without masks by men with suits and briefcases or women in heels.”¹⁰

In the austerity years that followed, neighbourhood committees met to discuss



practicalities such as the provision of basic healthcare, the production and distribution of alternative media and, on a more ideological level, the desire to end all political parties. This period also spawned a massive increase in street art in Buenos Aires, some of it political, some playful. Erick Lyle delivers a thoughtful portrait of his personal encounters with stencil artists, from the avowedly political Nico from Vomito Attack¹¹ – who has consistently refused to appear in stencil art exhibitions sponsored by the state, preferring to organise his own illegal events – to Cucusita,¹² the twenty-nine year old skateboarder who began stencilling before the crisis and confines his work to a suburban hospital car park.

When Nestor Kirchner was elected President on a low turnout and with a narrow majority in May 2003, he immediately defaulted on Argentina’s IMF loan, which has now been paid in full by Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez,¹³ and, while worker-owned and managed businesses still exist, the unprecedented neighbourhood assemblies have largely been dissolved. An interview with the members of Buenos Aires (BsAs) Stencil¹⁴ – who exhibited their work at the Centro Cultural Borges, took part in 2004 ArteBA contemporary art fair and happily discuss future prospects for commercial merchandise – prompts Lyle to consider:

“...in this new era, four years removed from the economic crisis that gave it birth, the stencil in

Buenos Aires is one step away from BECOMING advertising. If so, advertising for what? The “new freedom”? “The Revolution” [...]? Stencils represented the participation people wanted, and pop culture images represented the products they will get. The stencil was the aesthetic of a new participation that had long faded.”¹⁵

The ill-considered nature of many supposedly subversive creative ventures into state- and corporate-controlled space is consolidated in the theoretical section which concludes the same anthology. Anne Elizabeth Moore delivers an incisive critique of culture jamming, based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the boycott and a misidentification of parody and satire with political change. To illustrate the point, Moore considers the tactics of the Reverend Billy from the Church of Stop Shopping, typically centred on ubiquitous branded coffee houses. Rather than launching attacks that prove damaging to the targeted corporation, Moore argues, these activities actually increase the brand recognition on which any successful company depends:

“...parody and satire, used to fight the meme war or as strategies in their own right, rely on representing the very subjects ridiculed. Culture jamming, adusting, and parody in general, not only reassert the icons they half-heartedly attempt to dismantle, they encourage their continued survival. [...] As a method of political action, culture jamming, because of its central reliance on parody and satire as politically effective strategies, has already failed. That is, because it reproduces the exact messages it claims to want to upend, culture jamming is necessarily ineffective.”¹⁶

By and large, then, culture jamming does

nothing to undermine the actual mechanisms of profit or the products being traded. Instead, Moore concludes, genuinely critical responses to consumer culture are needed, to end the tyranny of brands and the dogmas they represent and enable us to conceive of something uncontrolled.

The Handbook for Changing our World claims to enable us to actually achieve something uncontrolled on the basis that “the networks of people that are working for Earth and societal repair, linked by the internet and a million small agreements to work together, are emerging to form the world’s greatest, most important, new global superpower.”¹⁷ Predicated on imminent peak oil and environmental catastrophe, eighteen chapters provide information about the process of achieving individual and community-based change, including an illustrated guide to the appropriate hand gestures to make during meetings. Again, its principles “largely follow anarchist/autonomist thought. Anarchism, from the Greek ‘without government’, is a belief that people can organise society for themselves without formalised government. It argues that the best way to organise is through voluntary arrangements where people are likely to co-operate more.”¹⁸ This is entry-level activism, the kind of thing you could give to a benign aunt to introduce her to the widely-known horrors perpetrated by Nestlé and Dow Chemical. As such, it belongs in every community library, readily accessible to those wishing to try out the experiments detailed therein. For those already

familiar with its arguments, however, the *Handbook* conjures notions of a selective Arcadia, with the privileged echelons of society cultivating their own vegetables on reclaimed land and powering their houses with sustainable energy while the Morlocks of the malls are forced to abandon their fossil-fuelled livelihoods with no contingencies in place.

Interestingly, the *Handbook for Changing our World* also mentions Argentina in terms of a ‘popular uprising that is still going on today’, contrary to Erick Lyle’s first-hand experience of the era of mass participation having almost disappeared. It also dedicates a celebratory chapter to culture jamming, from the perspective of a recruit to the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (convened in time for the G8 protests at Gleneagles in 2005). Acknowledging media theorist Geert Lovink’s scepticism – that “... culture jamming is useless fun. That’s exactly why you should do it. Commit senseless acts of beauty. But don’t think they are effective, or subversive, for that matter. The real purpose of [a] corporation cannot be revealed by media activism. That can only be done by years [of] long, painstakingly slow, investigative journalism. Brand damage has never proven enough. What we need is research, thinking, brainstorming, and then action”¹⁹ – the book nonetheless embraces media activism as “crucially changing both idea space and public space from a corporate or party political monologue to a dialogue where people are speaking for themselves,”²⁰ offering uncritical

praise of the impotent activities of the Rev. Billy and the like. The one exception among the examples cited, according to the terms established by Anne Elizabeth Moore – having allegedly caused share prices to plummet – would seem to be the televised admission of liability made on behalf of Dow Chemical by a representative of the Yes Men.

One way of evaluating the relative successes of these two titles is to measure them according to the anarchist criteria against which they seek to be judged. A recent attempt by Benjamin Franks to formulate an ‘ideal type’ anarchist – *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms* – is premised on a complete rejection of capitalism and state power, an egalitarian concern for the interests and freedoms of others and a recognition that means have to prefigure ends. In Franks’ schema, the revolutionary agent of change is the subject of oppression herself and, as oppression has more than one source, her identity is flexible and not confined to traditional Leninist definitions of the working class – which fits well with Lyle’s account of Argentina. Accordingly, Franks’ ideal type of class-struggle libertarians respond to their own oppression, without the need for vanguard intervention, and their actions are synecdochic – that is, part of a larger visualisation of societal change. This serves as a useful benchmark against which different approaches may be tested.

While neither *Realizing the Impossible* nor the *Handbook for Changing our World* attempts any definition of the particular branch of anarchism they claim to represent and as many stances are offered as there are authors, the former title veers dangerously close to what Franks dismisses as liberal, or lifestyle, anarchism, whereby “anarchists have a view of the individual which is fixed and conforms to the criteria of rational egoism associated with capitalism.”²¹ By advocating creative people as revolutionary subjects, it begs questions about the extent to which artists in the western world really are oppressed and, by offering hierarchical collectives such as the Bread and Puppet group²² as models, it undermines Franks’ ideal type. Further, the creative activities outlined largely rely on raising awareness of problems, rather than tackling them directly, and depend on mediation, rendering them examples of symbolic, as opposed to direct, action – a derided tactic according to anarchist logic.

By contrast, the *Handbook for Changing our World* would appear to adhere more closely to ideal type anarchism, encouraging local groups working together to improve their environments, on the basis that micro-political change will lead to something more substantial: “Alternatives to the current system of decision making in our society exist. We need to extend these spheres of free action and mutual aid until they make up most of society. It is the myriad of [sic] small groups organising for social change that will, when connected to each other, transform society.”²³ While the extent of these groups’ oppression would seem to rest on a notion of the majority being oppressed under capitalism, Franks also advocates *détournement* and culture jamming as consistent with the tactics employed by anarchists,



Over page and above: Graffiti in Buenos Aires.

Left: Graffiti in Buenos Aires, including the Headquarters of Bank Boston, on what the collapse of the financial system meant. Photographs by Dennis Rodgers.

inadvertently consolidating the ethos of the *Handbook for Changing our World*. Ultimately, both *Realizing the Impossible* and the *Handbook for Changing our World* are grounded in localist tactics and nationalist perspectives – from the US and the UK respectively – with any attempt to represent the creative dissent of other cultures (Argentina, Denmark) in the former being undertaken by US writers. Herein lays one of the main pitfalls of anarchist analysis, what Stewart Home refers to as a fetishisation of the state.²⁴ While Franks’ successful attempt to unravel the multifarious factions within British anarchism could serve as the historical basis for parodies of the fragmented Left, like Tariq Ali’s first novel, *Redemption* – and Franks’ glee in distinguishing anarchism from Leninism is palpable – capitalism benefits from an overwhelming consensus in every area of Anglo-American society, from the state and the media to the general populace, with no respect for national boundaries. Any further erosion of the (albeit capitalist) state during this final phase of advanced capitalism runs the risk of removing the last vestiges of corporate accountability and leaving the world and its citizens at the mercy of rampant neoliberalism. Rather than waiting for all those declaring themselves loyal to anarchism, or Leninism, or any faction of the Left – and all those joining the anti-capitalist movement but beholden to any specific ideology – to unite in the immediate task of developing strategies for the abolition of capitalism. It is only through wholesale change that we will be able to fully consider how future society will be constructed, which of the models being developed now will be sustainable and what the role of creativity will be.

With thanks to 100% Proof.

Notes

1. Josh MacPhee & Eric Reuland, 'Introduction: Towards Anarchist Art Theories', *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 4.

2. Patricia Leighton, 'Reveille Anarchiste: Salon Painting, Political Satire, Modernist Art', *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 27.

3. David Graeber, 'The Twilight of Vanguardism', *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 252.

4. Kyle Harris, 'Beyond Authenticity: Aesthetic Strategies and an Anarchist Media', *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 211.

5. See Stewart Home, 'Bolt on Neoism for Psychogeographical Wanderers Everywhere, or The Return of Three-Sided Football Part IX', *Bubonic Plagiarism: Stewart Home on Art, Politics and Appropriation*, (London: Sabotage Editions, 2005), pp. 24-33.

6. Meredith Stern, 'Subversive Multiples: A Conversation between Contemporary Printmakers', *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, pp. 104-119.

7. Cindy Millstein, 'Reappropriate the Imagination', *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 297

8. Erik Reuland, 'Gee Vaucher: Crass Art', *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 75.

9. Josh MacPhee cited in Stern, op. cit. p. 106.

10. Erick Lyle, 'Shadows in the Streets: The Stencil Art of the New Argentina', *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, p. 79. [Italics in original.]

11. www.vomitoattack.org

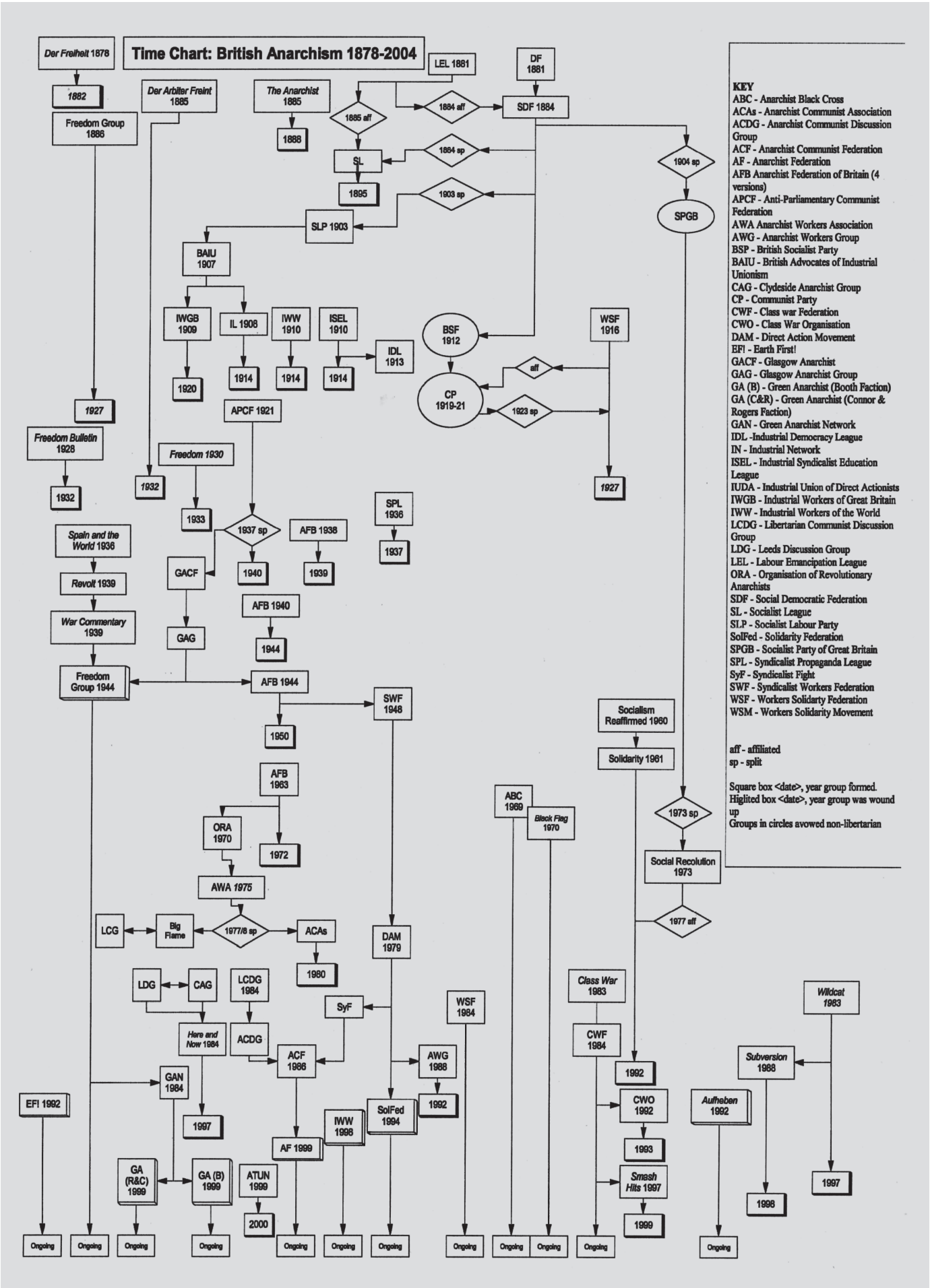
12. www.assholeco.com.ar

13. In December 1998, after a sustained period of civil unrest, former Air Force officer Hugo Chávez was elected president of his country and renamed it the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Inspired by the example of Simón Bolívar, who fought for independence from the Spanish Empire in the eighteenth century, Chávez reinstated calls for a federation of the Latin American countries against the new Empire of the United States.

14. www.bsasstencil.com.ar

15. Lyle, op. cit. p. 87.

16. Anne Elizabeth Moore, 'Branding Anti-Consumerism: The Capitalist Nature of Anti-Corporate Activism',



Realizing the Impossible, op. cit, pp. 292 & 294.

17. Andy Goldring, 'Why we need holistic solutions for a world in crisis', *Do it Yourself: A Handbook for Changing our World*, Edited by the Trapeze Collective, (London & Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 26.

18. The Trapeze Collective, 'Introduction', *A Handbook for Changing our World*, op. cit, p. 4.

19. Jennifer Verson, 'Why we need cultural activism', *A Handbook for Changing our World*, op. cit, p. 178.

20. Ibid. p. 179.

21. Benjamin Franks, 'Introduction', *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms*, (Oakland & Edinburgh: AK Press, 2006), p. 16.

22. Morgan Andrews, 'When Magic Confronts Authority: The Rise of Protest Puppetry in N. America', *Realizing the Impossible*, op. cit, pp. 180-209.

23. The Seeds for Change Collective, 'Why do it without leaders?' *A Handbook for Changing our World*, op. cit, p. 55.

24. See Stewart Home, 'Anarchist Integralism: Aesthetics, Politics and the Après-Garde', 1997 (<http://stewarthomesociety.org/ai.htm>)

'Time Chart of Main British Anarchist Groups 1878-2004', from *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms*, Benjamin Franks.

Poster Girl – Billboard Rhetoric

Jessica Foley

The following article is neither expert nor amateur, it is a subjective, loosely researched observation, which I felt was worth knocking into some shape. The article in question began formulating whilst I was cycling about Dublin City, absorbing the multifarious sights, sounds and smells of a traffic-burdened, western, ‘developed’ metropolis.

It was the beginning of Lent and Irish charity Trócaire’s annual Lenten campaign had just been launched. Consequently buses and billboards across the city (as well as collection-boxes, posters and leaflets in schools around the country), had begun to assert themselves, vying for the attention of the public. The billboards and bus banners, most frequently the realm of the commodity, had become host to a charitable campaign, a ‘not-for-profit’ venture aiming itself at the hearts and pockets of the Irish public. Of course this is a perennial effect – charities appropriating the capitalist means of the production of consumption. It just so happened that its effect had something of an impact on the author in April 2007.

I found myself jolted somewhat by Trócaire’s Lenten campaign ‘advertisement’, so I undertook to ruminate a little upon the nature of the billboard, which carried the advertisement, and the effect of advertising charity. Through a detailed description of the advert, both denotative and connotative, I came to a realisation of sorts (by no means conclusive) that there seems to be a discrepancy between the language and the political effect of the ‘campaign’ advertisement.

Semiotic denotation

The billboard was designed as follows: A young baby sleeps, nestled into what looks like a soft cotton blanket, lying on her stomach. Her face is relaxed, peaceful. Her right arm is extended towards her lips, which are slightly ajar, and on her wrist is strapped a ‘baby pink’ band, which is set off dramatically against the deep shade of the baby’s skin. The baby’s hair is a tight accumulation of short black curls. Below the image is printed ‘Amina Francisco, 10-weeks-old, Malawi’. Underneath this, at the bottom of the design reads: ‘Support Trócaire to help end gender inequality’. The main slogan reads: ‘She may never be given a chance [written in bright pink] simply because she’s female [written in a shade of purple]’.

It is nothing new that charities use commercial methods such as advertising to raise money to fund their work – in this case by Trócaire, “the official overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland”. But what of this apparent contradiction; that a charity, a not-for-profit organisation, should use the profit generating means of advertising? The charity might argue that it is one of many ways employed to raise monies which we are told go toward the development of projects such as women’s shelters in Afghanistan and literacy training for women in rural Pakistan. Is it enough to say simply that the ends justify the means? It’s not exactly a left-field statement to say that a politically disengaged public encouraged to throw money at a simplistically and externally framed problem won’t fix it. But unfortunately for charities this is a very attractive idea, particularly for a relatively affluent society whose main focus may be monetary despite clinging on to notions of allegedly passive philanthropy. Whereas, an advertisement such as Trócaire’s billboard campaign does not fulfil its objectives simply through the public generation of funds; there must be political will involved in order to bring about change. And though the advertisement itself may seem to be a clever appropriation of an extremely successful medium, it is not without its deceptions.

Initially the campaign had as its sub-slogan: ‘Support Trócaire’s Lenten Campaign to help end Gender Inequality’. The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, under section 10(3) of the 1988 Radio and Television Act, deemed that this sub-slogan infringed upon this section of the Act, which states: “no advertisement shall be broadcast which is directed towards a religious or political end”.¹ The Act defines a political end as one not confined to a party political end, but which “encompasses procuring a reversal of Government policy or particular decisions of Government”. The BCI went on to say that Trócaire’s ad campaign called upon the Government “to produce a National Action Plan and seeks public signatures for a petition in this regard. Therefore the campaign has a political objective as contemplated under the legislation”. The BCI said that it was an implicit objective of the Trócaire campaign to change Government policy so as to influence Governmental action.

Essentially this section in the Act was intended to eliminate any potential misuse of the broadcasting medium for political or religious purposes within the Irish State. But, as a press release on the Trócaire website puts it: “The construction that is being put on ‘political’ by the Commission means that any campaign, be it against bonded labour, child soldiers, trafficking, or slavery, which may even have been the subject of a United Nations Resolution, could be precluded from broadcast”.²

Therefore, the ad campaign is reduced to a cosmetic for a much more complicated and divergent issue; simply a means of generating funds in a way that cannot politicise issues of gender inequality, essentially the abuse of women and children in countries targeted by the Church’s charity at a time in a country such as Ireland whose population is diversifying at a rapid rate, when issues such as female genital mutilation are no longer so far removed from the Government’s doorstep.³

Semiotic Connotation

At play in this particular advertisement is any number of representational stereotypes. Particularly, of course, the representation of the female, but also of the ‘black baby’, the notion of ‘Africa’, the ‘Third World’, and of the neutral benevolent giver.

For example, the baby girl represented is sleeping. The child is passive and vulnerable... attributes often traditionally assigned to the female. Helen Cixous writes about the representation of the female in relation to the fairytale, the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ who will only be roused when her prince comes to save her – it is only he who can awaken her. He will lift her from one place (bed) to the next place (invariably bed again) and so it goes, happily ever after. (The same is true of Little Red Riding Hood; she sets out on the shortest path from mother’s house to grandmother’s house, takes a detour that was forbidden to her, and ends up being put in her place, the wolf’s stomach). Cixous sees woman as being culturally confined; “between two houses, between two beds, she is laid, ever caught in her chain of metaphors, metaphors that organise culture...”⁴ Cixous asserts that the female is set up in opposition to the male, like the passive to the ‘powerful’. These kinds of representations of the female only serve to perpetuate a phallogocentric categorisation of the hierarchical oppositions. It goes without saying that the reality of gender inequality, and all that spins out from it, is no fairytale.

This billboard campaign does not articulate the wider implications and devastating effects



of gender inequality, rather it dresses up the situation in a way that will appeal to the sentiment, that will instil a sense of patronage in the consumer; that will move them to donate, but not act, at home or abroad. The use of stereotype in the advertisement is problematic in many ways, particularly when perpetuated within the allegedly affluent Celtic Tiger. Homi K. Bhabha writes that it is the stereotype’s “force of ambivalence” which gives it its currency and which “ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalisation; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed”.⁵ This insight into the stereotype reveals it to be a fixed representation that manages to hold on relentlessly, despite changes in discourse and shifts in history. The ‘force of ambivalence’ could be related to a superfluous protestation; the stereotype ‘doth protest too much’.

And what effect, if any, can such a blatant use of stereotypes have on the Irish public, other than an effective reinforcement of the status quo? I can recall from the age of about five, the priests bringing the Trócaire boxes into our school and handing them out to each pupil. Each year it seemed the same people were being collected for; ‘the black babies in Africa’. An impression was formed that ‘Africa’ was a poor country (as opposed to a continent), where there exist huge populations of poor, hungry, black babies and children, and the only way to help this struggling nation was to put our pennies in the little cardboard box, and to encourage others to do the same. Twenty years later, the image of the ‘black baby’ reappears once more – this time it is not so much the bleak outlook of that baby’s ‘reality’ that is reaffirmed, but perhaps it is our, the consumer’s, impression of that baby’s ‘reality’ which is reconstituted. Perhaps it is not only the baby Amina who becomes the stereotype, but it is the Irish consumer who becomes stereotyped in our response of hands-in-pockets-and-head-in-clouds.

Joining the Dots

The projects and initiatives set up by charities, such as Trócaire, work on a micro level with the people who are in crisis, such as in cases where women are in danger of rape, or death, or where mothers fear that their daughters will be beaten and raped. Or in such cases as in parts of India where it is believed that women are a burden, and women are choosing to abort female foetuses

rather than go to full term.⁶

There is a conflation of discourses in the Trócaire billboard, between the discourse of charity and the discourse of advertisement, or capitalism. The means of generating funds which charities use are varied, but when advertising across billboards is employed, and where constraints of Broadcasting Commissions usurp the political contestations of such charities, questions need to be asked about the appropriateness of these means. The tactics employed by charities and NGOs to approach alleviating or eliminating injustices, such as gender inequality, and the poverty that follows in its wake, must perhaps become more aware of the semiotic practices with which they engage. (Having said this, it is not the sole responsibility of charities to effect change, this change must be effected at a governmental level.) The task may be to rethink the means and try to find other avenues, which will reassert the political nature of the work of charitable organisations. Anthropologist James Ferguson, speaking from a critical point of view of ‘development’ in Lesotho, suggests: “A first step, many would agree, toward clarifying that goal and the tactics appropriate to achieving it is to reformulate it somewhat more politically: since it is powerlessness that ultimately underlies the surface conditions of poverty, ill-health, and hunger, the larger goal ought therefore to be empowerment.”⁷

While the use of advertising and its semiotic practices of denotation and connotation, signifier and signified, may be relatively successful in generating funds for projects abroad within affected communities, the separation of the political from the representational is a serious one. There must be a political engagement with such issues both in areas and countries that are directly

and indirectly affected by them.

As Ferguson goes on to say: “Working for social change is not synonymous with working for governments; indeed, it is perhaps not too much to say that the preoccupation of governments and government agencies is more often precisely to forestall and frustrate the processes of popular empowerment that so many anthropologists and other social scientists in their hearts seek to advance.”⁸ Though Ferguson was speaking from the context of Lesotho and the intervention of aid by foreign governments for ‘development’ projects in the area of Thaba-Tseka, something rings true for the case of the billboard in question here. The longer stereotypes and representations of a ‘Third World Other’ remain in our streets and on our billboards, the less likely it is that change will ever be effected, either abroad or at home. According to the Irish government’s Equality for Women Measure, which seeks “women’s full and equal participation in the labour market”, as of 2005 women were earning almost 15% less than men in Ireland, to say nothing of unpaid work, such as caring, much of which is undervalued and carried out by women.

Change can only seriously be effected through empowerment, and through the people, through the *polis*. Representations through advertising only serve to reinforce a status quo rather than subvert it, and serve to further fracture the tentative relationship between representation and reality. At least, that’s the opinion of this perplexed cyclist.

Notes

1. BCI: http://www.bci.ie/news_information/press121.html
2. Trócaire: <http://trocaire.org/news/story?id=979>
3. Irish Independent article on FGM: <http://www.independent.ie/national-news/prosecutions-ordered-on-female-mutilation-cases-353169.html>
4. Helen Cixous, ‘Marginalia: Displacement and Resistance – ‘Castration of Decapitation’”, in Ferguson, Russel et al, ed. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp346-347.
5. Homi K. Bhabha, ‘The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism’ in Ferguson, Russel et al, ed. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp71-89.
6. There are countless sources of examples and stories of the struggles women face around the world. See Raeka Prasad and Randeep Ramesh, ‘India’s missing girls’, *The Guardian*, Wed. Feb 28th 2007, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,2022818,00.html> ; accessed April 26 2007. Also see Amartya Sen, ‘The many faces of Gender Inequality’, *Frontline*, Vol.18, no. 22, 27 Oct – 09 Nov 2001 (available at <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1822/18220040.htm> ; accessed April 26 2007). Another first hand account of the struggle of women is the personal story of Mukhtar Mai. She suffered a gang rape, condoned by her village council, to restore honour to her family name and in forgiveness of a supposed wrong doing by her 12 year old brother (he was accused of flirting with a woman in her mid twenties). Mukhtar Mai, 2006, *In the Name of Honour*, (Paris: Oh! Editions).
7. Ferguson, James, *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development”, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1995, USA, p. 279.
8. Ferguson, James, p. 285.

What dreams may come: (Palestinian) cinema/nation/history

Felicia Chan

Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema

Edited by Hamid Dabashi
Verso, London, 2006, 213 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-84467-088-8

“Palestinian cinema must be understood in this context. That is to say, on the one hand, Palestinians stand against invisibility, which is the fate they have resisted since the beginning; and on the other hand, they stand against the stereotype in the media: the masked Arab, the kufiyya, the stone-throwing Palestinian – a visual identity associated with terrorism and violence.”

Edward W. Said, Preface, *Dreams of a Nation*

No cultural project from, by or about Palestine escapes questions of its nationhood and self-determination. The formulation of a Palestinian cinema is no exception. Whilst the Golden Globe award for Best Foreign Language Film, and Oscar nomination, for *Paradise Now* (Hany Abu-Assad, 2005), may have brought Palestinian cinema to the notice of mainstream international audiences, the lack of a comprehensive film history from Palestine lies not in the lack of production,¹ but in the fact of its contested geo-political identity.

The controversy surrounding the 2006 Oscar nomination of *Paradise Now* dramatises the tensions in operation as a cultural identity seeks a political one. In a number of online petitions calling for the film’s withdrawal from Oscar nomination, detractors argue that the film glorifies Palestinian suicide bombing against Israeli citizens.² Amongst these detractors, several have lost children during the bomb attacks.³ Where the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), which administers the Academy Awards, is concerned, though, something altogether more mundane is at work – how can we admit a film from a place which does not, as such, exist? Or at the very least, one whose existence is being contested?⁴ In addition, how do we account for the fact that the film was produced by European funds and made by an Israeli-Arab director?⁵ To complicate matters further, *Paradise Now* is catalogued in the Internet Movie Database as being from Palestine/France/Germany/the Netherlands/Israel.⁶ Whilst it is possible to argue against the spuriousness of confining something as multifarious and layered as cultural identity under a sticky label, the Palestinian question, by virtue of its history, frames the argument within the context of its self-identification as a culture-in-exile.

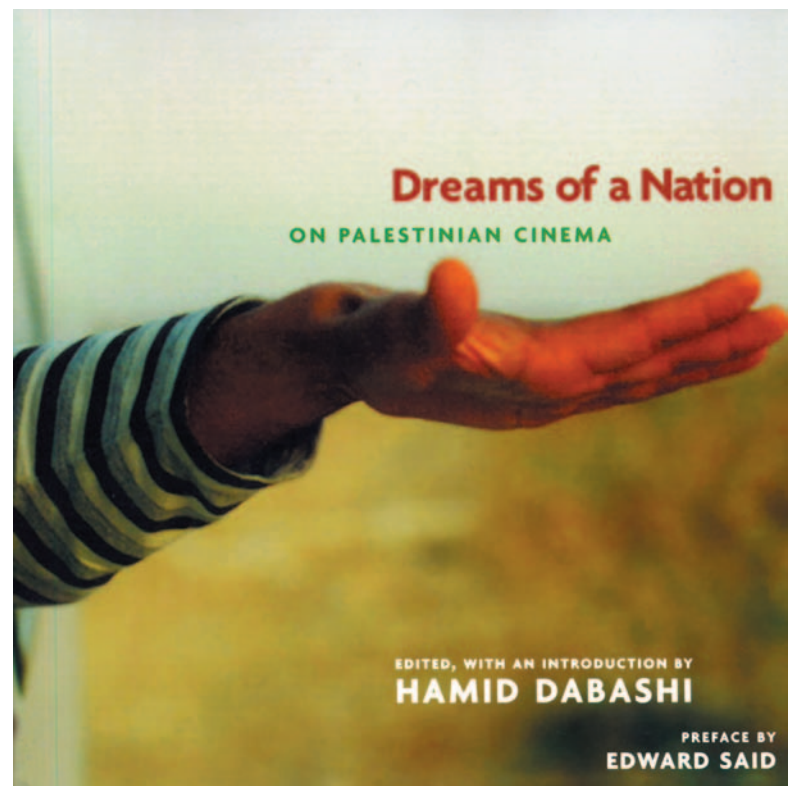
The anthology of essays edited by Hamid

Dabashi, *Dreams of a Nation: On a Palestinian Cinema*, is situated firmly within this context. It is part of a wider socio-politico-cultural project called Dreams of a Nation (<http://www.dreamsofanation.org>), which aims to highlight and promote Palestinian cinema through film festivals, critical writings, and an online database of Palestinian films and film-makers. The project is set up, in other words, as a cultural resource, and the organisers hope, eventually, to provide a ‘physical archive’ as well. However, in the case of Palestinian cinema, culture and politics are conjoined twins. The website for Dreams of a Nation specifically states that its mission is to provide a space for Palestinian films, which it defines as those made *by* Palestinian film-makers, and not films made *about* Palestine by non-Palestinian film-makers.⁷ Thus, the political aims of the Dreams project are evident – to provide a space from which Palestinian voices may be heard, faces seen, stories told, and memories made. Invisibility, as Edward Said argues in his preface to the collection, is one of the obstacles facing Palestinian self-determination. Cinema, as a visual medium, has the potential to counteract that invisibility, by making visible that which has hitherto been unseen. Yet, visibility is also a double-headed hydra. There is such a thing as the *wrong kind* of visibility, as Said himself notes, especially the visibility of stereotypes that spread through the media like a virus with no antigen.

Dreams, the anthology, is held in the tension between the two – between providing visibility for Palestinian cinema, and providing visibility for the Palestinian cause *through* cinema, which cannot help *but* address all the attendant issues surrounding that cause, including the negative visibility of stone-throwing anarchists and suicide bombers. It is a tension that is given expression by the inclusion of the text of the keynote speech given by the late Edward Said at the opening of the first Dreams of a Nation film festival at Columbia University, New York, in 2003. Dabashi credits Said with the inspiration for the festival and the Dreams project it is based on (211). That the first film festival to celebrate Palestinian film takes place outside of Palestine is of historical significance, especially when its success enabled the festival to be later taken ‘to Palestine itself’ (209). What is equally significant, then, is that whilst a great deal of critical attention is paid to the history of the Palestinian struggle in the history of Palestinian cinema, what is not explored in any depth in the collection is the question of to *whom* these films might be *addressed*, and what

form this address takes. Nonetheless, in the goals for which it sets itself, *Dreams* succeeds in making an important contribution to an understudied cinema in English-language scholarship. Its mix of critical articles, interviews, personal observations, and film analyses, surveys the issues of Palestinian self-determination from a variety of perspectives.

Film-maker, poet and activist, Annemarie Jacir, provides an account of curating a Palestinian film festival in New York, the aims of which she admits to being designed to introduce Palestinian cinema to the US, and ‘more specifically to film audiences in New York City’ (29). The festival was an occasion to provide American spectators with the opportunity to see and hear Palestinian stories that they have ostensibly never encountered. The implications of such a project is then subsumed under her account of the civil disturbances that took place on the university campus as the Israeli lobby gathered to protest the launch of the festival. Joseph Massad of Columbia University addresses the role of cinema in the struggle for Palestinian liberation, and provides a useful account of how the content and narratives of a range of films produced since the 1970s gave voice to the struggle. He writes: ‘What Palestinian filmmakers have succeeded in doing in the last thirty years is to tell many important Palestinian stories that the world had never heard before’ (44). Michel Khleifi provides an account of his career as a film-maker beginning in the 1980s in the context of ‘anger and revolt’ (45) and moving towards the effort to reconcile politics with ‘the imaginary’ (57), an effort which demonstrates succinctly the difficulty of producing an imaginary, and identifiably ‘Palestinian’ cinema, without also addressing its political milieu. That difficulty is undergirded by Bashir Abu-Manneh’s analysis of two of Khleifi’s films, under the frame that ‘[f]or the last twenty-five years, Michel Khleifi and Palestinian film have been nearly synonymous’ (58). Abu-Manneh, who also works in Columbia University, concludes that ‘[i]n times of capitulation and surrender ... Khleifi’s *oeuvre* ... stands as an important reminder that a better future in Palestine-Israel is not only desirable but *possible* as well. And *that* is his single most important contribution to his people’s struggle for justice and liberation’ (69). Ella Shohat, Professor of Cultural Studies at New York University, takes the political argument to the feminist cause, eschewing the more traditional anti-patriarchal and/or anti-colonial stance for the exploration of how gender and sexual identities play out in the search for a national one. According to Shohat, nation, race, and gender ‘intersect’



(71) and cannot be taken separately. Hamid Naficy from Rice University discusses the exilic and accented form of Palestinian cinema,⁸ and his contribution may be distinguished from the other essays in the collection in that it attempts to address the *form* employed by Palestinian films and the *modes of address* in which political resistance may be located, modes of address which are conditioned by, and further condition, their state of exile. Nizar Hassan, a documentary film-maker, offers a farcical account of the bureaucratic entanglements he encountered while trying to enter his film to an international conference, in which the film ended up being submitted as an Afghan entry because the organisers did not recognise the state of Palestine. At the final instance, Hassan was allowed to submit his film as a Palestinian entry but not before wryly observing that Afghanistan had then ‘disappeared’ from the organisers’ website and documentation as a result. The challenges of Palestinian film-making are addressed in closer detail by Omar al-Qattan, a British-Palestinian film-maker, who offers a survey of the perils of working in the midst of political conflict, the problems with funding and the ever-present obstacles of bureaucratic fatuity.

The anthology closes with an extended analysis by Hamid Dabashi, the editor of the anthology and Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, of the films of Elia Suleiman. Whilst continuing to address the political struggles of Palestinians, Dabashi’s essay nonetheless engages the use of frivolity in Suleiman’s films, and discusses how the film-maker walks the delicate line between tragedy and comedy, between terror and absurdity. The function of frivolity, Dabashi argues, is as a ‘substitutional narrative, a manner of storytelling when all else has failed’, and that frivolity is in fact a ‘noble version of obscenity’ (126). Suleiman’s films are non-realist, ironic investigations into the condition of Palestinian subjectivity, from which he attempts to ‘find a way out of the *cul-de-sac* of representing the unrepresentable’ (148). Dabashi equates the freedom of Suleiman’s style in the

present as a precursor to the freedom of Palestine, ‘tomorrow’ (160).

The collection’s best contribution to English-language scholarship on Palestinian cinema may be to provide bases from which further work in the field may develop, work which I hope will offer more interrogative perspectives on, for example, the apparent necessity for a Palestinian cinema to be closely identified with Palestinian self-determination, and whether the understanding of a Palestinian national subjectivity need only be about its struggle for freedom. Are there other ways in which that subjectivity might be constituted or addressed? To express the question in another way: to what degree do nations create cinema, and cinema create nations? Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen argue, in their introduction to *Theorising National Cinema* (2006), that ‘cinema can be thought of as pertaining to a national configuration because films, far from offering cinematic accounts of “the nation” as seen by the coalition that sustains the forces of capital within any given nation, are clusters of historically specific cultural forms the semantic modulations of which are orchestrated and contended over by each of the forces at play in a given geographical territory’.⁹ If that is the case – that the concept of ‘nation’ is constructed from an interplay of forces, whether of history, politics, or capital – then the quest for a Palestinian nation, albeit one that is projected into the future, through the exploration of its cinematic history would do well to consider also the quest itself as constituent of a discourse out of which that history is, in turn, also made.

Notes

1 An Arabic-language book, *Palestine in Cinema* (Institute for Palestine Studies, 2006), by Kais al-Zubaidi, purportedly accounts for at least 800 films about Palestine since cinema was invented at the turn of the twentieth century. See the book’s abstract at the website for the Institute of Palestine Studies, available online at <http://palestine-studies.org/final/en/books/item.php?id=594>.

2 Talya Halkin, ‘Petition Slams “Paradise Now” Oscar Nomination’, *Jerusalem Post*, 13 February 2006, available online at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagina>

[me=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1139395398449](http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagina=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1139395398449). As of 18 September 2007, a quick search in Google for ‘Paradise Now Oscar nomination’ will bring up the petitions within the top five search results.

3 Chris McGreal, ‘Bomb victims’ parents petition academy to reject movie’, *The Guardian*, 2 March 2006, available at <http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,1721212,00.html>.

4 Xan Brooks, ‘We have no film industry because we have no country’, *The Guardian*, 12 April 2006, available online at <http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepage/s/0,,1752076,00.html>.

5 Talya Halkin, ‘Petition Slams “Paradise Now” Oscar Nomination’, *Jerusalem Post*, 13 February 2006, available online at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagina=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1139395398449>.

6 See entry on *Paradise Now* (2005), available online at <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0445620/>> last accessed 18 September 2007. For a list of funding companies, the *Paradise Now* entry at Hollywood.com, available online at http://www.hollywood.com/movie/Paradise_Now/1738825.

7 This is not the space for a thorough theoretical discussion of what constitutes a ‘Palestinian’ identity, though Hamid Naficy’s essay in the anthology cites an example sufficiently illustrative of the dilemma it raises, especially when it comes to the question of Israel. Naficy notes the self-imposed limits that film-maker Michel Khleifi felt he had to place on himself when making his film: ‘Khleifi ... [turned] his *Wedding in Galilee* into a Belgian, French, and Palestinian co-production. As a person born in Israel, he could have applied for Israeli funding, as well. However, apparently he refrained from doing so because he feared contamination or co-optation. His fears were strong enough to refuse to show the film at the Jerusalem Cinematheque’ (93).

8 Naficy’s book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton University Press, 2001) explores these concepts in some detail.

9 Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen, ‘Introduction’, in *Theorising National Cinema*, eds. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen, London, British Film Institute, 2006, 1-14: 7.

Plink Plink Fizz...

Contemporary Art Dissolves the Past

Jim Coombes

Histrionics

Roderick Buchanan
GoMA, Glasgow
March - October 2007

Shotgun Wedding: Scots and the Union of 1707

Tracy MacKenna and Edwin Janssen
Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh
November 2006 - March 2007

Two recent exhibitions in Edinburgh and Glasgow demonstrate the peculiar ideology of contemporary art. Both these exhibitions concern what could be termed history and its impact on the present. The particular areas of focus are the Union of the Parliaments of England and Scotland in 1707 (*Shotgun Wedding*) and “sectarianism and its related issues – identity, territorialism, and neighbourhood” (*Histrionics*). The latter is part of the *Blind Faith: Contemporary art and human rights* programme which Glasgow’s Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) has run since 2005. *Shotgun Wedding* was commissioned as the National Galleries of Scotland’s response to the 300th anniversary of the Act of Union.

GoMA has used a strategy of employing contemporary artists to lead their social justice programme since its inception and a previous exhibition featured Barbara Kruger dealing with the issue of violence against women. *Blind Faith* is also accompanied by a series of outreach projects “working with members of the public” to develop new artwork on the themes of the series. For the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, *Shotgun Wedding* represents a relatively new approach that is intended to draw a wider, younger audience to the gallery. Both these institutions are in the public sector and have been responding to wider governmental strategies of social inclusion and social cohesion, where the arts are treated as a means of delivering social policy in an attempt to salve societal contradictions through cultural means.

What is the effect of the promotion of the contemporary artist as mediator in relation to a range of social ‘issues’? This process of converting the underlying issues of these exhibitions (nationhood, political and religious freedom and conflict arising from those freedoms) into exhibitions by contemporary artists is telling. Glasgow’s municipal arts infrastructure, particularly, has been at the forefront of recycling its distinctive culture and, in the case of domestic violence and sectarianism, its problems, as a voyeuristic heritage opportunity (witness the excruciatingly performed ‘domestic violence’ section of *Glasgow Stories* in the new Kelvingrove Museum).

Buchanan’s *Histrionics* features six pieces, five of which directly refer to the issue of sectarianism. The constructed, central, triangular viewing theatre presents a classic perspective viewpoint for the visitor to witness two alternating video performances; one features a Republican flute band, the other an Orange flute band. The filming and point of view is the same and the viewer is quickly brought to the conclusion that, in essence, both sides are the same. This feeling of course produces the liberally gratifying outcome that the entrenched ideologies of the depicted bands

are both primitive and outmoded, and therefore unproductive in the 21st century. The privileged operator of the single-point perspective is able to assess the bands without his or her viewpoint being connected to the issues which are the causes of the bands’ existence.

This reductive binary construction is paralleled in the mixed-marriage display, which features a large black and white photographic portrait of the artist and his wife (also an artist), who seemingly have survived the religious divide of their native city. They are accompanied by their respective family trees which bear the marks of religious and ethnic difference. So what is the message here? It could be read as saying that the successful artist transcends his or her surroundings through their shedding of the bigotries of the past. But it also seems to carry the implication that the artist, appearing here t-shirted and minimally styled, as opposed to the overly signified bandsmen, is the cipher that stands for lifestyle transformation, or an effective ‘life politics’¹ beyond ideology.

Far from being beyond ideology, increasingly, contemporary art, in the setting of its production and appreciation as a socially interrogative tool, provides the ideological atmosphere where personal, ethical and financial *limits* are reappraised or refashioned as lifestyle *choices*. Aspiration, therefore, becomes everything. The artist is presented in an opposition to, and dissolving of, all the constraints and ideological baggage of previous eras; as floating above all the disabling constraints associated with class, social and geographical immobility, old technology and above all, historically weighted ideas. Comparable to the ‘creatives’ in the world of the media, marketing and advertising, the raised-and-respectable artist is presented as the paradigm of the product innovator, appearing alongside architects and developers as those who are pointing to the city’s future through the imaginary radicalism of their projects.

Against this background, Buchanan is free to ‘play’ with the images and significations of religious division in *Histrionics* but his work has to be seen as part of Glasgow’s continuing post-industrial structural adjustment. The social scars of sectarianism should really remind us of earlier movements of capital and labour; for example, the mass migrations of the Irish poor fleeing the colonially-framed famines of the 19th century for the labour-hungry cities of Scottish industrialisation. These connections, which would take us to the forgotten material rationales of sectarianism and racism here and elsewhere are largely ignored as Buchanan’s work settles vicariously on the play of visual signifiers rather than the structural relations of the visual to the economic, the social and the ideological. Instead Buchanan’s work surfed history in order, quite literally, to build a defensive wall of words for what might otherwise be recognised as a trivialising installation. Surely art, visual or otherwise, can be made from the discussion of determining causes rather than from picturesque effects.

There are two key factors that are most questionable in Buchanan’s exhibition. The first is the idea of a visual critique. It is, above all, the surface appearance, with a video of sectarian bands, which the viewer is manoeuvred into position to assess merely as mirror images of each



other. Secondly, there is no attempt whatsoever to investigate the causes of the sectarian divide. Like the approach to the marching bands, conventional historic narratives are taken at face value. What we do get is the current preoccupation with a visual anthropology that often passes for contemporary art’s ‘take’ on any particular theme.

Jeremy Deller’s Turner Prize-winning, 2001 reconstruction of the *Battle of Orgreave* would seem to be the apogee of this style. To paraphrase Marx: “Those who cannot change history are condemned to re-enact it.” This eclectic museology renders recent history ‘folkloric’ rather than polemic. It could be argued that Deller uses re-enactment in a Brechtian manner, encouraging his ‘actors’ and audience to probe the presumptions associated with an event they have been involved in, but the final outcome seems to evacuate any deeper critical enquiry into the neo-liberal economics ushered in by the miners’ defeat. These sociological enquiries are often reduced to behaviourism as this art nostalgically mourns the ruins of what was social meaning. Deller’s ‘grand masque’ of the Miners’ Strike of 1984 substitutes spectacle for critical engagement as he buries the class war in the shroud of a colourful pageant. In this contemporary replay of picturesque aesthetics, subject-matter is discovered/identified in the textured remnants of a fossilised modernity. In these events, history is resurrected as a costume drama.

Shotgun Wedding was an installation of a series of video projections by Janssen and MacKenna utilising a similarly reductive format as Buchanan, but this time in a parallel assembly

Top: Still from ‘Here I am’, 16mm film, transferred to DVD, 2007. Photographer Alan Dimmick for *Histrionics* by Roderick Buchanan. GoMA, Glasgow

Above: Jeremy Deller, ‘The Battle of Orgreave’, 17 June 2001, Orgreave, South Yorkshire. Still from EventPlan extras database, who provided extras used in the recreation for Artangel and Channel 4.

of the personalities of the period of the Act of Union. Three displays on one side of the gallery featured portraits of those in support of the Union, whilst three opposite bays presented those opposed to the Union. A panning camera pored over images of the details of the faces and costumes of personalities such as Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Duke of Hamilton and Queen Anne, whose images were taken from paintings in Scotland's historical collections. This portentous myopia delivered no insights into these works or the characters they displayed. Again history was rendered as wallpaper, stripped of any structures of determination. Once again both sides looked the same on the surface. A serious investigation into the visual culture of Unionism or Jacobitism would surely have revealed distinct symbols and representational tropes that unpicked the ideologies of both tendencies. The exhibition was based on Christopher Whatley's recent book on the Act of Union but it failed to make anything of his clear presentation of the ideas and motivations underpinning the rival hegemonies. Instead of witnessing a crucial moment in Scotland's passage into modernity, where monarchic, *ancien regime* political power is rejected in favour of access to imperial commercial power, we instead are presented with the hoary nostalgia of an illustrative storybook. Sadly, the artists here allow their technological 'updating' of the images to be nothing more than the anachronism that Marx identified in the Ancient Greeks' use of a prototype steam engine to open the doors of their temple. In *Shotgun Wedding* the video projections clunk along with the same elaborate conceit. The idea that history is a constructed dynamic grinds to a halt amid the banal repackaging of this 'same old' Scottish story of eternal rewinding, which is itself a product of Scotland's reflex reaction to its

modernisation. 'Unionist nationalism' was Tom Nairn's term for this invention of a recurrent, palliative nostalgia born of the dramatic and brutal capitalisation of both agriculture and industry in 18th and 19th century Scotland. 'Scotland's history' is constantly promoted at the expense of its future, and in the case of the new nationalist government, at the expense of any identity outside the narrow vision of a national trajectory.

Contemporary art events, especially in supposedly 'socially-engaged' spectacular form, have recently been promoted by the liberal left as the vehicle for a 'new politics'; a means of representing the hopes and aspirations of communities let down by party politics.² If anyone is willing to give this viewpoint credibility, the two exhibitions which have been under scrutiny in this article should act as cautionary reminders of the actual role that such distracted art plays in scouting the neoliberal wasteland. Ultimately, "all that is solid melts into jobs for the boys."³

Notes

1. Chris Rojek, 2001, *Celebrity*, (London: Reaktion).
2. Madeline Bunting's *Comment* feature on Anthony Gormley in the *Guardian* is an instructive example: "Artists are now taking the lead politicians have failed to give. As professional politics becomes ever more remote, the most fraught controversies of our time are migrating into art". *The Guardian*, Monday May 21, 2007. www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,,2084368,00.html
3. Francisco De Oliveira, 'Lula In The Labyrinth', *New Left Review* 42.

*Shotgun Wedding:
Scots and the
Union of 1707*
Tracy Mackenna
and Edwin
Janssen
Scottish National
Portrait Gallery,
Edinburgh



Rebel Poets Reloaded

Tom Jennings

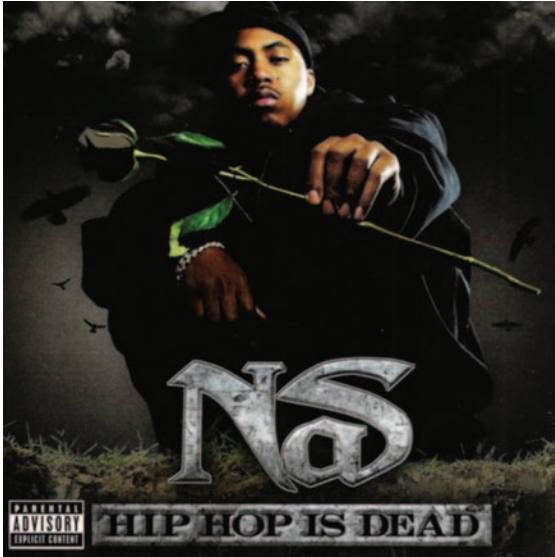
On April 4th this year, nationally-syndicated US radio shock-jock Don Imus had a good laugh trading misogynist racial slurs about the Rutgers University women’s basketball team – par for the course, perhaps, for such malicious specimens paid to foster ratings through prejudicial hatred at the expense of the powerless and anyone to the left of Genghis Khan. This time, though, a massive outcry spearheaded by the lofty liberal guardians of public taste left him fired a week later by CBS.¹ So far, so Jade Goody – except that Imus’ whinge that he only parroted the language and attitudes of commercial rap music was taken up and validated by all sides of the argument. In a twinkle of the jaundiced media eye, gatekeepers of Black opinion like Oprah Winfrey (convening one of her televised ‘town hall meetings’), old-school leaders like the Reverend Al Sharpton, and hip-hop movers-and-shakers such as Russell Simmons concurred – the lyrics and videos were damaging the moral fabric of the nation, and must be cleaned up.²

A closer look at mainstream rap’s production, distribution and reception, naturally, tells a different story. Corporate tactics cashing in on the cultural cachet, colonising and canalising it to suit the bottom line, are running out of steam as sales decline and targeted demographics jump ship.³ Ironically, the multilayered conflictual diversity of voice, position and musical expression – freely articulated and negotiated in public and private among generations of urban youth – drove hip-hop’s growth. In a classic case of late capitalism’s toxic stupidity, precisely this dynamic human vitality has been suffocated by superficial fantasy and celebrity worship⁴ – so that 50 Cent is now virtually interchangeable with Britney Spears. But away from the chattering classes’ disciplinary agendas, cycles of renewal in US hip-hop always juggle pleasure and pain, intelligence, artistry and entertainment. The grass-roots political implications of such shifting sands are still central concerns – whether or not MTV or monopoly radio pay attention – and what follows scratches the surfaces of today’s descendants of Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel’s 1982 ‘The Message’.⁵

Death Certificate

It’s no surprise, of course, that the usual suspects – moral majorities, high-minded aesthetes, racists, and all the assorted hip-hop hating hypocrites – relish sticking the boot in yet again. You’d almost worry if they didn’t. But now, twelve years after *Illmatic* – his definitive new-school debut – the eighth Nas release also declares the party over. *Hip Hop Is Dead* finds the genre’s pre-eminent wordsmith maintaining the consistent output of ghetto-centric quality that has attracted faithful support despite persistent cluelessness among subcultural tourists deaf to its effective musical marriage of rap tradition and cutting-edge populism and blind to the vision’s integrity in mobilising observation and personal resonance to chronicle and critique the anguish and aspirations of the contemporary US inner-city Black poor. Now mature enough to question the evolutionary status of a profoundly influential cultural movement, Nas challenges its adherents to transcend self-importance in response.

The album opens with no-nonsense potted summaries of rap’s ‘hoodrats clawing their way to fame and fortune, couched in the favoured gangsta condensation of capitalism-as-crime, before the bravado segues into admitting its protagonists’ culpability for the artistic price paid. Then the title track nails it – “Everybody sound the same / Commercialized the game / Reminisce when it wasn’t all business / They forgot where it started / So we all gather here for the dearly departed” –



before the pivotal ‘Black Republican’ juggles Jay-Z: “I feel like a black republican, money keep comin’ in” and Nas: “I feel like a black militant, takin’ over the government”, followed by the refrain: “Can’t turn my back on the ‘hood, too much love for them / Can’t clean my act up for good, too much thug in ‘em / Probably end up back in the ‘hood; I’m, like, ‘fuck it then’.”

Implicitly recognising that individual advancement neither resolves class contradictions nor fulfils hip-hop’s emancipatory potential leaves the set oscillating between honouring the Black traditions which nourish struggle, and reasserting underclass self-confidence in developing agendas expressed in their terms. With intricate wordplay literate in urban provenance, Black Arts and contemporary reference, Nas echoes Rakim’s cool philosophical cadence and 2-Pac’s passionate arrogance grounded in Panther politics. Beyond their mystical paranoia, though, he senses that the project is constitutionally incapable of breaking on through – despite the muscular, sensuous beats and brooding intelligence here representing living disproof of the title.

Alongside tiresomely predictable ‘I-told-you-so’ music press taste parades, insider critiques of Nas’ obituary cite the rude health of southern states ‘crunk’ – whose synthetic sonic minimalism re-energises grass-roots dance credentials yet rarely showcases lyrical craft or consciousness. Even then, the manic passions of the dancehall never fully suppress the nightmares outside⁶ – however candy-coated the corporate airbrushing and blinged-out overcompensation – so that current southern variants of urban narcissism and nihilism may just be more honest than the slickly-processed cartoon commercialisations prevalent elsewhere. Moreover, the Dirty South also boasts Atlanta’s Ludacris – the genre’s greatest ever humourist – and sophisticated reverse-colonisations of pop such as Outkast and Cee-lo Green (ex-Goodie Mob; now Gnarls Barkley), along with some awesomely-skilled anti-hero MCs.⁷

Across America the picture is comparably far from monochrome. Studio-gangsta fashion icons, sex-symbols and pop-wannabes conceal a scattering of progressive rap poets and producers who persist in courting recuperation on major labels, trading reluctant legitimisation of the latters’ lost kudos for radio airplay. Others regroup under corporate radar, combining strategic intrusions in mainstream glare with tactical retreats into relative autonomous obscurity, where those of a more activist bent nourish audiences for outspoken radicalism with modest, collectively-oriented niche production and distribution. The incendiary trailblazers of such approaches review their stances and re-enter the fray, whereas newcomers impatiently cut through tired pretension and sectarianism to cross-fertilise in unprecedented alliances. In short, whether underground or thoroughly mediated,

Notes

1. Despite the plague of reactionary cockroaches crawling from the woodwork in his support – see the detailed account of the affair given by Ishmael Reed, ‘Imus Said Publicly What Many Media Elites Say Privately: How Imus’ Media Collaborators Almost Rescued Their Chief’, *CounterPunch*, 24 April, 2007.
2. Not quite explicitly ‘by any means necessary’, though censorship was obviously a subtext; whereas dealing with the material conditions of dispossessed groups whose cultures include such forms of expression was not – as in the regular UK correlations between youth music and crime in misguided but ominous anti-sociality bandwagons. Adisa Banjoko succinctly highlights the perspectival chasm between the US civil rights and hip-hop generations, dismissing the focus on the use of language in ‘NAACP: Is That All You Got?’ (www.daveyd.com).
3. The myth of rap’s primary appeal to white kids is debunked in Davey D, ‘Is Hip Hop’s Audience Really 80% White?’ *San Jose Mercury News*, 17 August, 2006 (also on www.daveyd.com). It has shaped major record company marketing strategy – including the careful fostering of controversy exploited by political opportunists of all stripes – and fooled well-meaning hip-hop critics making simplistic equations of gangsta rappers and modern day minstrels (as well as hostile radical elitists; for example in the otherwise on-point *News From Everywhere* and BM Blob, ‘James Carr, the Black Panthers and All That: On the General Context and Some of the Hidden Connections Between Then and Now’, new afterword to *BAD: the Autobiography of James Carr*, Pelagian Press, 1995; at www.endangeredphoenix.com). Davey D lays out some of the implications in ‘Is Hip Hop Really Dead?’ *San Jose Mercury News*, 3 March, 2007 (www.alternet.org/mediaculture/48693/).
4. See Gwendolyn A. Foster, *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005) for an interesting, if limited, discussion.
5. Although, sadly – for reasons of space – lyrical illustrations are kept to an absolute minimum here. But then rap is musical poetry, not literature, and the beats are intrinsic to the rhymes.
6. An alternative genealogy of urban dance music can be found in ‘Dancehall Dreams’, *Variant*, No. 20, June, 2004.
7. Such as Mississippi’s David Banner, who only the most determinedly ignorant could construe as unequivocally ‘ign’ant’. His furious response to the demonisation of hip-hop by old-guard Black ‘leaders’, ‘Stop Attacking the Kids’, can be found on www.allhiphop.com. For more on rap negativity’s hidden transcripts, see ‘Br(other) Rabbit’s Tale’, *Variant*, No. 17, May, 2003.
8. Liner notes, *Hard Truth Soldiers*, Vol. 1.
9. Greg Tate, ‘Hip Hop Turns 30: Whatcha Celebratin’ For?’, *Village Voice*, 4 January, 2005.
10. Discussed in ‘At the Crossroads’, *Variant*, No. 25, February, 2006.
11. On ‘Say Something’, Talib Kweli, *Ear Drum*.
12. Which followed its bootstrap economic formulae far more scrupulously and profitably – see Nuthin’ But a ‘G’ Thang: *The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* by Eithne Quinn (Columbia University Press, 2005) for an excellent analysis of the subgenre. Chuck D’s most enduring legacy is probably his long-term personal mentoring in countless underground hip-hop scenes outside America, while at home KRS-One has kept the outreach flame of Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation rainbow coalition alive in his ‘Temple of Hip-Hop’. Breathless accounts of these and other US developments can be found in journalist Jeff Chang’s excellent *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York, Ebury Press, 2005; including ‘The Message: 1984-1992’, pp.215-353).
13. Paris, liner notes, *Hard Truth Soldiers*, Vol. 1.
14. Reviewed in *Freedom*, Vol. 65, No. 10, May, 2004 (also at www.tomjennings.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/).
15. As in the Black August programme showcased in comedian Dave Chappelle’s free concert in New York, filmed for cinema release as *Dave Chappelle’s Block Party* (2005) by music video maestro Michel Gondry.
16. Who *Finding Forever* commemorates after his death from lupus, and whose majestically haunting midtempo production (as on many other outstanding hip-hop releases) for 2001’s *Like Water for Chocolate* coincided with Common’s most forthright political opinions yet – compared to far safer (enough to appear on Oprah), if still worthy, seams mined since.

this is one hell of a hyperactive corpse – and, with characteristic hyperbole, Paris proclaims today’s as “the most prolific period of protest song-writing in history”.⁸

In a *Village Voice* piece interrogating glossy celebrations of hip-hop’s thirtieth birthday, Greg Tate⁹ contextualises the apparent conundrum, assessing the political implications of its capitalisation. First infiltrating American youth, rap’s viral spread via industrial dissemination abroad decisively shifted the conditions of possibility for a global lower-class discourse on poverty and powerlessness which can no longer simply be silenced by repression and fragmentation. On the downside, merged media’s cultural pincers package Black style for middle-class fashionistas while hypnotising local core communities with hyperreal fantasies of superhuman prowess to conceal the intensifying subhuman treatment meted out by the state. Such tactics require the active collusion of urban aristocrats in exchange for egos bloated with pieces of silver, encouraging a copycat gold-rush whose rate of profit now plummets in correlation with the hollowing-out of authenticity and innovation in ‘rhythm and bullshit’ and ‘hip-pop’.¹⁰ Nevertheless, such uneasy, conflicted recuperations are inherently prone to rupture, no matter how often they tell us there’s no alternative. The historical fault lines here trace US race reform, with the classic liberal compromise of civil rights the palliative for a working-class generation of revolutionary Black militants framed and massacred by the Fed’s COINTELPRO. The meritocratic mystification of dual spiritual/worldly uplift seemed viable as residual resistance was mopped-up in narcotic flood and economic drought, but street dreams of respectability unravelled with Rodney King, O.J. Simpson, 9/11, Iraq and New Orleans – with voting Democrat as inconsequential as Million Man Marches and millionaire MCs. Tate rhetorically specifies: “If enough folks from the ‘hood get rich, does that suffice for all the rest who will die tryin?” Clearly not, but hip-hop’s vernacular could unify a movement to dismantle structural dispossession, and present ideological and organisational realignments in the ‘CNN of the ghetto’ hint at just such a renaissance. As Jean Grae puts it: “Hip hop’s not dead, it was on vacation / We back, we bask in the confrontation”.¹¹

Critical Conditions

If Nas and Jay-Z settled their once-vituperative personal feud in a provocative statement of present dialectics, legendary hip-hop elders MC KRS-One & DJ Marley Marl were bitter adversaries in a much earlier battle of lyrical content, cultural consciousness and populist orientation. Their joint history lesson rejoinder, *Hip-Hop Lives*, recapitulates the compositional genius of sampling in heightening verbose charisma, but its fundamentalist stasis mistakes necessity for sufficiency in both cultural and political conditions for the genre’s enduring relevance. More forward-looking in spotting incipient convergences, California raptivist Paris has produced a slew of collaborative projects on his independent Guerilla Funk imprint. Somewhat bizarrely, he provided all the music and lyrics (apart from some Chuck D verses) for Public Enemy’s *Rebirth of a Nation*. Unfortunately, despite stentorian tones reminiscent of their halcyon days, the lacklustre bass thump squanders the trump card of NWA’s MC Ren guesting in symbolic reconciliation after the early 1990s US ghettocentric rejection of cross-class Black nationalism.¹²



The *Hard Truth Soldiers, Vol. 1* compilation is more successful, both musically and in addressing “subjects ranging from war and police brutality to black on black crime and domestic violence, the recent reduction of civil liberties, increased injustice and racism everywhere, and a rise in self-censoring corporate media monopolies hell-bent on stifling dissent and flooding our communities with negative and escapist entertainment ... we represent a united front against bigotry, misogyny and the exploitation and misrepresentation of our communities and culture”¹³ What really marks it out, though, is gathering together past-masters of agit-prop and hardcore hip-hop with underground stalwarts and younger voices, representing successive generations of social conscience – including a host of gangsta rappers scarcely famed for ideological acumen – where an unmistakable common political denominator is class war, as consistently advocated by participants like The Coup.

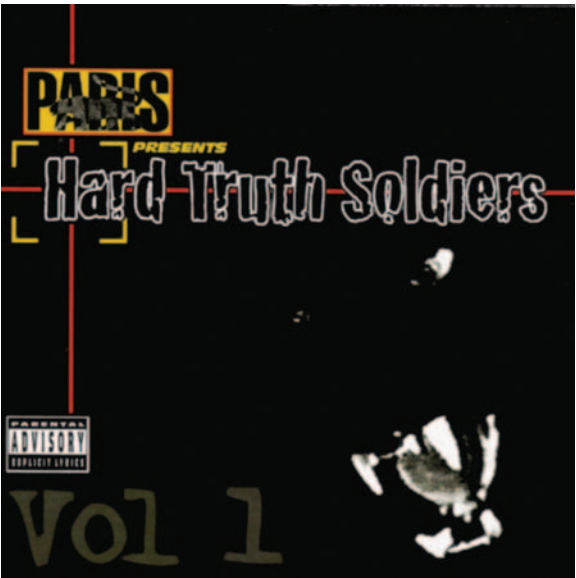
Their fifth album, *Pick a Bigger Weapon*, continues The Coup’s evolution from underground West Coast US rabble-rousers into international recognition and acclaim. The early-2001 cover design for *Party Music* – a metaphor for the revolutionary destruction of capitalism featuring DJ Pam the Funktress and MC Boots Riley brandishing drumsticks and guitar tuner with the World Trade Center exploding in the background – was hastily withdrawn by their record label after 9/11. The resulting publicity gave Boots an unanticipated mainstream media platform from which to air the insurrectionary class-struggle views familiar from the lyrics of *Kill My Landlord* (1993), *Genocide and Juice* (1994) and *Steal This Album* (1998). As in the new release, such views are conveyed via pithy, witty tales of woe, frustration, anger, humour and hope in everyday life on the mean streets of Oakland, drenched in 1970s soulful funkadelia and the whole gamut of hip-hop referentiality. Whereas, if The Coup’s compelling beats ever more pleasingly integrate their musical antecedents with present political demands, *Pick A Bigger Weapon* refers to the failure of our tactics thus far, with its contents reiterating the grass-roots grounds of any worthwhile future movement.

Preceding his music career, Riley spent four years on the central committee of a Leninist group before rejecting such instrumentalist forms of organisation. Since then he’s emphasised the potential of the lower classes to overcome their situation – which art has the capacity to engage with, share in, crystallise and facilitate rather than summon up or dictate. Avoiding the superior preaching traditional among rap’s self-appointed intelligentsia, his ghettocentric storytelling foregrounds the potential for individuals to interpret their lives in terms of collective understanding. So, lyrics of street hustler soul-searching, drudge work subversion, or sexual yearning reflect the painful intransigence of daily struggles gradually morphing into rebellious class pride – and the poetic balance of the opening metaphor, “I’m a walking contradiction / Like bullets and love mixin”, finally culminates in military mutiny in ‘Captain Sterling’s Little Problem’.

Bay Area activist and KPFA radio host T-Kash (‘keep a steady hustle’) himself turned from shady street business to guesting at Coup gigs before hooking up with journalist and webmaster Davey D; now inspiring Paris to provide his

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- 17. And moving to Jay-Z’s Def Jam may have helped in both respects. The Roots and their impressario percussionist-producer ?uestlove are also notable for helping birth the Black Lilies performance crucible and nurturing countless talented newcomers, including many of neo-soul’s most important figures.
- 18. From whence he previously blessed Mos Def and Talib Kweli with the magical beats for *Black Star* and *Reflection Eternal*.
- 19. After writing West’s most successful flirtation with messianic naffness yet, 2006’s Grammy-winning ‘Jesus Walks’, Rhymefest now extracts reparations with some of the production wizard’s best for his own album.
- 20. While still permitting strategic deals with the majors on his terms (and those of labelmates) – but as mere conveniences for distribution rather than millstones more trouble than their monetary worth. Thematically, Kweli stresses that his approach “focuses on black self-love, black self esteem, black self worth. That translates to other communities because if you’re a human being, it doesn’t matter what color you’re talking about. You’ve been through some sort of struggle and you can apply it to your own life”. Its effectiveness is described in more detail in ‘Beautiful Struggles and Gangsta Blues’, *Variant*, No. 22, February, 2005.
- 21. Including the late-1990s Black August visits to Cuba with the likes of Common and DJ Tony Touch, and, after the NYPD murder of Amadou Diallo, initiating the *Hip-Hop for Respect* (2000) project. The latter recording was acknowledged by many as among the most sublime music and inspiring lyrics of the period, yet was curiously censored from the airwaves – an open media secret susceptible only to corporate-scale payola (cf. The Roots and Erykah Badu’s 1999 ‘You Got Me’) or the dumbing down of lyrics deemed ‘too intelligent’ (which Little Brother refused to do with 2005’s *The Minstrel Show*).
- 22. Over the UTP/Juvenile (from New Orleans) beat for ‘Nola Clap’. Again weaving together cultural, media and political critique, Mos Def was arrested on his flatbed soundsystem arriving to play ‘Dollar Day’ outside the 2006 Video Music Awards at Radio City, NY. The furore around Katrina’s aftermath manifests clearly enough the neocon primitive accumulation agenda – in the landgrab after the dispossession’s brutal enforcement, and also in hounding all manner of altruists flooding into Louisiana to help. These included southern rap royalty David Banner, Nelly and Young Jeezy donating millions – only to find the IRS and federal prosecutors in their and recipients’ faces for a cut. See also Slavoj Žižek’s invaluable observations on the conventional discourses overdetermining the all-round obscenity, ‘The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape: Reality and Fantasy in New Orleans’, *In These Times*, 20 October, 2005. Finally, further depths of Louisiana’s current reality surface in the school students persecuted for refusing to wear Jim Crow’s new-millennial clothes – see Jordan Flaherty, ‘Racism and Resistance: The Struggle to Free the Jena 6’, *CounterPunch*, 15 August, 2007.
- 23. And, although a fascinating and enjoyable listen, this vastly ambitious enterprise overreaches itself in fragmented pacing and thematics and wildly uneven lyricism, albeit with considerable talent and imagination on show.



most varied G-funk hi-jinks so far for *Turf War Syndrome*. Declaiming authoritatively on wider forces of political economy refracting into ghetto hopelessness and destructive criminality, his direct street-corner pedagogy ‘thinks globally; acts locally’ in conversation with neighbourhood peers. Straightforward, effective metaphors engage populism without risking patronisation, particularly in the R&B loverman double-meanings in tracks like ‘Liberty Mutual’ (unrequited love; but for the Statue thereof) and ‘How To Get Ass’ (i.e. assassinated by the state). And whether puncturing hero and anti-hero pretensions through humour or honest realism, the heart of the album is to motivate and inspire the poverty-stricken to turn their ‘American Nightmare’ into one for the status quo.

A similar message of revolt has been developed by far-left duo Dead Prez, who ended a two-year hiatus following 2004’s landmark *RBG: Revolutionary But Gangsta*¹⁴ with several new projects. Despite endorsement from rap mogul Jay-Z, Sony dropped them after swallowing Loud Records, so independent moves now yield M-1’s solo debut, two mixtapes with the Outlawz, and Stic.man’s *The Art of Emcee-ing* how-to book+CD. Their trajectory reinforces the cross-pollination of post-Panther politics with street-level music and class-based ‘reality’ rap, with M-1 branching out to produce for other artists (including David Banner), establishing publishing company ‘War of Art’ (punning on Sun-Tzu), touring with Wu-Tang Clan’s Ghostface, and signing with jazz guitarist/producer Fabrizio Sotti for *Confidential*.

The resulting melange of R&B melodies and hooks (sweetly rendered by veteran soulstress Cassandra Wilson and initiate Raye) mixes current NY, west coast, and southern club sonics in a successful lyrical-musical synthesis with MCs like Styles P (ex-The Lox) on ‘Comrade’s Call’, ATCQ’s Q-Tip on the sexual politics tip (‘Love You Can’t Borrow’), and rising star Somalian refugee K’naan (soulful lead single ‘Til We Get There’) – as well as M-1’s own mother (fresh from 12 years inside for drugs offences) on the thoughtfully downbeat ‘Land, Bread & Housing’. These strategies dovetail with thematic subterfuge, thinly-veiling revolutionary rhetoric in everyday stories ‘making sense’ rather than ‘intellectualising’. The title track links repression in the past and present while celebrating contemporary resistance. And, resuscitating 2-Pac’s stillborn ‘conscious thug’ project, ‘Don’t Put Down Your Flag’ explicitly preaches gang unity in the wider struggle.

With M-1 positioned as a remotely radio-friendly quasi-mainstream rapper, Stic.man and California’s Outlawz explore inner-city Black youth options in two albums. *Soldier 2 Soldier* fruitfully deploys military tropes and metaphors in crosscutting between the failed promises of both ghetto strife and armed forces careers; whereas *Can’t Sell Dope Forever* is more fully accomplished in dissecting the deadly fascination with the drugs game. The subject has intimate resonance with all concerned – several of the Outlawz are former dealers, including Young Noble whose mother and brother were both addicts. Also involved are Stormey, Kastro and Edi Don (ex-members include Napoleon and Fatal, with 2-Pac and Khadafi both murdered), the group being most famous for *Still I Rise* (1999). They have a long-standing collaborative ethic, though previously stressing the ‘gangsta’ side of the equation.

Can’t Sell’s opener, ‘1Nation’, straightforwardly frames the problem as gang versus class war, while the title track sympathetically fleshes out the cold-hearted reality. Later, ‘Like a Window’ has Stic.man agonising over his junkie brother, musing on the interests ultimately served, and ‘Believe’s comparative critique of consumerism decisively reconnects the political-economic analysis to daily life: “You ain’t gotta smoke crack to be a fiend / A fiend is just somebody who’s addicted, it could be anything / Too many of us addicted to the American Dream / We’re high from the lies on the TV screen / We’re drunk from the poison that



they’re teachin’ in school / And we’re junkies from the chemicals they put in the food”. This thematic integration of all dimensions of everyday reality itself reflects another hip-hop rapprochement supported by Dead Prez, bringing cultural politics, art and lifestyle back to an unapologetically vulgar lower class grass-roots.¹⁵

Vital Signs

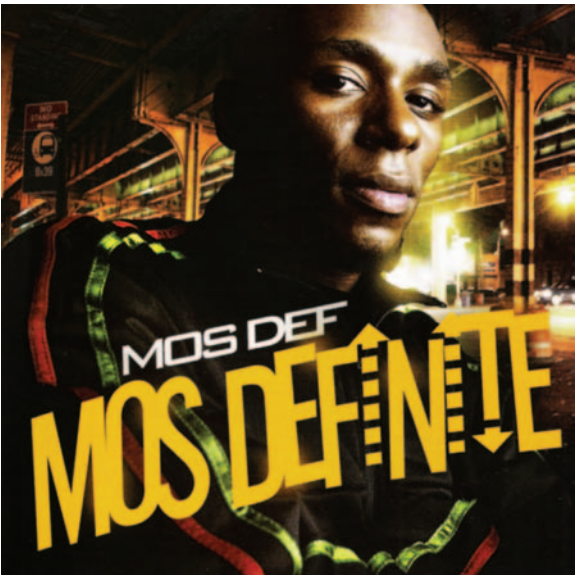
The original ‘Native Tongues’ trajectory of De La Soul, Jungle Brothers and A Tribe Called Quest self-consciously embraced sonic breadth far beyond hip-hop’s early disco, funk and rock borrowings, nourishing a 1990s blend of jazz, blues and soul which helped facilitate the hyper-commercialisation of R&B crossovers. The philosophies espoused also mixed a heady countercultural brew from 1960s psychedelia to Afrocentrism and the Black avant garde, and although these purportedly bourgeois overtones were drowned out by reality rap’s relentless rise, the production innovators flourished – especially in alternative regional scenes in the midwest and Atlanta, which were responsible for considerable musical progression in both independent and mainstream sectors. The tradition’s MCs were always already left-of-centre, but have moved steadily away from identity politics to explicit class-consciousness, condemning them to the margins despite widespread respect for their integrity.

Several of the best have raised their profiles in alliance with industry heavyweights, however, and the results are mixed. *Finding Forever* finds Common mellifluously commenting on communal hardship and love’s complexity, though Kanye West’s competent cod-spiritual backing holds no candle to J-Dilla’s transcendental genius.¹⁶ Philly live-band specialists The Roots’ *Game Theory* is far tighter than occasionally lumbering, meandering previous output, and the album’s outspoken solidaristic voices avoid the lazy, hectoring patronisation of which they’re sometimes guilty.¹⁷ Pharoahe Monch has collaborated with pop icons like P. Diddy to leverage clout, and *Desire* brings marvellously smooth gospel-funk to diverse topical themes tackled with his usual tenacity and flair, especially in the harshly anti-war ‘Agent Orange’. Conversely, Hi-Tek travels in the opposite direction, having recently produced in-house at 50 Cent’s G-Unit, with the classic truculence of *Hi-Teknology 2* anchored back in the edgily creative independent realm.¹⁸

In the ebb and flow of mid-careers ducking and diving around the majors, two notable midwest debuts dip toes in the mainstream. Lupe Fiasco’s bohemian proletarian diaries in the superb *Food and Liquor* echo convincingly as an off-kilter latterday Slick Rick, with dizzying soundscapes and profound wordplay juggling wordly pleasure and pain through subcultural scholarship, social realism and acute oppositionality. Kanye West’s former sidekick Rhymefest¹⁹ is less subtle in the magnificent *Blue Collar*, inflecting impressions of sundry charismatic Black figureheads with a battle-rapper’s bragging overkill. This comic masterstroke exposes both the pretensions of power and its fragility, simultaneously clarifying the recipes for all the false cures sold to ordinary folk in his music-hall crowd. Unfortunately, though,

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24. As well as being proof positive, if such were needed, of the possibilities hip-hop’s worldwide embrace offers those suffering. K’Naan has performed at various international conference junkets and is always outspoken in disrespecting the UN et al. He was equally realistic about his inclusion as token African in last year’s Live8 extravaganza – rejecting its patronising ethos while relishing the opportunity to represent the dignity of his people despite abject circumstances.
25. See my appreciation in ‘Beautiful Struggles’ (see note 20).
26. From the intro: “Came to pass in the days of glorifying everything wrong / That the standard for girls became a bra and a thong / Wholesome values like curling up with a good book and a bong / Went out the window along with making a good song / ... So I say to you now, the Reblution is urgent / Stand before you not as queen, but as your humble servant / Fake leaders claim thrones without building kingdoms / Same as the music business in Kingston / We need to fight for the future for our daughters and sons / Instead you’re tripping your brothers, fighting for crumbs / But we will not be deterred by knives or guns / Go tell it on the mountain, the Reblution has come” – see a full review in *Freedom*, Vol. 68, No. 14, July, 2007 (at www.starandshadow.org.uk/).
27. Including those hopeful souls nevertheless persisting in established campaign networks and mainstream electoral politics (covered in depth by Yvonne Bynoe in *Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership and Hip Hop Culture*, Soft Skull Press, NY, 2004); and the more cynical, realistic, determined, and increasingly numerous who recognise that movement from the bottom up has to be the first principle (sketched in Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, Ch.19, ‘New World Order’, pp.437-465; see note 12).
28. With the notorious refrain on 2006 single ‘Bin Laden’ (featuring Chuck D and KRS-One): “Bush knocked down the towers!” (not to be taken literally, of course ...) The depth, breadth and integrity of his political orientation and its fearless public expression have earned the trust and respect of, for example, framed political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, who tape-recorded on Death Row an intro and interludes for his album. IT’s many fascinating and forthright interviews include: ‘Essence of Revolution’, *Latin Rapper* magazine, 6 October, 2004 (www.latinrapper.com), and Brendan Frederick, ‘Rock The Boat’, *XXL* magazine, 4-5 April, 2006.
29. Including producing and guesting, as in ‘Treason’s disgust at bourgeois (and other) sellouts: “Immortal Technique, Indian Chief, Lord Sovereign / Bear claw necklace and the puma moccasins / Legal money motherfucker, you can bring the coppers in / ’Cause I’m a take a shit on them, without Johnny Cochran / spittin’ Prometheus fire, when I speak to a liar / I’m the last of the Essenes that will teach a Messiah / Rip your heart out with the technique of a Maya / ’Cause only snitches and Kanye speak through a wire.”
30. The legacy is laid out first in ‘Initiation’ by Abiodun Oyewole of the Last Poets: “We got high on Blackness / Held our black fists up / Told the devil to suck / And made a commitment to disrupt the world / Kill a cop a day / Give white girls no play / Make America pay for all her wicked ways / The shit was on! / Then it was gone / Just like an episode on TV / It got cancelled, and there was nothing to see / Panthers were turned into little pussycats / Revolution was commercialized / And had nothing to do with Black / ... But we never stopped making babies / They came out breathing the vapors of our aborted revolution.” Then ‘Mood Music’s cultural focus has Akir wryly referencing more immediate precursors: ‘First things first, I never tried to be like Nas / See, I’m my own man; respect to that nigga, though, Paw / It’s the same thing they used to do to him with Ra / take it as a compliment, and nod as I hit the top.”



such sincere and effective deployments of rap’s cornucopia (like West’s soul concoctions) still resemble novelty acts, passing nostrums rather than lasting remedies for society’s ills.

Probably the most gifted conscious rapper of them all is Talib Kweli, whose sojourns through the range of underground, independent and corporate production paradigms never dampen his anger at the state of the world or enthusiasm for beats and rhymes as expressive tools for the articulation of personal and collective visions of struggle and change. The sheer brilliance of the writing crafts densities of allusion with a knack for rendering complexity into narrative to rival anyone. Added to a willingness to immerse these profound talents in the most crowd-pleasing entertainment and cutting-edge sonic styles, you’d have a complete ‘package’ – except for contradicting accepted sales and subcultural wisdoms, where neither niche-marketers nor their fanboy mirror-images can handle his refusal to kowtow to stratifying imperatives. Shunning such straitjackets meant a reluctant retreat to petit-bourgeois discipline and the running of a small label, but advance to more purist practices of collaborative experimental musicianship while allowing full furious flow for lyrics saturated with exuberance, analytical rigour and positivity.²⁰ As a consequence, *Liberation* (free-download album with Cali’s villainous lo-fi beatsmith Madlib), the *Blacksmith* sampler showcasing signees Jean Grae and west coast posse Strong Arm Steady, and new solo triumph Ear Drum all overflow with thrilling skill and poignancy.

Like Kweli, Mos Def has a history of engagement in radical causes²¹ and no truck at all with the political establishment, but even less patience with music industry bullshit. Mixtape CD *Mos-Definite*’s energetic envelope-pushing, eclectic populism and newly-rediscovered lyrical playfulness and ferocity perhaps reflect both the influence of and relief from the regimented rigours of growing Hollywood stardom. Somewhat ironically, given this dream factory provenance, ‘Beef’ is a meaty lambasting of commercial rappers’ abdication from reality, wherein (after Talib Kweli’s historical contextualisation) he punctures their pumped-up ego dramas:

Yo, Beef is not what Jay said to Nas / Beef is when working niggas can’t find jobs / So they try to find niggas to rob / Try to find bigger guns so they can finish the job / Beef is when a crack-kid can’t find moms / ‘cause they in a pine box, or locked behind bars / Beef ain’t the summer jam on Hot Ninety-Seven / Beef is the cocaine and AIDS epidemics / Beef don’t come with a radio edit / Beef is when the judge’s callin’ you defendant / Beef, it come with a long jail sentence / Beef is high blood pressure and bad credit / Need a loan for your home and you’re too broke to get it ... / Beef is not what these famous niggas do on the mic / Beef is what George Bush would do in a fight (that’s right) / Beef is not what Ja said to Fifty / Beef is the world and earth not being here with me / When a soldier ends his life with his own gun / Beef is trying to figure out what to tell his son / Beef is oil prices and geopolitics / Beef is Iraq, the West Bank and Gaza Strip / Some beef is big, and some beef is small / But what y’all call beef is no beef at all / Beef is real life, happenin’ every day / And its real-er than the songs you gave to K-Slay.

His subsequent third studio album, *True Magic*, mixes fervent blues-ridden yearning and laconic excoriations of media complacency and corporate collusion in a sick political and social system, diagnosing with great subtlety the symptoms of its corrupting fallout – all oriented squarely but empathetically towards listeners who lack material means and comforts but have untold cultural riches at their fingertips. Halfway through, the blistering ‘Dollar Day’ is dedicated to “the streets everywhere, the streets affected by the storm called America”, signifying Katrina with the punchline “Quit bein’ cheap, nigga, freedom ain’t free ...”²²:

It’s Dollar Day in New Orleans / It’s water, water

everywhere and people dead in the streets / And Mr President, he ‘bout that cash / He got a policy for handlin’ the niggaz and trash / And if you poor or you black / I laugh a laugh: they won’t give when you ask / You better off on crack / Dead or in jail, or with a gun in Iraq / And it’s as simple as that / No opinion, my man, it’s mathematical fact / Listen, a million poor since 2004 / And they got illions and killions to waste on the war / And make you question what the taxes is for / Or the cost to reinforce the broke levee wall ... /

It’s Dollar Day in New Orleans / It’s water, water everywhere and babies dead in the streets / It’s enough to make you holler out / Like where the fuck is Sir Bono and his famous friends now / Don’t get it twisted, man, I dig U2 / But if you ain’t about the ghetto, then fuck you too.

A plethora of alternative urban therapies stray further from established conventions, drawing on diverse models of musical innovation to riff on and mull over experience and prognosticate on prospects for transformation. For example, Portland’s Lifesavas crew twist 1970s blaxploitation into concept album *Gutterfly*, with updated classic soul and funk cleverly mobilised to illuminate the present state of exploitation of the hip-hop arts as well as of its grass-roots audiences.

On the opposite coast, new collective The Reavers (with eleven ‘revolutionary emcees advocating views [on] everyday reality struggles’) marry the avant garde symphonics of the Def Jux label with a sense of cold menace courtesy of the Wu-Tang Clan. Rather than the latter’s apocalyptic visions of Staten Island as the psychotic kung-fu dystopia of Shaolin, however, *Terror Firma*’s parallel universe condenses the entire global village into their own home neighbourhoods, matching imperialist colonisation with the oppositional armoury of hip-hop elements.²³

Reflecting rap’s worldwide influence more readily, Toronto’s Somali ex-pat K’Naan’s *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* swirls hi-tech synthetics around organic samples and African drums, strings and chants behind accomplished poetic jeremiads about coming-of-age in Mogadishu’s cataclysm. Quite apart from searing imagery, magnificent accompaniments and unique verbal style, his takes on questions of criminality and ‘What’s Hardcore’ “make 50 Cent sound like Limp Bizkit” while crumbling the New World Order’s institutional thuggery.²⁴ Meanwhile, Tanya Stephens continues her de facto ambassadorial role for hip-hop’s older Caribbean sibling. 2004’s *Gangsta Blues* transformed reggae with its critical (and self-critical) intelligence and hatred of all oppression and in combining the passionate lower-class patter and panache of the ragga dancehall with roots, Lovers Rock, and lighter, singer-songwriter instrumentation.²⁵ Now, *Rebellion* articulates a clear agenda for present conditions in culture and politics.²⁶

Stephens’ strident street-level soap-box pronouncements are placed pithily in the history of Black struggle, with other tracks amplifying the implications of prejudice in weaving together the baleful power of dominative discrimination. Then, having scathingly critiqued organised religion’s mystifications, ‘Warn Dem’ muses furiously on ghetto desperation, with its video showing a young carjacker robbing a pharmacy and using the proceeds (an oxygen mask) to save an asthmatic baby’s life. The epilogue reiterates the artist’s trademark humility reasoning her most trenchant insights: “You know what? Me can’t promise you say the youths dem a go drop the Beretta / Hell, me can’t even promise you say ME a go act better / But one thing’s for sure, we can mek a effort / And that a the least we can do before we lef earth”. Her early career yielded some of the most pleasurable barbed highlights of the obscene ‘slackness’ subgenre, and several tracks here explore personal intimacy and the pragmatics of sexual relations, emphasising womanist strength and autonomy and emotional and sensual directness and honesty – with no PC pieties and arguably the sharpest tongue and most hilarious

Notes continued...

31. For example, the high-profile, high-handed Black August debacle in South Africa in 2001 (described in Jeff Chang, ‘New World Order’, see note 27); or the Fugees’ Wyclef Jean’s symptomatic superstar posturing in his native Haiti (justifiably attracting Anthony Iles’ ire in ‘Haiti Special: Introduction’, Mute, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2006, pp.32-39; also at www.metamute.org).

32. Such as Black Autonomy founder Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, some of whose writings appear in www.libcom.org’s race thread, including ‘Black Autonomy: Civil Rights, the Panthers and Today’ (with JoNina Abron) from Do Or Die, No. 9, 2001, and ‘Black Capitalism’ (2001). See also, News From Everywhere and BM Blob’s insightful discussion of BAD: the Autobiography of James Carr (see note 3). In terms of broader reference, www.illegalvoices.org, the US Anarchist People of Color network’s important online resource, has unfortunately been hijacked. However, part of its immensely useful archive can still be found at www.illvox.org.



wit ever put on wax on the subject. Throughout, her personal narratives reliably correlate – naturally, unpretentiously and effortlessly – with wider levels of analysis too, in a rare appreciation of the complexities of class, gender and race with recourse neither to righteous mysticism nor simplistic faith in better leaders. And such meldings of class-conscious ethics with collective effort are exactly what resonate widely among younger generations of hip-hop affiliates – both within the musical arena, and as DIY activists outside²⁷ – aware of the hypocrisy of orthodox political forums, and no longer pandering to egotistical, self-righteous power.

Recovery Plans

Among many younger musicians, these trends are exemplified in the work of producer/MCs Immortal Technique and Akir (‘always keeping it real’), whose uncompromising politics are clearly manifest in praxis as performing and recording artists. IT’s chaotic early days included escaping Peruvian civil war to refugee status in Harlem, violence, crime and prison time – before passion for hip-hop channelled rage into battle-rapping and a virulent blend of bare-knuckle inventiveness and insurrectionary propaganda. Gangsta and underground hip-hop heads alike recognised the prodigious skills in *Revolutionary, Vols. 1 and 2*, morphing doses of bitter street paranoia into the common lore realism of Black and Hispanic ghettos concerning US government and corporate responsibility for the heinous horrors across the hemisphere.²⁸ Having maintained a punishing pace of concert tours and guerilla distribution, he has hooked up independent deals for the Viper label, delaying his own new album for the sake of Akir’s debut.²⁹

Swerving between Washington and NY, the latter’s early mixtape hustles catapulted him to cognoscenti attention with the ‘Unsigned Hype’ accolade in *The Source* magazine. Fulfilling the promise, Legacy’s astonishingly accomplished achievement marries music and message in intense introspection and wise social awareness with perfectly pitched production overseen by partner Southpaw (relieved from providing superior beats for P. Diddy to call his own). The MC’s relaxed style is equally on beat tackling personal (‘Rite of Passage’, ‘Change of the Seasons’) or interpersonal growth (‘No Longer My Home’, ‘Tropical Fantasy’) with warmth and wistfulness, while demonstrating hard-hitting appreciation of past and present constraints on communality (‘Treason’, ‘Kunta Kinte’). Yet the interrelationships among diverse levels of analysis emerge without pretension from an intoxicating brew of ambience, rhythm and lyricism so that – though exasperated by apt comparisons with Nas – Akir actually transcends the circular arguments new-school rap in general has remained hypnotised by, gesturing towards a future with far fewer illusions.³⁰

In particular, economic and social struggles repeatedly overlap, for example in ‘Grind’, ‘This Is Your Life’, ‘Resurrect’ and ‘Ride 2 It’ meditating on questions of getting by, getting ahead, and leaving behind authenticity and one’s past and people. Deploying both African and proletarian traditions forces the implications for the satisfaction of spiritual and material needs of egotism, moralism and greed to be balanced against grass-roots criteria for welfare and horizontal social-power relations. Leavening



the twin sorceries of the griot’s and postmodern entertainer’s charismas with revolutionary understanding allows aspirations to realise American Dreams to be acknowledged, but their baleful global payoff is too painfully centre-stage to succumb to fantasy. The alienated hubris of celebrity, fooling artists (and politicians, in their sphere) into forgetting that the context and manner of their rise to prominence inherently contradict lower-class collectivity – inevitably yielding embarrassing and damaging errors of judgement³¹ – is no option.

Finally, Akir’s legacies dovetail to devastating effect in more explicitly political tracks connecting historical, cultural and structural dots, such as ‘Apocalypse’, ‘Pedigree’ and ‘Homeward Bound’, and ‘The Louisiana Purchase’s timely pinpointing of the general significance of Katrina. The centrepiece of the album’s ideological assault, ‘Politricks’, most satisfyingly signals a decisive advance beyond both vanguard arrogance and tepid reform – conceiving healthy radical movement in terms of the mutualism, individual strength and implacable resistance to domination emphasised by the libertarian heirs of Black Liberation³²:

“Politicians that be gargling that garbage shit / Bargain with anonymous officers of opposite / Doctrines for the legal tender documents / Pocketin’ the profits off of rockets / While they kick us out the projects / Logic, surprising common sense / Risin’ occupants up out environments / Survive and then they got you doin’ five to ten / ...
I don’t follow the news, they just add to my blues / Politicians and they big feat could never fill my shoes / They don’t care, think we all live off welfare / It’s hell here, why should I vote, like it’s ever been fair?”

Discography

- Akir: *Legacy* (Viper/Babygrande, 2006)
Common: *Finding Forever* (Geffen, 2007)
The Coup: *Pick a Bigger Weapon* (Epitaph, 2006)
Dead Prez & Outlawz: *Can’t Sell Dope Forever* (Affluent, 2006); *Soldier 2 Soldier* (Real Talk, 2007)
Hi-Tek: Hi-Tekology 2: *The Chip* (Babygrande, 2006)
Immortal Technique: *Revolutionary, Vols. 1 and 2* (Viper/Babygrande, 2005); *The Middle Passage* (forthcoming).
K’Naan: *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* (BMG, 2006)
KRS-One & Marley Marl: *Hip Hop Lives* (Koch, 2007)
Talib Kweli: Blacksmith: *The Movement* (featuring Jean Grae & Strong Arm Steady, Blacksmith, 2006); *Liberation* (with Madlib, Blacksmith 2007); *Ear Drum* (Warner, 2007)
Lifesavas: Gutterfly: *The Original Soundtrack* (Quannum, 2007)
Lupe Fiasco: *Food & Liquor* (Atlantic, 2006)
M-1: *Confidential* (Koch, 2006)
Mos Def: *Mos Definite* (FMG, 2006); *True Magic* (Geffen, 2007)
Nas: *Hip Hop Is Dead* (Def Jam, 2006)
Paris: *Hard Truth Soldiers, Vol. 1* (Guerilla Funk, 2006)
Pharoahe Monch: *Desire* (Universal, 2007)
Public Enemy, featuring Paris: *Rebirth of A Nation* (Guerilla Funk, 2006)
The Roots: *Terror Firma* (Babygrande, 2005)
Rhymefest: *Blue Collar* (Sony, 2006)
The Roots: *Game Theory* (Def Jam, 2006)
Tanya Stephens: *Rebelution* (VP, 2006)
T-Kash: *Turf War Syndrome* (Guerilla Funk, 2006)

Distribution of the Sensible

Robert Porter

The Future of the Image

Jacques Rancière

Translated by Gregory Elliott

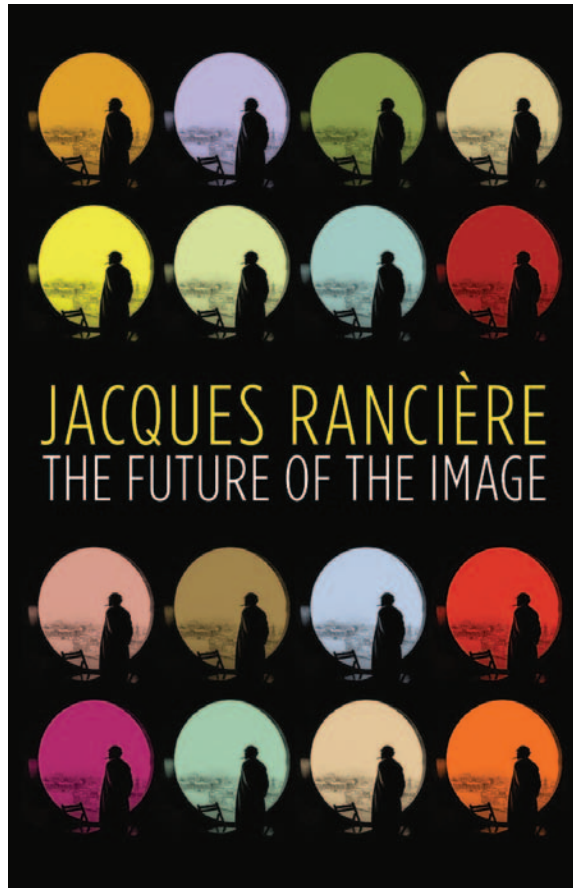
ISBN-13: 978 1 84467 107 6

Verso, 2007

Jacques Rancière emerged on the intellectual scene in the early 1960s as part of a group of ‘young Althusserians’ (Balibar, Macherey, Estabiet being the others) who contributed to *Lire le Capital* which, along with Althusser’s hugely influential *Pour Marx*, fundamentally shaped the field of ‘structuralist Marxism’. However, Rancière began to distance himself from Althusser when he published *La Leçon d’Althusser* in the mid 1970s. Inevitably, perhaps, the Althusserian distinction between science and ideology came under Rancière’s attack, implying as it did a will to master the ‘masses’, a will to scientistically know how and why the masses are caught in the grip of ideological misrecognition, a will to speak on their behalf, to know the truth about them. Rancière’s violent reaction to this tendency in Althusserianism springs from his long-standing commitment to the idea that the emergence of politics, or what he would call modes of ‘political subjectivization’, occurs when people begin to speak on their own behalf, and in speaking on their own behalf, assume the right to occupy public space, a public space whose co-ordinates immediately shift to take account of these new voices.¹

Unsurprisingly, then, it was Rancière’s critique of the rigidity of Althusserian scientism that came to dominate the early reception of his work in the mid 1970s.² Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s Rancière proved himself to be a prolific writer, publishing works such as: *The Night of Labor*, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, *Short Voyages to the Land of the People* and *On the Shores of Politics*. What we see here is Rancière developing a unique voice as a political theorist, a voice that perhaps reaches maturity in 1995 with the publication of *Disagreement*.³ So what kind of political theory are we talking about here? Put simply, politics, for Rancière, emerges through the formation of a mode of subjectivity that begins to speak for itself, through a call to be heard and seen in public space. Politics, then, is antagonism, the disruption of the hitherto constituted political order (Rancière pointedly refers to this as the order of police, an order of administration, the politics of maintaining order...) by a subject who emerges and demands a role and a part to play in a reconfigured public sphere (Rancière often talks about this emergent mode of subjectivity as a ‘part with no part’ in the given, as that part of society with as yet no properly defined place...). So we can begin to see that the term ‘politics’ can come to signify a double meaning and significance from a Rancièrian perspective. There is the politics of maintaining order (politics as police) and a politics of disruption (‘political subjectivization’), the instrumentality of administration and its destabilization. Key here, for Rancière, is the ability to see how politics as police precipitates a depoliticization of the public sphere and to understand how such a depoliticization can be concretely challenged in public space by those hitherto excluded or marginalized.⁴

It is important to point out that Rancière’s political thought connects explicitly to his aesthetics and cultural theory, while perhaps inevitably acknowledging that Rancière’s work traverses the fields of ‘aesthetics’ and ‘political theory’ in ways that frustrate the possibility of drawing and maintaining any sharp distinction between them. Now, it has become something of a



cliché to say that Rancière’s work cannot be easily circumscribed within traditional disciplinary borders. So, the story goes that although Rancière theorizes politics he is not confined to the disciplinary norms of political theory (norms that are explicitly challenged in and through his work), that although he does historical work, he is not a historian in any accepted sense, that although he has written a series of texts on art he is not a traditional student of aesthetics. No doubt this is partly a result of the influence of Alain Badiou’s remark that “Rancière is an heir to Foucault”, an intellectual who has “never been a member of any particular academic community”.⁵ The point here, dare I say, is not to get too preoccupied with a cliché of eclecticism and trans-disciplinarity, but to begin to appreciate the connections Rancière makes across supposed disciplinary boundaries or, more particularly for our purposes here, how concepts of ‘politics’ and ‘aesthetics’ assume shape and form in his thought, and how these concepts shape up precisely through virtue of the ways in which they are connected. So what

He seems to be detecting a shift away from a critical appreciation of the necessary connection between the aesthetic and the political...

is their connection then for Rancière? In recent books such as *The Flesh of Words*, *The Politics of Aesthetics* and *Film Fables*, Rancière time and again implicitly and explicitly builds on one of the basic insights from *Disagreement*: namely, that politics involves a ‘distribution of the sensible’, where this can be understood as a legitimization of certain ways of seeing, feeling, acting, speaking, being in the world with one another... Put bluntly, Rancière suggests that art or aesthetic practices (for example, the novel, photography, film, painting...) can be political to the extent that they play a key function in this ‘distribution of the sensible’. So if, as Rancière wants to argue, politics revolves around “what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak” around “ways of doing and making” a shared sense of what we have in common, then ‘artistic practices’ are always-already political: that is, “aesthetics is at the core of politics”.⁶

A couple of general principles or basic themes have emerged and they are worth stressing at this point. First, Rancière is concerned to understand and critique the logic of depoliticization at play in the given social-political formation (if we assume, with Rancière, that depoliticization has an exclusionary logic, that it prevents those excluded or marginalized from speaking and thereby assuming the right to speak). Second, this political critique, or the emergence of politics itself (if we assume, with Rancière, that politics only properly emerges through the antagonism of a given order) has aesthetics at its core to the extent that it can bring about a redistribution of the sensible, a shift in public consciousness concerning how we see, what is seen, who can legitimately say this is what is seen, felt... Given the importance of these themes or basic tendencies in Rancière’s thought it should come as no surprise that they are at play in the most recent work to appear in translation; *The Future of the Image*. We can take each theme briefly in turn.

Rancière detects a clear tendency toward depoliticization in contemporary theorizations of the image. Simply put, he seems to be detecting a shift away from a critical appreciation of the necessary connection between the aesthetic and the political and a worrying trend toward what he considers to be a reactionary reverence for art, one clouded in religion and mysticism. For example, in chapter one, ‘The Future of the Image’, Rancière engages the work of Roland Barthes, or, better still, we are presented with two images of Barthes: the critical Barthes of *Mythologies* and the rather more reactionary, even religious, Barthes of *Camera Lucida*. More particularly, Rancière reads Barthes famous distinction between the ‘studium’ (that is, the encoded message that the critic deciphers in order to show how the image can ideologically reproduce the values of the dominant) and the ‘punctum’ (that is, the pre-reflective, pre-ideological and affective power of the image) as a reactionary gesture. That is to say, by foregrounding the idea of a punctum Barthes, argues Rancière, runs the risk of shrouding the image in mystery, of relegating the important work of political or ideological critique to the banal. Why does Barthes do this? Well, Rancière suggests (and the religious tone of the language is obviously key here) that there may be some feeling of ‘guilt’ on Barthes part, that the move toward a notion of the image that somehow transcends or stands beyond the messiness of the social-ideological field is nothing less than the expiation of the “sin of the former mythologist: the sin of having wished to strip the visible world of its glories, of having transformed its spectacles and pleasures into a great web of symptoms and a seedy exchange of signs”. Rancière continues with his accusation:

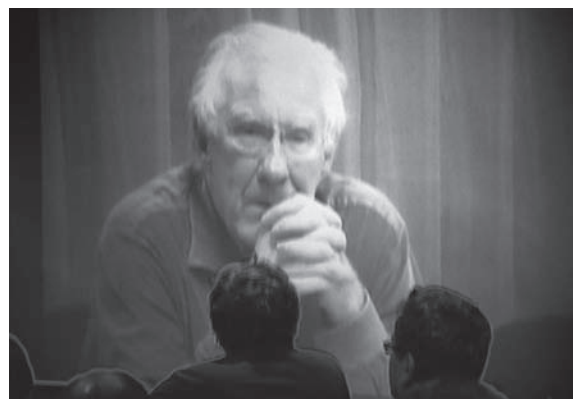
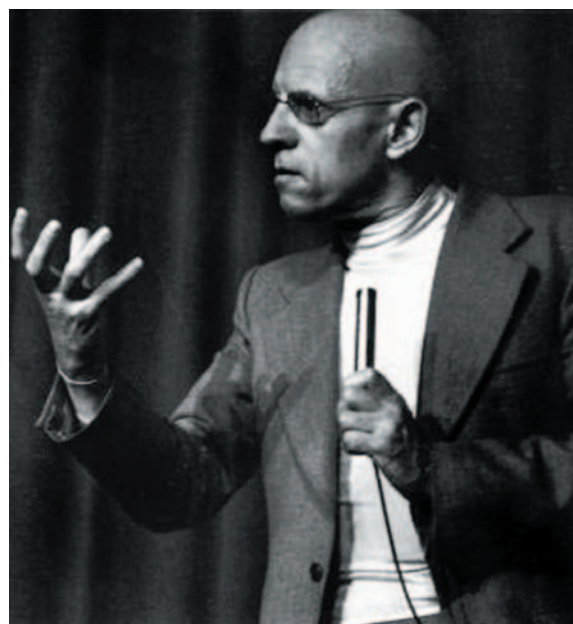
The semiologist repents having spent much of his life saying: Look out! What you are taking for visible self-evidence is in fact an encoded message whereby a society or authority legitimates itself by naturalizing itself, by rooting itself in the obviousness of the visible. He bends the stick in the other direction by valorizing, under the title of *punctum*, the utter self-evidence of the photograph, consigning the decoding of messages to the platitude of the *studium*.⁷

Turning to the notion that aesthetic practices can contribute to a particular 'distribution of the sensible', it is perhaps worth foregrounding the extent to which Rancière insists on the power of words. For example, and in what I found to be a most interesting chapter, 'Painting in the Text', Rancière seeks to analyze the relation between painting and criticism, aesthetic practice and aesthetic discourse. Too many words, Rancière says, is the dictum that sums up the often repeated diagnosis and denunciation of the triumph of aesthetic discourse over aesthetic practices. The assumption or claim here being that words devour practice, parasitically living off it, while clothing it in a metalanguage that is unhelpfully abstract (for example, a Freudian reading of Francis Bacon, a Deleuzian reading of Bacon or whatever...). Rancière's response to this familiar gripe is not to

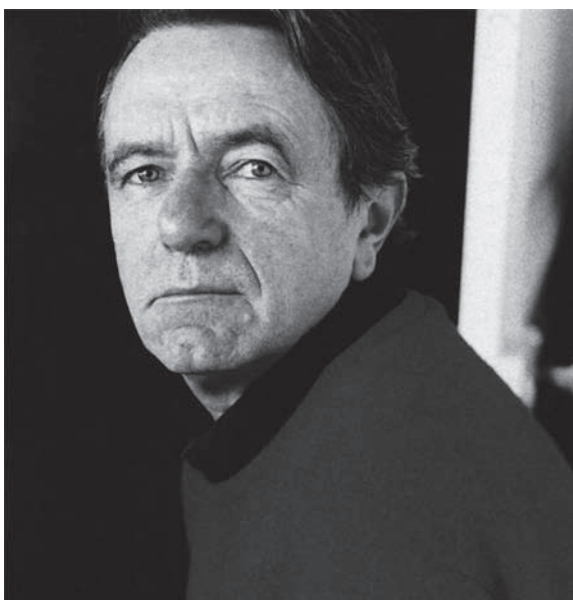
directly challenge it, but to make the philosopher's move and refuse to accept the grounds on which the problem is posed in the first instance. Most immediately, Rancière wants to reject the seemingly intuitive notion that we can simply have practices on the one hand (say, a painting by Francis Bacon) and criticism on the other (say Deleuze's book *Francis Bacon*) that we can simply have 'pictorial phenomenon' and then a 'torrent of discourse' about that 'pictorial phenomenon'. Put simply, he wants to argue that criticism, aesthetic discourse or, most basically, words can condition the possibility of painting by reconfiguring and then circumscribing the domain of the visible itself, that 'texts reconfigure the visibility of what painting does'. Words, even criticism that seemingly abstracts itself from a given concrete medium or set of practices, can always-already function as aesthetic practice in its own right; that is, words can do political work in that they can condition the 'distribution of the sensible'. 'Words', Rancière claims, 'no longer prescribe, as story or doctrine, what images should be. They make themselves images...'.⁸

Notes

1. For a useful and interesting discussion of the concept of 'political subjectivization' in Rancière, and for a good appreciation of Rancière's critical relation with Althusser, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London: Verso, 1999.
2. See, for example, Ted Benton, 'Discussion: Rancière on ideology', *Radical Philosophy* 9 (Winter 1974): 27-8; Ian Craib 'Rancière and Althusser', *Radical Philosophy* 10 (Spring 1975): 27-8.
3. Slavoj Žižek, for example, has no qualms about referring to this book as 'the masterpiece of his political thought'. See Slavoj Žižek, 'The Lesson of Rancière' in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 71.
4. That is to say, politics as police precipitates or encourages a depoliticization of the public sphere by insisting on the normative rightness of order ('We must maintain order at all costs!') and a failure, wilful or otherwise, to see that the current system of identifying the 'public' or the 'people' may leave others uncounted for. And yet those excluded or marginalized can become a 'people', political subjects who supplement the police account and render problematic the current order of identification.
5. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, London: Verso, 2005, p. 107.
6. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, pp. 12-13.
7. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, London: Verso, 2007, pp. 10-11.
8. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 87.



Anti-clockwise
from left:
Jacques Rancière
Louis Althusser
Slavoj Žižek
Gilles Deleuze
Roland Barthes
Michel Foucault
Alain Badiou



The High and Mighty

John Barker

”What is U.S. Guv? It’s a bunch of rich men playing golf. It’s big business, big army and big government all visiting each other in company planes for the sole purpose of playing golf and talking money.”

Don DeLillo, *Great Jones Street*

”At the centres of public decision there are powerful men who do not themselves suffer the violent results of their own decisions... Their public views and political actions are, in this objective meaning of the word, irresponsible: the social corollary of their responsibility is the fact that others are dependent on them and must suffer the consequences of their ignorance and mistakes, their self deceptions and their biased motives.”

C. Wright Mills, *The Powerless People: The Role of the Intellectual in Society*

C. Wright Mills was a tough-guy intellectual, a sociologist with a heart condition who died aged 46. He taught for many years and became a professor at Columbia University. His book *The Power Elite* was first published just over fifty years ago in 1956. Its original working title had been *The High and Mighty* and in the same year the book was published Wright Mills gained a factory diploma as a first class mechanic on BMW motorbikes. His book describes the emergence of an elite in the USA which began in World War II and developed through ‘revolving doors’ between military, corporate and political elites with the media functioning as an increasingly important component in the institutionalisation of the Cold War. *The Power Elite* is exemplary of the methods Mills described in his essay *On Intellectual Craftsmanship*¹, an investigative how-to kit based on use of the file. In that pre-computer age cardboard folders or boxes were the places to collect material such as news clippings, excerpts from books, statistics, scraps of conversation, ideas or fringe thoughts and, most importantly, notes on follow-up ideas for the development of themes and to shift perspectives between them. These last functions were what Mills called the sociological imagination. In keeping with dialectical method, *The Power Elite* completed a trilogy of works examining different class perspectives in the United States. In his series, Mills grasped at the social whole, a philosophical concept he would defend against the charge of ‘extremist exaggeration’. The same sense of investigative scope looks especially relevant today, when a variety of socio-political critiques appear to operate in parallel universes of stand-alone theory.

The Power Elite was written at a time when it was difficult to be optimistic about the challenge presented to the US working class. After its successes in the New Deal era, the radical optimism expressed by the GIs in Gertrude Stein’s *Brewsie and Willie*² was chipped away by capitalist restructuring under the McCarthyite cloud that shrouded the country’s politics in the aftermath of World War II. Mills’ pessimism was not politically crippling however. His defence of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and opposition to punitive actions and sanctions against it, understanding that it was calculated to make the Cuban government more authoritarian, made him a busy public intellectual doing no good for his heart condition. If *The Power Elite* was pessimistic it was not defeatist. Mills was an early proponent of the role of the public intellectual in an era of revisionist history, sponsored by the likes of the Rockefeller family, and set along clear Hamiltonian lines by researchers and able writers like Alan Nevins, also at Columbia University. Mills also had no truck with the dominant theories of elites by the manifestly reactionary writers Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michaels whose analysis single-mindedly aimed to show the inevitability of elite power as a ‘natural order of things’. The elite Mills describes is a particular

historical development in which the economic and political power of the military, the militarisation of politics and the dominance of finance capital come together in a formation which may be distinguished from more general understandings of classical oligarchy or the ruling class.

Fifty years on, Mills reads as remarkably prescient with his description of ‘a military definition of reality’; the role of celebrity; the development of the ‘opinion business’; the merged elite’s monopoly claims on ‘realism’; its reproduction; and the reduction of checks and balances on power to such a state of impotence that they are more effectively part of an ideological fantasy. On its publication *The Power Elite* was met with misrepresentation and vitriol from other professional sociologists whose careers depended on giving academic credibility to the fantasy of democracy and, above all, the Cold War view of the world. That ‘one of their own’ should do a necessary job of demystification was especially dangerous. At the same time, there was little enthusiasm from the Marxist – and at that time almost exclusively Leninist – left. Years later in the late 1960s when it was especially relevant, the book hardly figured at all in revolutionary critiques of capitalist society. I believe that was a loss, and there is a danger that the kind of analysis Mills offers is ignored by the refreshed anti-capitalist movement. I want to suggest why Mills may have become marginal to the left, but before anything else, given that the book described a situation specific in time and place, it’s worth considering just how relevant his analysis is now.



Dame Pauline’s Illustrious Career

It is quite likely that the top, very rich mangers of hedge funds or private equity outfits have no direct role in politics, but they are likely to depend on global political intelligence, and socialise with those who move freely through Mills’ ‘revolving doors’. In the UK, with its numerous public-private partnerships, think-tanks and other quangos, interchanges and professional transformations are greatly encouraged. The still evolving career of Dame Pauline Neville-Jones, now National

Security Adviser to David Cameron, leader of the Conservative party, is an instructive example.

As a career diplomat, in the 1990s she was Douglas Hurd’s right-hand woman during the war in Bosnia, when their treatment of Milosevic as a moderate and necessary middleman was proclaimed – in true power elite style – as ‘realism’. For a period, she was Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, as well as Foreign Affairs Advisor to John Major, and as Britain’s senior negotiator of the Dayton Agreement in 1995 she argued energetically and successfully for an end to sanctions against Serbia. Very soon after as a managing director in NatWest Markets, and with Lord Hurd, she negotiated a lucrative privatisation deal with Milosevic. Her career with NatWest Markets continued until 2000 while she was also Vice Chair of Hawkpoint Partners, a semi-autonomous NatWest corporate finance advisory group, concentrating on governments and ‘quasi-government’ organisations as well as private equity houses in Europe.

In January 1998 she was appointed a BBC Governor, and left at the very end of 2004. She had been chair of the BBC’s Audit Committee (“value for money for the public”) and was its International Governor. Dame Pauline’s departure followed two instances in which her various roles were highlighted. This was because by then she had become the chair of QinetiQ (the privatised research arm of the Ministry of Defence) the history of which has become a known case of revolving door elites. But her BBC role had also become a subject for comment. The former Director-General, Greg Dyke, had singled her out as being a moving force behind his removal after the Hutton Report, having already taken an active role in criticizing news management of David Kelly’s death, and undermining the dead man’s expertise.

Dame Pauline is also on the Council of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, which is described as a “higher echelon opinion-maker”. She has also been prominent in Ditchley Park seminars (described below) as well as being an invitee to an Intelligence Summit at Arlington USA last year along with various Israeli military think-tankers. She was also Chair of the Information Assurance Advisory Council (IAAC) another public-private think-tank/quango aimed at cyber infrastructure protection and with the intention of ‘influencing policy development’ and pursuing its own R&D. IAAC’s ‘Corporate Public Sector’ consists mostly of police and defence outfits, while the private corporate world is represented by BAT and HSBC amongst others.

The QinetiQ story/scandal is well known: its part privatisation sale to the Carlyle Group (chaired by Frank Carlucci⁴) at a knock-down price on the day it landed a huge pfi contract with the MoD which has accounted for 20% of its income since then; its flotation in 2006 and the subsequent selling of Carlyle’s stake all at a profit of some £350 million. Dame Pauline was Non-Executive Chair from 2002-5, during which the Carlyle sale took place, and the pfi deal is estimated to have made some £350,000 profit on a £50,000 original stake.⁵

This same QinetiQ recruited Sir Alan West, former Chief of the Royal Navy. The company was brazen about the role he will play “to develop the company’s relationship with the defense establishment.” He will, they said, “be recruiting other top defense experts to the advisory board.” He is, in short, a man for hire and has now walked through another door to become Internal Security Minister of Gordon Brown’s New Labour government while Dame Pauline will be an Advisor to the Opposition Party. In her individual career she has enjoyed prominence in *all* sections of the power elite.

Characteristics

In a rare moment of modesty, former French President Charles de Gaulle said, “The cemeteries are full of irreplaceable people.” Mills’ analysis does not require or depend on ‘irreplaceable people’, only a continuum of people who believe they are irreplaceable at the time; in particular that they alone have a true understanding of reality, and a special talent for decision-making. Nor does it require conspiracies, but is rather concerned with the reproduction and evolution of a power elite. “It is not that our rulers ‘believe in’ a compact elite behind the scenes and the mass down below,” Mills writes. “It is not put in that language. It is just that the people are of necessity confused and must, like trusting children, place all the new world of foreign policy and strategy and executive action in the hands of experts.” Just now and then the language slips out of the bag when, for example, Peter Mandleson called Labour Party opposition to the Iraq invasion an “infantile disorder”, perhaps unconsciously using the phrase Lenin used to defend the Bolshevik oligarchic trend against its communist critics in the early 1920s.

More common, Mills argues, is that “a reformulation of classical liberalism in the entirely unclassical age of the 20th century ... instead of justifying the power of an elite by portraying it favourably ... denies that any set of men, any class, any organization has any real consequential power.”⁶ He goes on to describe what members of the elite have in common. For one thing, they “cannot be truly thought of as men who are merely doing their duty. They are the ones who determine their duty, as well as the duties of those below them ... their circumstances make them independent of the good will of others, never waiting for anyone but always waited upon.” Yet here, he reveals how partial the power elite’s self-defined ‘reality’ actually is by pointing to essential characteristics of power; whether it be in rates of pay, queuing at buses, or those in Housing Benefit and Social Security offices, the time of the poor does not count. Being insulated from such temporal realities only reinforces the elite’s view of the world.

Their insulation is more important than the specific class origins of the elite, although Mills does not duck the question of how the elite reproduces itself. The evidence he produced showed that class mobility, a crucial prop to the ‘American Dream’ and meritocratic ideology, was shrinking, as it is, in different forms, now. “[B]y the middle years of the 20th century it is in some ways easier to transfer position and power to one’s children than it was in 1900 and 1925 ... to pass on to children strategic positions in the apparatus of appropriation that constitutes the higher level of American private, free enterprise.”⁷ He backs this up with the statistic that: “Only 9% of the very rich of our own time originated in lower-class families, i.e. families with only enough money to provide essential needs and sometimes minor comforts.”

Mills describes an education system as class-ridden as the UK’s, where in specific circles “adolescent boys and girls are exposed to the table conversation of decision-makers, and thus have bred into them the informal skills and pretensions of decision-makers.” Likewise, Maureen Duffy, writing from an English point of view in her novel *Capital*, talks of educated young people who “would have had a daily familiarity with the smell of power and money at their parents’ dinner tables.” In a more conscious manner Mills talks of how, “To exclude others enables the high and mighty to maintain a series of private worlds in which they can and do discuss issues in which they train their young informally for the decision-making temper”.



Lenny’s Version

In the week of late October 1962, the scary ten days of the Cuban missile crisis, Lenny Bruce criss-crossed the USA with sharp-edged gigs some of which are reported verbatim by Don DeLillo in his novel *Underground*. Bruce started in West Hollywood on the 22nd.

“The true edge is not where you choose to live, but where they situate you against your will. This event is infinitely deeper and more electrifying than anything you might elect to do with your own life. You know what this is? This is twenty-six guys from Harvard deciding our fate. Dig it. These are guys from the eating clubs and the secret societies. They have fraternity handshakes so complicated it takes three full minutes to do all the moves. One missed digit you’re fucked for life. Resign from the country club, forget about the stock options and the executive retreat ... Picture it, twenty-six guys in Clark Kent suits getting to enter a luxury bunker that’s located about half a mile under the White House. ... Powerless. Understand, this is how they remind us of our basic state. They roll out a periodic crisis. Is it horizontal? One great power against the other. Or is it vertical, is it up and down?”

On the 29th he was back in New York, doing a midnight show at Carnegie Hall:

“We’re not going to die. Yes, they saved us. All the Ivy League men in those striped suits and ribbed black socks that go all the way to the knee so when they cross their legs on TV we don’t see a patch of spooky white flesh between the sock and the pants cuff. ... They saved us in their horn-rimmed glasses and commonsense haircuts. They got their training for the missile crisis at a thousand dinner parties. Where it’s at, man. This is the summit of Western civilization. Not the art of the schlocky museums or the books in the libraries where bums off the street infest the men’s rooms. Forget all that. Forget all that. Forget the playing fields of Eton. It’s the seating plan at dinner. That’s where we won. Because they toughed it out. Because they were tested in the cruelest setting of all. Where tremendous forces come into play and crucial events unfold. Dinner parties, dig it, in the Northeast corridor. Your mother used to say, Mix, sweetheart. There was anxiety, a little hidden terror in her voice. Because she knew. Mix or die. And that’s why we won. Because these men were named and raised for this moment. Yes, tested at a thousand formative dinners. It started in adolescence. Seated next to adults, total strangers, and forced to make conversation. What a sadistic thing to say to a kid. Make conversation.”

‘The Wise Men’

A more reverential and detailed account of the elite described by Mills and Bruce comes in *The Wise Men*, published some 30 years later in 1986.⁸ Their heyday was the Truman Presidency during which the Cold War became an almost self-generating dynamic. The dominant figure was Secretary of State, Dean Ascheson, who rotated between politics and corporate law. Also

figuring are: George Kennan, the administration’s ideologue; John McCloy Jr., who moved in an out of the Defense Department and ended up as chief counsel to what were then the Seven Sisters dominant oil corporations; Robert Lovett, also in and out of the Defense Department and corporate America; and Averell Harriman, a multi-millionaire corporate chief shareholder and geo-political busybody.⁹ These people, the authors say, “were free to pursue what they really cared about, service to the country...” because “they did not have to worry too much about the daily chore of child care, or about their wives’ careers, or about paying the mortgage.” They were all making money when they went out of the revolving door for periods back in Wall Street and were exactly the sort of people whose “circumstances make them independent of the good will of others.” In *The Wise Men*, however their position is not contrasted to people who have no insulation from ‘daily chores’, but rather with “the careerists who now populate the official bureaucracy, or the grasping opportunists who value a sub-Cabinet post primarily as a springboard to a lucrative job with a government contractor.”

Mills’ critique embraces both types, refusing the romanticized elitism of these ‘wise men’. With the exception of McCloy, they came from well-off families and went to Groton School and Yale or, at the very least, Harvard Law School. They were people who, as Mills says, “have bred into them the informal skills and pretensions of decision-makers.” At Yale, Lovett, Harriman and their mentor, war time Defense Secretary Henry Stimson, had all been members of an elite secret society, The Order of Skull and Bones. More recently, the current President George W. Bush and his 2004 opponent, John Kerry, were also members. This is not conspiracy theory, there is no suggestion that these ‘Bonesmen’ are the secret government of the USA or anything of the sort, but it exists with a specifically elitist way of looking at the world, and shows an extraordinary continuity in one of the various channels in which the power elite reproduces itself.¹⁰

Narcissistic Capitalism

This perpetuation of advantage is an important phenomena described in *The Power Elite* and an empirical reality that could hardly be ignored. This is increasingly the case when the scale and institutionalisation of the elite is noticed by the largely excluded middle class of the Western world. However, the reproduction of the elite does not preclude people ‘of merit’ like James J. McCloy joining from an unprivileged position. By university funding, Scouting, think tanks and all kinds of private-public set-ups, recruitment takes place. What the already advantaged and those newly admitted have in common is making a fetish of ‘the decision-making temper’ and their unique competence within a capitalist world. Consequently, the main thrust of Mills’ book becomes a multi-pronged attack on capitalism’s fantasies. First at an ideological level Mills takes on Schumpeter’s version of capitalist self-idealization. Schumpeter, he argues, “combines a theory of capitalist progress with a theory of social stratification to explain, and indeed celebrate the ‘creative destruction’ of the great entrepreneurs.” The villainous Robber Baron is transformed into the Ayn Rand type hero of perennial innovation. But to do this Schumpeter has to be “rather free and easy with his moral evaluations, believing that only men of superior acumen and energy are lifted to the top by the mechanics they are assumed to create and focus.” Mills instead brings out “the objective structure of opportunities” which he details in the manner of Marx, noting the systematic confusion between technological gain and financial manipulation. On this basis he

is able to point out both the tautology implicit in capitalist self-idealization, and the inherent relationship between elitism and exploitation. As Mills says: “To use the acquisition of wealth as a sign of ability and then to use ability as an explanation of wealth is merely to play with two words for the same fact: the existence of the very rich.”

Mills shows that it is not and never has been usual for great fortunes to be made by nursing small businesses into large ones. Equally, men do not become very rich by rising through corporate bureaucracies but do so by financial manipulation in what are anything but ‘open’ markets. Mills talks of *economic politicians* who have been able to accumulate information and contacts “permitting them to appropriate for personal use out of the *accumulation of advantages*.” Their accumulation invariably involves holding strategic positions as investment bankers for example, a concrete form being to “speculate in the promotion and manipulation of securities with no or very little risk.” Indeed the rise of ‘follow the money’ investigative economics by researchers like R.T. Naylor further underlines Mills’ observations making them even more specific to the subsequent rise of neoliberalism internationally.

The dominance of finance capital with its ‘economic politicians’ is conducive to an *ad hoc* power elite since it brings together a whole class of go-betweens. “The inner core of the power elite,” Mills writes, “includes, the men of the higher legal and financial types from the great law factories and investment firms who are almost professional go-betweens of economic, political and military affairs. By the nature of their work, they transcend the narrow milieu of any one industry and so are in a position to speak and act for the corporate world.” Because finance capital involves investment here, there, and everywhere, political economy intelligence is required globally. It is intelligence with potential consequences: whether it be stiffening a currency, dropping bunker bombs, weakening a currency, or debating the efficacy of torture, and these are precisely the areas where the power elite exerts its monopoly on decision-making. The cohesion this makes for is augmented by a relatively new ‘opportunity’ which Mills highlighted, namely how executives are given restricted options to buy stock at or below current market value, options made attractive by the 1950 tax law.¹¹ Over time these have created more ties and go-betweens with finance capital, as well as being instrumental in recent scandals of the Enron variety.

Most of all, in examining the ‘military

definition of reality’, Mills takes apart the self-idealization in which a free and independent capitalism chafes at the hindrances and costs of the state. Even in its self-proclaimed turn against Keynesianism, Western capitalism has had considerable dependence on state armaments contracts. US government contracts from World War II were institutionalised in the agreement between armament corporations and the military on the timing and rules of ‘reconversion’. Mills is prescient in describing the sheer weight of the military in scientific research; the money the military invested in universities and the compromises with academic independence this involved. Similarly, in the raft of examples he gives of the ‘crony capitalist’ nature of the corporate-military revolving doors, he tells the stories of General E.R. Quesada of the H-bomb test team who became Vice-President of Lockheed, and General Jacob Evers who became technical adviser to the Fairchild Aircraft Corporation.

The Military Definition of Reality

In 1961, five years after Mills’ book was published, ex-General Eisenhower, who had been President when it was written, made a valedictory speech in which he talked of the need to “guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for this disastrous use of misplaced power exists and will persist.” Typically, the warning was delivered when it was too late to matter; his second term had finished. It was Eisenhower who coined the phrase ‘military-industrial complex’ but according to his family he was uncertain about the sufficiency of the term. In talking about a definition of reality, one which benefited corporate profitability and is especially suited to power elites, Mills helps explain Eisenhower’s inevitable uncertainty, on one hand, and the elusive nature of modern oligarchy, on the other.

The context of both Eisenhower’s speech and Mills’ book was a normalised Cold War. Of this Mills writes with what sounds like an uncannily apt description of ‘The War on Terror’: “For the first time in American history, men in authority are talking about an emergency without foreseeable end.” Worse, when this view of reality is dominant, “Every man and nation is either friend or foe ... when virtually all negotiation aimed at peaceful agreement is likely to be seen as ‘appeasement’ if not treason ... in such a context the diplomat is replaced by the warlord.” With nauseating glibness it is as if all diplomacy was inherently weak and unprincipled on the lines of the Munich agreement

with the Nazi government in 1939.

The power elite thrives in this situation because it demands that information be secret, and because it demands an anti-democratic allowance for the ‘decision-making temper’ in which it claims a monopoly. Daniel Ellsberg has described the seductive nature of secret information, the select few knowing the real stuff. We also now have bitter experience of how secret information can be censored and manipulated to suit power elite desires. Mills, many years ahead of David Halberstam’s *The Best and the Brightest*, and the Vietnam War itself, indicated how freezing out of the State Department’s China experts who had predicted the victory of the Chinese Communists in 1948, created a situation whereby the “impression grew” during the Eisenhower Presidency, “that it wasn’t safe to report the truth ... about any foreign situation when the truth didn’t jibe [chime in] with the preconceived notions of the people in Washington.”¹²

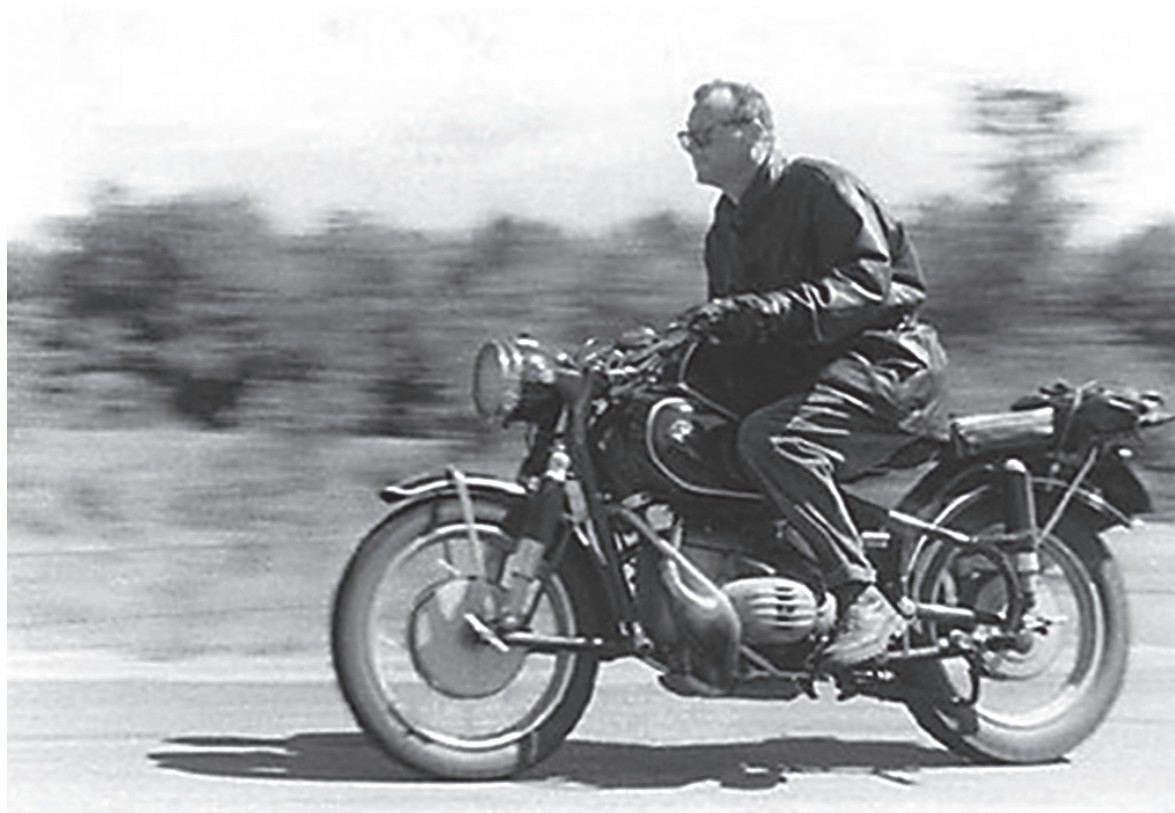
Critiques at the time¹³

The attacks on Mills’ book by Daniel Bell and Talcott Parsons, two intellectual stars of what Richard Barbrook calls the ‘Cold War left’ and who Mills himself called ‘executives of the mind’, rested, as indicated above, on a wilful avoidance of Mills’ points about stock options, interlocking directorships, and the dominance of finance capital. His critics insisted that power was so diffuse that a power elite was impossible and asserted baldly that there were multiple centres of power operating within a general consensus on politics and economics. Bell pushes this a step further by accusing Mills of going for conspiracy theory. The bad faith of his attack is, as so often, revealed in the language. Bell writes: “Although Mills contends that he does not believe in a conspiracy theory, his loose account of the centralization of power among the elite comes suspiciously close to it.” Ultimately for Bell it would be Mills, not an elite, that is the object of suspicion.

The Marxist Left of the time was almost exclusively Leninist: either ‘Stalinist’ or ‘Trotskyist’. Its attack on the book was not on the grounds of the structural reproduction of a power elite, which would have been a substantive issue, but rather on the analysis of elites *per se*. It seemed as if such an approach was heresy even if Mills had turned elite theory against its proponents. Thus Robert Lynd argued that it “provides a glittering focus above common, troublesome things like capitalism and its class structure.” In his more generous review, Paul Sweezy argued that a focus on elites “inevitably diverts attention from social structure and process, and leads to a search for external causes of social phenomena.” But from this point of view what is ‘internal’ is in practice a narrow economic determinism, while Lynd’s critique is simply unfair and carries with it a distinctly self-righteousness tone. In fact, as well as understanding the increased power of the media, Mills is clear about the function of ‘glitter’: “In part they [celebrities] have stolen the show for that is their business; in part they have been given the show by the upper classes who have withdrawn and have other business to accomplish.” Surely this is an accurate description on the role of celebrity at the World Economic Forum at Davos, or as apologists and propagandists for the international financial institutions in Make Poverty History.

...and ever since

When it comes to conspiracy theory, we have every reason to be wary. Unfortunately when power is so secretive (promises of openness always running into ‘business confidentiality’, ‘national security’ and bureaucratic obstruction) it is a common morbid symptom. There are particular and real ‘conspiracies’ that have been uncovered, like the illegal arming of the Nicaraguan Contras by the



Reagan Administration. Conspiracy theory in contrast either bumps up an individual to being the hidden global string-puller, like Aristotle Onassis in the once popular Gemstone Files, or more recently in the case of the World Trade Centre attack of 2001 which the *Loose Change* fantasists and foolish egomaniacs like Michael Meacher who say, or imply, were really carried out by the Bush Administration under the wing of an omni-powerful Mafia. By association, wild suppositions like this discredit real investigative research and journalism.

Mills is not presenting any such conspiracy, and goes some length to show that this is not what he is doing. The Cold War was not planned by a small group of ruthless men. In a well known essay of 1970, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, Jo Freeman warned against the dangers of informal, unacknowledged elites in feminist organizations which were trying at that time something very different from Leninist-type organisation. “Elites”, she noted “are not conspiracies. Very seldom does a small group of people get together to take over a larger group for their own ends.” This text has become well-known again, fetishised even by a post-structuralist analysis with its ‘gazes’ and ‘self-surveillances’, while actual study of elite power tends to get shunted off the agenda.

One of the most famous radical critiques of capitalism and its power in the late 1960s that came from the Situationist International ironically follows the Cold War Left’s assertion of the diffusion of power in modern capitalism. For the SI, this diffusion is found in the form of the ‘spectacle’, though in the later *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord becomes more concerned with secret sources of power. The net effect of the SI has been an ultra-leftist obsession with ‘recuperation’, and an emphasis on the cultural embeddedness of modern capitalism but such an approach risks confusing the issues of consumerism and the ‘provisional identities’ it may provide with the fluidity of elite networks. The phrase ‘revolving doors’ does not emphasise diffusion but suggests interchanges of power, the identification of which undermines the claim that representative democracy may periodically punish the political class at election times. Put simply the power elite are always on the move anyway.

A robust and probably the most useful empirical and theoretical work to refresh a Marxist critique of capitalism since then came from the Italian Autonomism. Whatever its origins, it theorized the working class militancy of the early 1970s in a way that placed working class agency as central to both the development of capitalism itself as well as the project of social liberation. It overthrew Leninist notions of ‘economism’ and ‘workerism’. It also fitted another anti-elitist project, a rejection of history as that of great men and individual genius for the development of a history from below. It was, and remains, a crucial break with the vanguardist past. Of course it too can be rather problematically ideologized in a mix of class guilt, and a moralistic ultra-leftism obsessed with being in the right, and from this point of view one might even see the spotlight on the power elite as another betrayal of the non-elitist worldview.

Paul Sweezy’s criticism of Mills work was not put in these terms, arguing instead that *The Power Elite* sought “external causes of social phenomena”. But this criticism, coming from a rather rigidly economic determinist variety of Marxism, implies an inaccurate separation of the internal and external to the workings of capitalism, one which is now being reproduced again in the form of “logic of capital” style of analysis. Capitalism does not have a singular internal dynamic in the compulsion to accumulate, it functions equally as a social discipline.

Capitalism is the system that accrues power to capitalists but this does not exist in an ahistorical vacuum. Only in the self-regulating market fantasy of bourgeois economics are politico-economic decisions not being made daily by institutional and



ad hoc groupings comprising individual members of the power elite. But this naivety is echoed on the left – perhaps from bitter experience of the inept opportunism of some Leninist groups/parties – when it is somehow naff to talk about powerful individuals and the consequences of their actions, that this is inherently populist and un-theoretical. It is true that empirically-based theory from Autonomists like Sergio Bologna and Feruccio Gambino some times spoke of capital’s strategies or offensives in anthropomorphic style, but they also identified decisions made by identifiable decision-makers as for example in the case of ‘Project Independence’, by which successive American Presidents from Nixon onwards used the fantasy goal of US oil independence to hold up oil prices when necessary for domestic production and class control. Oil, access to it, manipulation of its supply and price has not been ‘an external cause of social phenomena’, it has been a crucial factor in class politics and geopolitical conflict in the last 35 years. Geopolitically it is intimately associated with the arms business which itself is a major source of corporate profitability and accumulation as well as in the transfers of surplus value from poorer parts of the world to richer.

The power elite described by Mills is in its element in the world of arms and oil business. It is a secretive world where decisions are made by those tempered in decision making: tough decisions which their own soft populations cannot make.¹⁴ And that is also how it is presented from the inside. Through a conjunction of not unrelated circumstances such self-presentation has offered a huge lease of life to the consolidation of this power in the present. The ‘neo-liberal’ capitalist offensive of the 1980s and ‘90s, the resultant across-the-board growth of inequality, the increasing mismatch between financial claims and total surplus value, the rise of religious fundamentalisms, the logic of resource wars, and a variety of anti-humanist terrorisms, all these have created the conditions of “an emergency without foreseeable end” and “a military definition of reality” that Mills described. The logic has infiltrated the language and hence we now have *wars* on AIDS, on drugs, terrorism, cancer and – grotesquely – on poverty.

Student Union Tough Nuts

At first sight it’s hard to see any similarity between those East Coast aristocrats of the Cold War and the UK’s New Labour leaders for whom the worst thing that ever happened was some other squirt challenging their role in student politics. When Jack Straw stood next to ex-General Colin Powell

in the theatrical lead-up to the war on Iraq, Straw looked like a man out of his depth. But years in power, a compliant media, and a cosy relationship with oil companies, armaments makers, corporate capital in general, have found New Labour taking its place through the sort of wholesale patronage of consultancies accused of ‘plundering the public sector’. Mills described those who have been able to accumulate information and contacts “permitting them to appropriate for personal use an accumulation of advantages.” Not all aspirants can have the breadth of connections of a Dame Pauline, but by sharing a mind-set they may try to make up for it. This is precisely what New Labour formalised within the British Labour movement. Both consultants and lobbyists are a new form of the ‘intermediaries’ Mills describes, as are think tanks, and similar groupings like the British-American Project for the Successor Generation, an outfit originating during the Reagan regime, worried that the best and the brightest in Europe might not stay loyal to Washington. Its members include Geoff Mulgan, formerly of the Cabinet Office strategy unit, lobbyist Julia Hobsbawm, and institutional ‘player’ Trevor Phillips. It is funded by various heavyweights of the corporate world – Coca Cola, Monsanto, Philip Morris, BP and others – having started with money from the Pew Foundation. Its prime mover – as they say in criminal conspiracy trials – is one Nick Butler formerly of BP and the Fabian Society. With no embarrassment, he describes how he wanted to bring in, “Bright people, in many different fields, who were likely to influence outcomes in those fields. People who were interesting.”¹⁵ There is the stink of elitism here but who would dream of questioning the idea of ‘bright’ and ‘interesting’ people being self-evidently qualified to do ‘interesting’ things, unless of course we ask in whose interests they act? Predictably many of these people who are likely to “influence outcomes” (and many are) are also “directly involved with US and UK defense establishments.” Dr Madson Pirie of the Adam Smith Institute (which has an off-shoot organisation funded by British taxpayers to spread the message of privatisation in the Third World), is even more explicit: his target audience is not any old riff-raff, not the public, but a list of 660 powerful individuals, civil servants, journalists, politicians and professional businessmen.

In this world the seminar room has replaced DeLillo’s golf course. There is also the Council for European Reform¹⁶ and the Ditchley Foundation, in both of which Dame Pauline often appears. The Foundation organises and hosts conferences on a regular basis, and is involved both independently and with the Rand Corporation and US and UK defense establishments. It would be tedious to list all the ‘great and the good’ and the ‘best and the brightest’ who are trustees or board members of this outfit – diplomats, the military, journalists, politicians, and the representatives of big money – they can be seen, no conspiracy here, this is open elitism on an open website, at www.ditchley.co.uk. For example, their programme for 2003 tells a story: February 21-23 ‘The Future Role of NATO’, chaired by General Klaus Naumann; next up, March 7-9, ‘Higher Education: the global future and value of universities in the information age’. The same Peter Mandelson who was to talk of opposition to the Iraq War as “an infantile disorder” a year later, chaired the next Ditchley Park conference entitled ‘Legitimacy/Correcting the Democratic Deficit’. This democratic deficit was to be corrected by an invitation-only gathering of the elite, ‘the best and the brightest’, the ones who count. If satire were not yet outdone, the gathering took place in March 2003 as the invasion of Iraq got underway in the face of massive public opposition!

Revolving Doors

Mills’ revolving doors have become increasingly well-oiled in the Anglo-Saxon world. In the US, it is almost *de rigeur* from Treasury Secretaries, Democrat or Republican, to come out of Goldman Sachs. From the Vice-President downwards and taking in, for example, the authors of *Shock and Awe*, the ‘military-industrial complex’ is embedded in the political world more than ever. The same holds true for UK plc under New Labour. The cases of Sir (Lord) Alan West and Dame Pauline are brazen in this respect, but are not unique. Former UK Defence Minister Ivor Caplin resigned as an MP to be senior consultant with Foresight Communications (dig that name!) a lobbyist representing firms with defence interests like EADS. Lord Boyce, former Chief of the Defence Staff, has recently begun working with three companies¹⁷ all which have involvement with UK defence contracts. Sir Robert Walmsley, the Ministry of Defence’s former Chief of Defence Procurement, is now a director of two US defense firms. These moves are said to have been endorsed by Mr Blair as being in the ‘national interest’.

The same closeness of this world has also been shown up by the relationship between BAE Systems (the major British arms company) and the British government – the 2006-7 investigation into bribery involved in the long running BAE-Saudi “al-Yamamah” arms deal was stopped in the interests of ‘national security’; that’s the story. It invited a fair deal of outrage, rightly so, even if scandal and outrage have, by themselves, little impact on power elite decisions. Much less was made of how useless the weapons in question were to the Saudis given the geo-political realities which they operate within; or why the president of Kazakhstan should recruit Sir Richard Evans, BAE Systems ex-chairman and still board member, as head honcho of its oil industry; or how and why Tanzania should have bought a military radar system it has no use for; or more recently, how it was that BAE infiltrated and spied upon the Campaign Against the Arms Trade; never mind the roles of our official government arms salesmen.

‘Organized Irresponsibility’

Oscar Wilde, at his most subversive in *The Importance of Being Ernest* has a late-Victorian vicar preaching a charity sermon on behalf of The Society for the Prevention of Discontent Among the Upper Classes. From the very beginning of its existence the urban proletariat and its ‘underclasses’ have been the main focus of social investigation and research; a spy job, as an old East Londoner described it. Real life photography, even from the best of motives, has followed the same pattern. Nowadays it’s CCTV. The spotlight and the self-confidently nosey tone of investigation is hardly ever turned on the power elite, not unless they have chosen the spotlight, which is normally left to those in search of celebrity status. This is because, as Mills understood, a subservient media is part of the elite itself¹⁸, and because ‘intelligent elitists’, as Jo Freeman put it, will not seek visibility. Rather they will maintain a certain privacy through the command of legal and architectural resources. Lifting that curtain on individuals and networks is an important task but without a broad understanding of the democratic principals, which the power elite continually deride, vocal dissent can only add to the long list of apparently ‘public’ scandals.

However, the analysis provided by Mills is applicable to today’s political economy of militarised neo-liberalism. The reality of revolving doors shows in graphic style how the anti-statist ideology of this neoliberalism is disproved by its political, economic and financial dependencies on the state, whether it be military contracts or central bank rescues. The existence of a ‘global power elite’ as represented by Peter Sutherland for example, the idea of which has got US ultra-nationalists like Samuel Huntington into hysterical mode, implies a different set of revolving doors. Even so, Sutherland sat on the board of ABB with the militarist and nationalist Donald Rumsfeld. This is not to argue against the existence of a global capitalist class, or capitalism as a global

mode of production, but to point to the flimsiness of neoliberal ideology. Equally, individuals are replaceable and scandal by itself changes nothing, but individuals of the power elite, both singly and collectively, are responsible for decisions which have consequences not for themselves but for millions of other people of whose lives they know nothing. They have never sat in waiting rooms, stood in queues, or gone hungry. Such basic but unstated apartheid is integral to the power elite’s irresponsibility and unctuous inhumanity? Certainly, in the world of geopolitics this is what is nailed down in an exceptional newspaper article by former diplomat Carne Ross. Talking from bitter experience he describes the filtering of information to a very small group of decision-makers: “They make decisions based on abstractions many removes distant from reality. Even on the ground, the strictures of security prevent diplomats from all but the briefest contact with the everyday reality of Afghans and Iraqis.”

Thomas Pynchon’s fictional Mason in the novel *Mason & Dixon* warns 18th century Americans against the dangerous English ruling class who amongst other things, “will not admit to error.” A minimum requirement of bourgeois democracy is that it should have the strength to prevent its leaders from making stupid and murderous decisions. When it came to the US-UK invasion of Iraq it failed to do the job. For the many considered and intelligent people who opposed the war, this has been a demoralising experience. Though there is a crowded bandwagon of wise-after-the-eventers, these, like the armchair Spartan Richard Perle, don’t take any responsibility for what happened, standing by the invasion decision. There have been no admissions of error from its cheerleaders. ‘Star’ political writer of *The Observer*, Andrew Rawnsley, on 26th January 2003 praised Tony Blair for not ‘pandering’ to anti-war public opinion – pandering in other words to the stupid masses. At the 2006 Labour Party Conference, Blair himself said: “The British people will, sometimes, forgive a wrong decision. They won’t forgive not deciding.” This is the elite-speak of the political class in a representative democracy that has been hollowed out to such a degree that there is no need even for the pretence of a popular sovereignty. Blair’s sheer cheek is hard to match. Rawnsley, who one would have thought would have had the good grace to shut up, thought it a “masterclass.” This fetishizing of the power elite leadership, which has a long proto-fascist and corporatist lineage, is truly scary stuff.

As things stand, it is only the ubiquitous shareholder pursuing his or her private interests who has the means to bring judgement on capitalist irresponsibility and its consequences. Presently this is the case with British Petroleum. This is grotesque. There is a job to be done by the anti-capitalist movement to act more broadly in the name of the public interest. It must take this ground to spotlight responsibility in the chains of sub-contractors, in the worlds of production, in torture and in the terrorism executed and legitimated by the state; and to pin down the *ad hoc* networks that function to willfully obscure causes and consequences of elite power. With his ‘warlords’, ‘organised irresponsibility’, ‘crackpot realism’, and so on, Mills offered a guide and a whole vocabulary for contesting the power of elites. What he could not fully confront was the inadequacy of the public intellectual as a substitute for the functions of a proper democracy.

Notes

- 1. This is the final essay in Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination* which has been wonderfully realized in multi-media form by Muhammed A. Asad at: <http://craftsmanship.asad.org>
- 2. The counter attack by American capital is described in detail by Feruccio Gambino, ‘Class Composition and US Direct Investment Abroad’. *Red Notes*, 1975.
- 3. From the libertarian communist tradition, and writing at the same time as Mills’ book, the Socialisme ou Barbarisme group did concentrate on the central importance of the power and nature of decision-making as did Mills, but it was difficult for them at that time to go beyond fairly abstract templates of workers’ self-management.
- 4. Carlucci is a seriously heavyweight part of the power elite, one time Defense Secretary under Ronald Reagan,

and QinetiQ an exemplary power elite company. It owns various companies making munitions and equipment for the US military and has James Baker, George H. Bush and John Major on its books in a PR and Sales role. Carlucci himself started as a foreign service operator, complicit in the murder of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, the coup against the Goulart government in Brazil in 1964, and then the defeat of the Portuguese Revolution of 1974-5 when he was US Ambassador. These successes lead him to government roles in the Nixon government along with Donald Rumsfeld, then Deputy Director of the CIA under President Carter, and Defense Department posts under Reagan. He walked through all these revolving doors as well as circulating through the board of influential think-tanks before becoming chairman of Carlyle which has resulted in “an expanded portfolio of defense industries.” For more details see: www.counterpunch.org/schorcarlucci.html

- 5. She is mentioned in Hywel Williams book *Britain’s Power Elite*, pub. Constable, 2006. It was also inspired by Mills but is, other than sharp comments on British politics, a disappointing book with no sense of the revolving doors or *ad hoc* coherence of that elite. In Dame Pauline’s case he mentions only the Milosevic loan and QinetiQ roles.
- 6. Which doesn’t prevent Talcott Parsons in his critique of the book – and using David Riesman to back him up – simply denying by assertion the existence of any real, consequential power in the USA. This during the Cold War. See his essay in *C. Wright Mills and the Power Elite: Essays*, compiled by G. William Domhoff and Hoyt B. Ballard. Beacon Press, 1968.
- 7. The perpetuation of advantage is especially important now. A study on Intergenerational Mobility by The Centre for Economic Performance (supported by the Sutton Trust) in 2005 showed that this had decreased in the USA and even more so in the UK for children. This perpetuation is now being institutionalized by ‘family offices’. Writing in the *Guardian* (17/4/06) James Meek describes them as the ultimate symbol of true wealth. There are 11,000 such offices worldwide. They consist of “a full-time team of lawyers and accountants dedicated to the sole aim of protecting and cultivating one’s family wealth further into the future than most governments, let alone ordinary people would ever dream of.” 100 years is advised which rather puts the Five Year Plan to shame. Reporting the phenomena has not stopped the newspaper from advertising such an ‘office’. Lower down the ladder the perpetuation is being acted out in the housing market.
- 8. *The Wise Men*. Walter Isaacson and Ewen Thomas, Faber&Faber 1986
- 9. In another great Lenny Bruce riff he digs away at the exclusivity of elite names: Adlai, Averell, McGeorge.
- 10. This order of the Skull and Bones was formed in 1832 and as described by Suzanne Goldberg (*Guardian* 20/5/2004) “represented the pinnacle of prestige – or social exclusion depending on one’s point of view. Each class of Bonesmen would take it upon themselves to perpetuate the distinction by grooming its successors.” She is at pains to reject any conspiracy theory in the case of George W. Bush, though the connections helped him financially. What emerges instead is a collective belief in their entitlement to advantage.
- 11. In a method that has become standard, Daniel Bell’s critique of the book simply ignores this crucial point and introduces instead an irrelevance to do with trade associations.
- 12. On this Mills cites Charlotte Knight writing that when one Scott McLeod became head of Security in the Eisenhower State Department, “the impression grew that it wasn’t safe to report the truth to Washington about any foreign situation.” More recently Sidney Blumenthal reports that in May 2006 as the Iraq situation worsened, “Condoleezza Rice told senior staff she wants no more reporting from the embassies. She announced in a meeting that people write memos only for each other, and that no one else reads them. She said she wouldn’t read them. Instead of writing reports, the diplomats should ‘sell America’.”
- 13. All these included in G. William Domhoff and Hoyt B. Ballard cited above.
- 14. See John Barker ‘Armchair Spartans’, *Variant*, issue 24.
- 15. *Guardian Weekend* (6/11/04)
- 16. Investigated by William Clark, one of the few people to have investigated these networks of *ad hoc* power. See articles in *Lobster*, and more recently at www.nuclearspin.org
- 17. WS Atkins; Tricolom; Computer Sciences Ltd.
- 18. In *The Power Elite* he writes: “Entire brackets of professions and industries are in ‘the opinion business’...and are among these increased means of power at the disposal of elites of wealth and power; moreover some of the higher agents of the media are themselves either among the elites or very important among their servants.”

Denialism and the Armenian Genocide

Desmond Fernandes¹

Elif Shafak is currently being prosecuted in Turkey because fictional characters in her novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*² speak of a “genocide” and the mass killing of Armenians.³ Academics, journalists, teachers, human rights activists and publishers also continue to be labelled as “traitors” to the state, criminalised and subjected to death threats and other forms of intimidation (both nationally and internationally) for merely recognising or debating this genocide. In the case of Hrant Dink, the journalist and editor of the Istanbul based *Agos* newspaper, targeting ultimately led to his assassination in January 2007.

The Armenian genocide, which began in 1915, “continued through 1917 and picked up again in 1918, when Turkish [nationalist inspired] troops entered the Caucasus. In the end, Anatolia’s 3,000 year old 1.5 - 2 million strong Armenian community was gone”.⁴ Armenians were subjected to a range of genocidal processes which included massacres, death-marches, starvation and ethnic cleansing. As Turkish historian Halil Berktaş observes, “1915 fits into a pattern of nationalist, Social Darwinistically fed ideologies of mobilization and violence”.⁵ To Israel Charny, President of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, the killing that took place of “other Christian (therefore non-Turkish) groups such as the Assyrians and Greeks as well as the Armenians ... was ‘outright genocidal murder’”.⁶ The Marxist historian E. J. Hobsbawm has observed, that “Turkish modernization”, as envisaged by the Committee of Union and Progress, “shifted ... to a military-dictatorial frame and from the hope in a secular-imperial political loyalty to the reality of a purely Turkish nationalism”.⁷ The aim “was to opt for an ethnically homogenous nation, which implied the forcible assimilation [i.e. cultural genocide] of such Greeks, Armenians, Kurds and others as were either not expelled *en bloc* or massacred ... Within the Young Turks, the balance thus tilted ... to westernising but strongly ethnic or even racist modernisers”.⁸

In this scheme, “Yezidi were victims alongside Armenians in the genocide of 1915”.⁹ Many Alevis also firmly believed that they, too, were going to share the same fate as the Armenians. A study that is “based on original documentation from the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior, US and European consular, diplomatic, and private archives and memoirs” by Hilmar Kaiser, a historian specializing in German-Ottoman relations, concludes that “Greeks, Armenians, Kurds, and Balkan Muslims, as well as a many other smaller groups” were targeted “according to a single scheme”. Outlining this “scheme”, Charny writes, “the extermination of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915-1916 provided the economic basis for a full-scale ethnic re-structuring of the Ottoman provinces ... The deportation of the Kurds marked the beginning of the second phase of the demographic reorganization of the Ottoman Empire. A number of other and smaller groups were included into the assimilation programme as well, such as the deportation of Druzes from the Hauran towards Asia Minor. Jewish inhabitants of Zakho were targeted like Iranian Shiites in Mesopotamia. The assimilation of individuals was, however, only one part of the restructuring. Besides the ‘turkification’ of human beings, whole regions or critical localities were targeted as a second major aspect of the government’s programme. Therefore, whole districts were designated as a ‘turkification region’ ... Throughout 1915 and 1916, Greek villagers were deported

inland and distributed in the same manner as the Kurdish deportees among Turkish villages ... In 1917, the anti-Greek campaign was fully extended to villages along the Black Sea coast. Death-marching in snow storms and massacres”, were also undertaken.¹⁰

Charney confirms that, “the Ottoman rulers in Palestine ordered and carried out the expulsion of Jews from Jaffa-Tel Aviv in 1914 ... and again in 1917 ... A serious number of deaths resulted from these forced uprootings, and the worst that was feared never came to be, thanks only to international intervention ... The Ottomans also expelled nationalist Arabs from Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria ... The Ottomans were on a rampage to get rid of any and all who were not like them.”¹¹

Consequently, “the Ottoman Empire devoted enormous resources” towards eradicating the ‘other’: “At one stage, the Empire was fighting on no less than four separate battle fronts ... Every available man, weapon, automobile and rail car was required for war effort. Yet we have Australian prisoners-of-war reporting trainloads of Armenian deportees coming from north-east Asia Minor to the Taurus Mountains. Soldiers needed to fight at the fronts were instead sent to escort columns of Pontian Hellenes on death-marches hundreds of kilometres in length and sent to the mountains of historic Assyria to burn Assyrian villages and kill every Assyrian they could lay their hands on ... Armenians were deported to the deserts of northern Syria and either massacred or left to die ... The Military Governor of Van entered the city of Sairt, commanding a force of 8000 troops. He ordered his Kassab Tabouri (Butchers’ Battalions) to massacre all the Christians of the district: Assyrian and Armenian alike. Nor were the massacres restricted to the territory of the Ottoman Empire ...”¹²

According to R.J. Rummel, the US political scientist who coined the term *democide* for murder by government: “I do not doubt that this [Armenian] genocide occurred. Extant communications from a variety of ambassadors and other officials, including those of Italy, the then neutral United States, and Turkey’s closest ally Germany, verify and detail a genocide in process. Moreover, contemporary newsmen and correspondents documented aspects of the genocide. Then, two trials were held. One by the post-war government that replaced the Young Turks, which gathered available documentation and other evidence on the genocide and found the leaders guilty. The second trial was of the Armenian who assassinated the former Young Turk leader Talaat in Munich in 1920 ... Finally, Turkish government telegrams and minutes of meetings held by government leaders establish as well their intent to destroy all the Armenians in Turkey. In my related *Death By Government* I have quoted selections from this vast collection of documents and need not repeat them here. The sheer weight of all this material in English alone ... [is] in some ways as diverse and authoritative as that on the Holocaust”.¹³

As the US poet and academic, Peter Balakian, explains, specifically with reference to the nature of targeting actions against the Armenians: “In fact, documentation of the genocide is abundant and incontrovertible ... Lemkin, the man who coined the term “genocide”, ... named the Armenian case in first developing the concept of genocide, and he consecrated the term “Armenian genocide” ... The International Association of Genocide Scholars is unanimous in its assessment



that it was one of the major genocides of the modern era.”¹⁴

Its 1997 resolution stated that it re-affirmed “that the mass murder of Armenians in Turkey in 1915 is a case of genocide which conforms to the statutes of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. It further condemns the denial of the Armenian Genocide by the Turkish government and its official and unofficial agents and supporters”.¹⁵ In 2005, in a letter that was addressed to the Turkish Prime Minister, it reminded him of its position on the matter and additionally pointed out that “Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin, when he coined the term genocide in 1944, cited the Turkish extermination of the Armenians and the Nazi extermination of the Jews as defining examples of what he meant by genocide”.¹⁶ It clarified the point that “to deny its factual and moral reality as genocide is not to engage in scholarship but in propaganda and efforts to absolve the perpetrator, blame the victims, and erase the ethical meaning of this history”.¹⁷

Nevertheless, despite all this ‘evidence’ concerning the genocide, it is instructive to note that certain governments (such as the USA, UK and Israel), corporations (particularly, but not exclusively, ones related to the ‘military industrial complex’ in the US), think tanks and lobbying groups have actively chosen *not* to interpret these ‘events’ as genocide because of political expediency, ideological biases and/or profits that stand to be made if stances that are “agreeable” to the denialist Turkish state are adopted. Consequently, even though the United States has “full information about the genocide”, R.J. Rummel confirms that, “for political reasons, the State Department refuses to ... even acknowledge that the genocide took place. Now, Israel – ISRAEL – not only joins the United States in this, but also pressures its genocide scholars and others against public comments on it. How explain this? By two words that I increasingly find distasteful – *real politic*. I hope some day we can encase in lead the foreign policy these words describe and drop it in the deepest part of the ocean. The sound we might then hear could be the cheering of all the dead souls whose memory this policy has consigned to oblivion”.¹⁸

To Robert Fisk, the Middle East correspondent for *The Independent*, we need to additionally be aware that “the holocaust deniers of recent years – deniers of the Turkish genocide of 1.5 million Armenian Christians in 1915, that is – include Lord Blair, who originally tried to prevent Armenians from participating in Britain’s Holocaust Day”.¹⁹ For Donald Bloxham, Professor of History at Edinburgh University, “if the British government wishes to continue its policy of not calling a spade a spade in relation to the Armenian genocide, it would be at least more honest if it acknowledged that this is entirely due to its desire to maintain good relations with the Turkish state, and nothing at all to do with proper examination of the

historical record. Such honesty about *realpolitik* may be difficult, since this would call into question the integrity of Britain's supposed commitment, enshrined in our annual Holocaust Memorial Day, to learning the lessons of past genocides in order to prevent them in future".²⁰

Thomas O'Dwyer, writing in *Ha'aretz* in 2003, has commented upon the equally questionable manner in which, "not for the first time, we have witnessed the State of Israel's complicity in the lie ... This is political expediency at its most morally bankrupt. Tripping over itself in its stupid defense of the untenable Turkish position" which denies the Armenian genocide, "the Israeli Foreign Ministry has again and again played an active role in suppressing even discussion of the issue ... What is shocking is that there should be any question whatsoever of Israel denying the murder of a nation ... Turkey's denials of the Armenian

massacre will not endure – but the memory of Israel's refusal to speak out against the denial just might".²¹ The Israeli academic Yair Auron, author of 'The Banality of Denial: Israel and the Armenian Genocide', has clarified that, in his opinion, "the Israeli government's abetting of Turkey's denial is not only a 'moral disgrace', it also 'hurts the legacy and heritage of the Holocaust. When we help a country deny the genocide of its predecessor, we also help the deniers of the Holocaust, because they watch what's happening. They see that in this cynical world, if you invest persistent efforts in denial, then denial, to some extent at least, succeeds"²² ... Out of political expediency, other governments, including that of the United States and Israel, have aided and abetted Turkey in its rewriting of history".²³

To Rabbi Kenneth I. Segal, spiritual leader of the Beth Israel Congregation in Fresno, California, "a 'political stench' [has] emanated from the role played by the Israeli Embassy in the United States in the matter".²⁴ With the statement by Shimon Peres in 2001, Auron observes that the then Israeli Foreign Minister "joined the deniers on behalf of the Israeli

government. This was not The Holocaust (with capital H), this was not a holocaust or even a genocide, claimed the minister. What is it but an Israeli escalation from passive to active denial, from moderate denial to hard-line denial? Imagine the Israeli and Jewish reaction to a similar claim by another country's Foreign Minister, regarding the Holocaust. What would be their reaction if the Holocaust had been called a 'tragedy?' Peres' views were repeated, unfortunately, by the Israeli Ambassador to Turkey in Georgia and Armenia, Rivka Cohen, in February 2002 in Yerevan, and then by the Israeli Foreign Ministry".²⁵

For Auron: "We cannot minimize the historical significance of this terrible statement. Not a holocaust, not genocide; only 'victims', 'plight', and 'tragedy', without even mentioning who the perpetrators were. There is no mention of a killer, as if it were a natural disaster, but there is mention of the emotional relevance to both sides – the Turks and the Armenians (imagine Jews and Germans being mentioned together in the case of the Holocaust!) ... There is a lot of cynicism, arrogance, internal contradiction, and irresponsibility in this dangerous official statement."²⁶

"Within Israel itself", it needs to be understood that there has also, for several years, been "Israeli involvement in preventing a memorial day for the Armenians"²⁷ to commemorate and/or recognise the Armenian genocide, just as there have been

Israeli government inspired attempts to halt any recognition of the Armenian genocide in the US Senate. This stance has been criticised from several Israeli quarters: "In an article in *Ha'aretz*", for example, "Akiva Eldar claimed: 'The politics of [Israeli] weapons dealers has long since pushed morality aside'²⁸ ... An editorial" in the same paper has "compared the intention behind the attempts to deny the Holocaust to the intention of the Turkish government. It says that Israel cannot whitewash the evil implicit in such assistance: 'The memory of the Holocaust which befell us commands us to display understanding for the sense of suffering of the Armenian people, and not to be an obstacle in the path of American legislation of its memory' ... An editorial in the popular *Yedioth Ahronoth*" has also concluded that "'What was inflicted upon the Armenians in 1915 certainly belongs in the category of genocide' ... In the issue of *Maariv*, ... an article by journalist Shmuel Shnitzer" raised the point that "'We, who struggle against the attempts of shady historians and slick politicians to deny the gas chambers and the genocide of the Jewish people, are natural allies of the Armenians in the war against erasure and denial ... If we have minimal decency, if the truth is precious to us even when it is inconvenient to the government or any other, we are obliged to strengthen the American Senate in its initiative to stand up for memory – ours and that of other victims of the evil plot to exterminate a people and then to enlist a thousand reasons to cover up the horror' ... Sheila Hattis wrote" in *Davar* "that the reports of the involvement of Jews and Israeli diplomats in the efforts to prevent establishment of a day of remembrance of the Armenian Genocide was 'one of the most nauseating reports appearing in the press in recent times' ... Boaz Evron's article"²⁹ in *Yedioth Ahronoth* points to "another reason" which possibly explains the Israeli government's questionable genocide denialist position on the matter. It is one, he suggests, that must be confronted and criticised: "We, who recall the Holocaust every day, are not willing to allow anyone else any part or possession of his [or her] own Holocaust. Isn't it our main asset today? It is the only thing around which we attempt to frighten Israelis against leaving the country. It is the only thing by which we attempt to silence the Gentiles".³⁰

In Israel itself, an initiative by Haim Oron to secure Armenian genocide recognition was also recently opposed by key Israeli government representatives. According to the 15th March 2007 edition of *Today's Zaman*: "The Israeli parliament, the Knesset, declined yesterday to approve a resolution recognizing Armenian claims of genocide ... The resolution, submitted by lawmaker Haim Oron, drew anger from some quarters in the Israeli government and was rejected by parliament ... Oron ... was quoted as saying ... 'It is a debt we owe to the Armenian people and one we owe to ourselves' ... Oron said he has been under heavy pressure from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's office as well as the Foreign Ministry to withdraw his motion."³¹

On the 90th anniversary of the Armenian genocide in 2005, Larry Derfner noted the following in *The Jerusalem Post*: "What does the State of Israel and many of its American Jewish lobbyists have to say about it[?] ... If they were merely standing silent, that would be an improvement. Instead, on the subject of the Armenian genocide, Israel and some US Jewish organizations, notably the American Jewish Committee [AJC], have for many years acted aggressively as silencers ... Israel and the US Jewish establishment may say they're neutral over what happened to the Armenians 90 years ago, but their actions say the opposite. They've not only taken sides, they're on the barricades ... Ninety years after the Armenian genocide, there is a decent Jewish response to the sickening behavior of the State of Israel, the American Jewish Committee and [many] other US Jewish organizations: Not in our name".³² In a subsequent article, he had this to say: "I've learned how Israeli governments and some of their American Jewish lobbyists have been so crucial to Turkey's

campaign to cover the genocide up. They've acted, and continue to act, mainly in the name of Israel's military, economic and political relations with Turkey. In 60 years, then, it seems Israeli government leaders and more than a few Diaspora *macherim*³³ have picked up a few pointers on how to excuse the inexcusable. Knowing their role in the legacy of the Armenian genocide, I can't listen to these people talk about the legacy of the Holocaust".³⁴

A 2007 report in *Today's Zaman*, moreover, confirms that: "In a letter addressing influential members of US Congress, including head of the House of Representatives' Foreign Relations Committee Tom Lantos, US-based Jewish groups demanded that voting on congressional resolutions urging the US administration to recognize an alleged genocide of Armenians be delayed. The letter was jointly signed by B'nai B'rith International, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee [AJC] and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs [JINSA]."³⁵

In terms of other lobbying activities that have been undertaken, it is worth reflecting upon the following: "Turkey is known to have offered funding for academic programmes in universities such as Princeton and Georgetown. In 1998, UCLA's history department voted to reject a \$1m offer to endow a programme in Turkish and Ottoman studies because it was conditional on denying the Armenian genocide. In August 2000, Turkey threatened Microsoft with serious reprisals unless all mention of the Armenian genocide was removed from an online encyclopaedia. According to Professor Colin Tatz, an Australian academic, 'Turkey has used a mix of academic sophistication and diplomatic thuggery to put both memory and history in reverse gear'".³⁶ "Since 1999, the Turkish government has engaged the services of The Livingston Group to block these congressional resolutions" seeking to acknowledge the Armenian genocide. "The lobbying firm is led by the highly influential former Cong. Bob Livingston ... More than \$10 million" has been "paid" to "the Livingston Group" by the Turkish government "in the past 5 years (figures based on a recent study conducted by Public Citizen) ... Efforts of the American Turkish Council (ATC) and the Assembly of Turkish American Associations (ATAA) in countering these two [Armenian genocide recognition] resolutions" have also been made.³⁷ The ATC "has consistently lobbied against successive [Armenian] Genocide resolutions, using the names of top US companies including Raytheon, Boeing, Lockheed-Martin and others in their advocacy efforts".³⁸ Other key 'players' that have been involved in supporting the Turkish state's Armenian genocide denialist and/or anti-Armenian 'genocide recognition' stances include the American Business Forum in Turkey (ABFT),³⁹ several 'neocons' and "Morton Abramovich, the former US Ambassador to Turkey" and former Assistant US Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research (1985-89) who "is President of the Carnegie Foundation, a member of the editorial board of the prestigious journal *Foreign Policy*, and a founder of American Friends of Turkey. As a Washington insider, he has been an important asset to Turkey in supporting the denial of the Armenian Genocide".⁴⁰ Additional 'assets' have been identified: "In 1990, the Philip Morris lobby and the powerful Aerospace Industries Association were at the forefront of the effort to defeat Senate Resolution 212 on the recognition of the Armenian Genocide".⁴¹ Kate Ackley also confirms that "companies such as Citigroup, Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Pfizer, Philip Morris International, Raymond James and others are working through the [American Turkish] Council to stop the resolution".⁴² Richard Gephardt has also "been busy" since spring 2007 "promoting his new favorite cause – not universal health care or Iraq, but the Republic of Turkey, which now pays his lobbying firm, DLA Piper, \$100,000 per month for his services. Thus far, Gephardt's achievements have included arranging high-level meetings for Turkish dignitaries" and "circulating a slim paperback volume ... that denies the existence of the Armenian genocide of 1915".⁴³



Auron has additionally clarified that “Turkish Jewry’s prominent involvement in the domestic American debate” has “added an additional dimension to the issue. The chief rabbi of Turkey sent a personal letter to every member of the US Senate” some time ago “saying: ‘The new initiative [aimed at recognising the Armenian genocide] greatly troubles our community. We recognise the tragedy which befell both the Turks and the Armenians ... but we cannot accept the definition of ‘genocide’”.⁴⁴ Genocide, the chief rabbi noted, as far as the Armenian case was concerned, represented a “baseless charge”.⁴⁵ Auron confirms that “the rabbi’s reasoning was”, actually, “identical to that of the Turkish authorities”.⁴⁶ He further used the “argument that such action” – i.e. recognition of the Armenian genocide as ‘genocide’ – “would diminish and relativize the significance of the [Jewish] Holocaust”.⁴⁷ Ron Kampeas has reported that “top Turkish officials and Turkish Jewish leaders” in 2007 had, indeed, jointly “sought help from US Jewish leaders to stave off an effort in the US Congress to define World War I-era massacres of Armenians by Ottoman Turks as genocide ... The Turkish lobbying has had some effect ... Significantly, a Jewish community delegation ... was one of three delegations Turkey sent to Washington in recent months”.⁴⁸

In Turkey, meanwhile, where the state still persists with an Armenian – and Assyrian, Pontic Greek and Kurdish – genocide denialism policy even as it continues with a culturally genocidal policy against Kurds and Armenians,⁴⁹ Halil Berktay clarifies that: “Such denialist indoctrination continues to emanate from the most authoritarian, militaristic, nationalistic ... elements of the military-bureaucratic complex, which are forcefully imposing it on the rest of Turkish society, including the media, political parties, and even the government. They are, indeed, using and manipulating this discourse to pursue objectives that are not limited to the Armenian question as such. What they are maximally after is straitjacketing all other public visions, outlooks and discourses, and establishing un-crossable “red lines”, so-called, so as to maintain the whole political system in ideological bondage to the deep state. It is as part of that blinding, blinkering and straitjacketing attempt that they are also trying to persuade (or rather, stampede) all the rest of Turkish society into standing in solidarity with the main actors of 1915, the decision-makers and the executors [of the genocide], on the grounds that they were – Turks. In Turkish nationalist discourse, therefore, Enver, Talaat and Cemal, and Bahaddin Sakir, Kuscubasi Esref, Dr. Nazim and all others of the TM, and the likes of the sub-governor of Bogazliyan, are divested of all other qualities except their Turkishness; stripped of their dictatorial inclinations, their putschism, their authoritarianism, their extra-legality and non-accountability, their propensity to have their opponents and critics (including free-thinking journalists) assassinated, their extreme nationalism tinged with racism and Social Darwinism – stripped, in other words, of all evidence of a political-ideological outlook that today, with the advantage of hindsight, we might qualify as proto-fascist.”⁵⁰

For Elif Shafak: “For me, the recognition of 1915 is connected to my love for democracy and human rights ... If we had been able to face the atrocities committed against the Armenians in Anatolia, it would have been more difficult for the Turkish state to commit atrocities” – defined as genocidal in their nature and scope during the 1990’s by Article 19, Haluk Gerger, Ismail Besikci⁵¹ and Karen Parker – “against the Kurds”. Even as Shafak observes that “a society based on amnesia cannot have a mature democracy”,⁵² Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (amongst others) reminds us that Turkey is still practicing linguistic genocide against the Kurds and still remains in breach of two articles of the United Nations’ Genocide Convention.⁵³

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Notes

1. Desmond Fernandes is a representative of the Campaign Against Criminalising Communities and was a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography (1994-2006) and Genocide Studies (2001-2006) at De Montfort University, Bedford, England. He is the author of *Perspectives on the Armenian, Assyrian, Greek and Kurdish Genocides* (Apec, Stockholm, in press), *US, UK, German, Israeli and NATO 'Inspired' Psychological Warfare Operations Against the 'Kurdish Threat' in Turkey and Northern Iraq* (Apec, Stockholm, in press), *The Kurdish Genocide in Turkey* (Apec, Stockholm, in press), *Colonial Genocides in Turkey, Kenya and Goa* (Apec, Stockholm, in press) and co-author of *Verfolgung, Krieg und Zerstörung Der Ethnischen Identität: Genozid An Den Kurden In Der Türkei* (Medico International, Frankfurt, 2001). Please note: Emphasis, as presented in this text, is by the author.
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Gordon Brown: From reformism to neoliberalism

John Newsinger

“The distribution of income in Britain has now become so unequal that it is beginning to resemble a Third World country”, wrote Gordon Brown in his 1989 indictment of Thatcherism, *Where There Is Greed*. He complained that since 1979 “an extraordinary transfer of resources, from poor to rich, has taken place”. Indeed, so great had the level of inequality become that it was “difficult to argue that there remains even a common interest between the top 1 percent to whom Mrs Thatcher has given so much, and the rest of the nation”. And, of course, inequality was even more glaring with regard to the distribution of wealth. According to Brown, the richest 10 percent of the population owned more than 50 percent of the wealth, while the bottom 50 percent of the population owned only 7 percent. Even more outrageous, under Thatcher “the wealth of the top 1 percent, who now own 17 percent, had more than doubled”.¹ Remember, this was written in 1989 and the situation was to get considerably worse in the run-up to Labour’s 1997 election victory.

Now that he has been chancellor of the exchequer for ten years in a New Labour government with a large majority, what has Brown done to remedy the injustices and inequalities of the Thatcher years? Not only has he done nothing to reverse “the extraordinary transfer of resources from the poor to the rich” that so outraged him in 1989; under New Labour the situation has continued to get worse. When New Labour came to power in 1997 the proportion of the country’s wealth in the hands of the richest 1 percent had reached 20 percent. By 2004, with Brown as chancellor, it had increased to 24 percent.² According to one commentator, the 600,000 individuals who make up the richest 1 percent were, on average, £737,000 richer than they had been under the Conservatives.³ More recently, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2005-6 saw both relative and absolute poverty increase. The institute reported that income inequality today is “higher than Labour inherited by a statistically significant amount”.⁴ Brown is still trumpeted as the Labour Party’s most successful chancellor ever.

In *Where There Is Greed* Brown not only condemned increasing inequality under Thatcher, but also savaged the Conservative policy of privatisation. He was particularly critical of the dramatic increases in pay that the top executives of the privatised utilities awarded themselves. He also censured the erosion of civil liberties under the Conservatives, complaining that “information on individuals is now compiled and held on an unprecedented scale” and that “the right of assembly and the right to protest have been curtailed in ways that were not contemplated under any other post-war Conservative administration”. New Labour have, of course, far surpassed the Tories in their assault on civil liberties – with Brown’s full support. But back in 1989 he even complained of the government allowing “the Murdoch empire” to take over the *Times*.

What was Brown’s answer to all this? “Socialism has always been about more than equality,” Brown insisted, very deliberately distancing himself from the Labour right. Indeed, he warned that hard-won political and social rights were always in danger while they “existed side by side with huge concentrations of private unaccountable power”. The way forward was to forge “a strong economic democracy”. This was his vision of socialism.⁵

How did Gordon Brown, the champion of “a strong economic democracy”, become the champion of privatisation, of the market, of the interests of the super-rich, of globalisation, of the whole neoliberal agenda? The Brown who in 1989 warned of the danger posed by “huge concentrations of private unaccountable power” went on to embrace them, court them and govern in their interests. And this was openly celebrated: in March 2006, for example, Brown proudly announced the establishment of an International Business Advisory Council to help ensure that British economic policy remained in the best interests of global capital. Its members included Lee Scott, president and chief executive officer (CEO) of Wal-Mart; Lord Browne, chief executive of BP; Jean Pierre Garnier, CEO of GlaxoSmithKline; Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft; Robert Rubin, chairman of Citigroup; Ratan Tata, chairman of the Tata Group; Sir John Rose, CEO of Rolls Royce; Sir Terry Leahy, CEO of Tesco; and Meg Whitman, CEO of eBay.⁶ Needless to say, these people are not friends of the labour movement, either in Britain or abroad; they are its enemies, extreme examples of those whose huge wealth Brown had once considered made it difficult to believe that they still had any “common interest” with the rest of humanity.

Brown’s courtship of Rupert Murdoch, conducted in competition with Tony Blair, has been even more grotesque. This competition between the prime minister and chancellor led Murdoch to complain in a recent interview that whenever he visited Britain he always had to “have tea” with both men “or they are very suspicious that you are lining up with the other one”. For Murdoch, the test for Brown as prime minister will be “how much would he let the private sector get involved in health and education”.⁷ This courtship of the reactionary, union-busting, tax-dodging Murdoch, something unprecedented in Labour Party history, tells us everything we need to know about the politics of New Labour.

This article will examine how Brown got to where he is today. It will chronicle and attempt to explain his remarkable trajectory from student radical to left Labour MP to becoming one of the principal architects of New Labour and, at last, to the enthusiastic embrace of neoliberalism.

Student radical

Brown was born in 1951, the son of a Presbyterian minister. He was brought up in a middle class household with a strong social conscience. In 1967 he arrived, aged 16 and with this social conscience

still intact, as a student at Edinburgh University. Here Brown, along with thousands of others, found himself part of a student revolt. Although he was certainly influenced by the radical ideas of the time, Brown never embraced the politics of direct action and in 1969 he joined the Labour Party. This did not involve any commitment to Harold Wilson’s Labour government, but rather a belief that the Labour Party in Scotland could be transformed into a vehicle for radical change. Brown first came to prominence as a student politician in 1970 when the university principal, Michael Swann, categorically denied that the university had investments in any companies involved in apartheid South Africa. This was a lie of Blairite proportions. Brown received leaked documentary proof of this, and a special issue of the student newspaper was produced to expose the scandal. He went on to get a first class degree and began a PhD on the history of the Scottish Labour Party.

Brown continued to be involved in student politics and in 1972 campaigned on a “student power” platform for election as rector of the university. The rectorship was an office elected by students, usually contested by various notables and celebrities, and, once elected, the rector only ever played a nominal role. To the horror of the university authorities, Brown won an overwhelming victory, and immediately demanded that the university should support the campaign for increased grants. During his time as rector, he argued for working class representation on the university court, proposing that two vacancies be filled by the president of Edinburgh Trades Council and by the secretary of a tenants’ association. In retrospect, Brown was to regret this protracted involvement in student politics, but to his credit he was actively involved in the Chile Solidarity Campaign, set up in response to the CIA-sponsored military coup that overthrew the government of Salvadore Allende on 11 September 1973 (“the other 9/11”), and supported the miners during the 1974 strike that brought down the Heath government.⁸

It was in this period of military coups, American defeat in Vietnam and governments brought down by industrial action that Brown edited *The Red Paper on Scotland*, a collection of articles published in 1975. It was a new leftist celebration of radical politics, which included contributions from Tom Nairn, John McGrath, John Foster, Robin Cook and others. Brown’s own contribution condemned “the gross inequalities which disfigure Scottish life”, and argued that the times cried out for “a new commitment to socialist ideals”. He urged “a coherent strategy” of reforms designed “to cancel the logic of capitalism” and to lead “us out of one social order into another”. This would involve “a phased extension of public control under workers’ self-management and the prioritising of social needs by the communities themselves”. He called for “a planned economy” and for “workers’ power”, identifying himself with “Scotland’s socialist pioneers, Hardie, Smillie, Maxton, Maclean, Gallacher, Wheatley and others” – a pantheon



that included both revolutionary and reformist socialists. What was needed was “a positive commitment to creating a socialist society”.⁹

Brown’s student activism denied him a teaching post at Edinburgh University. Instead he got a post at Glasgow College of Technology in 1976, and in 1980 gave up academic life to work as a producer at Scottish Television. Brown was elected onto the executive of the Scottish Labour Party in 1976 and eventually, in 1983, was elected Labour MP for Dunfermline East in the face of Thatcher’s post-Falklands general election victory.

Labour MP

Brown became a Labour MP as the Thatcher government’s assault on the labour movement was moving towards a climax with the Great Miners’ Strike of 1984-5. He confronted this turning point in the class struggle as a left wing Labour MP, someone who was never to embrace Bennisism, but who nevertheless continued to advocate a reformism that he believed would raise up the working class, confound the capitalist enemy and accomplish a peaceful transition to socialism. In 1983, together with Robin Cook, he published a powerful collection of articles on poverty and deprivation in Scotland entitled *Scotland: The Real Divide*. In his introduction Brown argued that the “first prerequisite for eradicating poverty is the redistribution of income and wealth from rich to poor”. In what reads like an indictment of his later policies as chancellor, Brown insisted:

Taxation should rise progressively with income. Programmes that merely redistribute poverty from families to single persons, from the old to the young, from the sick to the healthy, are not a solution. What is needed is a programme of reform that ends the current situation where the top 10 percent of the population own 80 percent of the wealth and 30 percent of the income, even after tax. As Tawney remarked, “What some people call a problem of poverty, others call the problem of riches.”

Such views would later become anathema. At the time, however, he was adamant that “the goal would not simply be the minimalist one of equalising opportunities, a strategy akin to what Tawney described as ‘the impertinent courtesy of an invitation to unwelcome guests in the certainty that circumstances would prevent them from accepting it.’” So much for the cornerstone of New Labour’s claim to be “progressive” today. Moreover, a crucial point of the package of reforms that Brown was advocating was that taxation of the rich should be increased – increased, that is, from the then top rate of 60 percent.¹⁰

The 1984-5 miners’ strike was the most bitter and hard fought class struggle in Britain

since before the Second World War. It was a decisive moment when the opportunity to defeat Thatcherism was lost and the labour movement went down to a historic defeat.¹¹ In Scotland, Brown gave the miners his full support throughout the battle, appearing on picket lines, donating a significant proportion of his salary and challenging the Thatcher government’s decision to confiscate the benefits of striking miners’ families. His commitment to the miners’ cause earned him honorary membership of the Scottish Miners’ Union. In the aftermath of the strike he published his biography of the Scottish leader of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), James Maxton, a labour of love that it had taken him 20 years to write. Maxton was one of the great spokesmen for reformist socialism in the period between the two world wars. He supported workers’ struggles, savagely attacked the capitalist class and was a constant critic of the compromises and betrayals of the Labour Party leadership that were to culminate with Ramsay Macdonald’s defection to the Conservatives in 1931. The collapse of the Labour government saw Maxton lead the ILP out of the Labour Party in 1932. He condemned the Labour Party as irredeemably compromised and no longer a vehicle for socialist change. Any sympathy with Maxton would be inconceivable for the Gordon Brown of today, but the Brown of the mid-1980s was different. He produced a sympathetic and scholarly account that celebrated a tradition of militant reformism, an account that was still fuelled by anger at the defeat of the miners.

Some commentators have seen the book as marking a turning point for Brown: he celebrates Maxton’s principled intransigence, but in the end rejects it because it can only lead to political impotence. This is to read Brown’s subsequent trajectory into the book in a way that is not substantiated by the actual text. Certainly Brown acknowledges contemporary criticisms of Maxton’s “purism”, but he goes on to reject them. He insists, “Maxton’s journey through the politics of the twenties and thirties must be viewed in context.” Just at the moment when the Great Depression “cried out for a radical political response, the British Labour Party seemed immobilised, frozen by the enormity of the challenge”. The great weight of his criticism is of the Labour Party, not of Maxton. There is, I would argue, no doubt that at this time Brown’s loyalties still lay with some sort of militant reformism. The book ends with a strong endorsement of Maxton’s socialist vision.¹²

We have already looked at Brown’s 1989 book, *Where There Is Greed*, a book in which he continues to condemn Thatcher and all her works and argues for a left Keynesian reformism. What was to transform him into a champion of neoliberalism?

Architect of New Labour?

One of the problems with bourgeois political science as it is practised in British universities is that it focuses on the shadows cast by the class struggle rather than on the class struggle itself. From this point of view New Labour is regarded primarily as an electoral phenomenon, as a necessary step if the Labour Party was to secure the votes of the Thatcherite middle class and have any chance of taking power. The problem with this particular view of politics is that it ignores, indeed helps conceal, the way that power is actually exercised in capitalist societies, and in particular it renders the ruling class invisible. The reality is that New Labour was the product of class struggle or, more to the point, of defeat in the class struggle. The emergence of New Labour was predicated on the defeat of the miners’ strike and of the print unions (by Rupert Murdoch) at Wapping. These defeats registered a historic shift in the balance of class forces in Britain, and New Labour was a product of that shift. Whereas previous Labour governments had served as mediators between the trade unions and the capitalist ruling class, in the aftermath of defeat this was no longer a viable role.¹³ After Thatcher’s victories the ruling class no longer needed a party to mediate with the trade unions.

If the Labour Party was to get into government again it needed to make itself acceptable to the ruling class – it needed to embrace Thatcherism and transform itself into the party of business, the party of globalisation. This was to become Brown’s objective in the 1990s.

Defeat in the 1992 general election is often seen as decisive in transforming Brown from a reformist socialist into a neoliberal. In reality, it only consolidated developments that were already under way. The task of making Labour acceptable to big business began under Neil Kinnock, continued under John Smith and was merely carried forward to completion by Brown and Blair. Whereas, for Blair, the embrace of neoliberalism involved no great personal struggle because he had no previous beliefs to dispose of, for Brown it involved a deliberate decision to change sides. The effort, one suspects, damaged his personality. Nevertheless, for Brown, the class struggle was over and the capitalist class had won, both domestically and globally. Once he had come to terms with this, he embraced the neoliberal agenda with all the fervour of the recently converted. While there is no evidence to show that Brown was ever an admirer of the Soviet Union, at the very least, the victory of the United States in the Cold War would have reinforced this conclusion. And it was to the United States that he turned for the model of the New Jerusalem that beckoned humanity. It began with an enthusiasm for Bill Clinton, but has since generalised into a belief that the United States is the global future.¹⁴

What seems clear, looking back, is that it was Brown and not Blair who was the principal architect of New Labour. Blair was more the salesman. Brown was by far the most substantial of those pushing the neoliberal agenda within the Labour leadership. George Galloway has provided an interesting assessment of the calibre of the two men:

Brown was a political titan compared to Blair; as deep as Blair was shallow, as serious as Blair was slick. Brown versus Blair was like a contest between Bertrand Russell and Bob Monkhouse (whose motto, incidentally, could easily be Blair’s: “Once you learn how to fake the sincerity, the rest is easy”).¹⁵

This makes Brown’s culpability all the greater.

Nevertheless, when Labour leader John Smith died from a heart attack in May 1994, Brown found himself outmanoeuvred for the party leadership by Blair.¹⁶ He regarded himself as having been betrayed by people he had trusted, something he has never forgotten or forgiven. His position was still remarkably strong, however. He extracted from Blair an agreement (the Granita agreement) that gave him control of economic and social policy in a future Labour government, together with the promise that Blair would hand the prime ministership over to him in the not too distant future. This unprecedented agreement was testimony to the extent to which Brown was the driving force behind New Labour.

As shadow chancellor, Brown played the decisive role in remaking the Labour Party as New Labour, “the party of business”. In speech after speech to business leaders, he insisted that Labour had accepted the results of Thatcherism, embraced market forces, adapted itself to the supposed realities of globalisation, and cherished the entrepreneur above all others. He even tried to invent a business background for himself. In November 1996 Brown told the Confederation of British Industry conference that “business is in my blood”. His mother had been a company director and “I was brought up in an atmosphere where I knew exactly what was happening as far as business was concerned”. He was, indeed he had always been, one of them. The only problem is that it was not true. As his mother subsequently admitted, she would never have called herself “a business woman”: she had only ever done some “light administrative duties” for “a small family firm” and had given up the job when she married, three years before young Gordon was even born.¹⁷ While there have been Labour politicians who have tried to invent working class backgrounds for themselves before, Brown is the first to try and invent a capitalist background.

“Britain is made for globalisation”

Since becoming chancellor of the exchequer Brown has regularly boasted to business audiences, both at home and abroad, of how New Labour has made Britain “the most business friendly environment in Europe”, although on this particular occasion he did go on to acknowledge that there was still a lot to learn “from the entrepreneurial and flexible labour markets of the American economy”. Some of these speeches have been collected in his recently published *Speeches 1997-2006*. They provide a wealth of evidence of the way in which he has transformed himself from a reformist socialist into a full-blown neoliberal. In a speech to the Social Market Foundation in February 2002, Brown admitted that making Britain a paradise for business and the rich had involved “a break from a hundred years of Labour history”. Indeed, he went on to warn that “we need to affirm a yet more radical break with Labour’s past”. Whereas, in the past, the left had seen markets as “leading to inequality, insecurity and injustice”, now he could “assert with confidence that promoting the market economy helps us to achieve our goals of a stronger economy and a fairer society”. He actually went on in the same speech to accuse the Conservatives of not being pro-market enough. It had been necessary to make “fundamental changes” to Labour Party policy, but he was now confident that Britain would “be a beacon for the world, where enterprise and fairness march forward together”.

Brown was even prepared to pay tribute to the contribution made by Margaret Thatcher, no longer “the betrayer of Britain’s future”, but the country’s saviour. In a speech made in July 2004, he was fulsome in his praise: “She recognised the need for Britain to reinvent itself and rediscover a new and vital self-confidence”. She, he went on, “understood that we could gain strength from the glories of our past which could point the way to a glorious future”. While Thatcher had made mistakes, nevertheless there had been many “advances, achievements and important changes”. In this same speech, he recited some of “the real achievements” of Britain’s glorious past, which included the country’s “imperial mission” and the fact that Britain was once “centre to the world’s largest empire – the global economy of the day”.

What was needed, according to Brown, was not just the transformation of the Labour Party into “the party of business”, but the transformation of British culture. In July 2001 he urged that “a truly entrepreneurial culture” should be created in Britain. He went on:

We want every young person to hear about business and enterprise in schools; every college student to be made aware of the opportunities in business and to start a business; every teacher to be able to communicate the virtues and potential of business and enterprise.

Socialism, for Brown (and he still used the word to trade union and Labour Party audiences), had become “the creation of a deeper and wider entrepreneurial culture where enterprise is truly open to all”. One can imagine the outcry if any previous Labour government had ever suggested that schools should inculcate socialist values or trade union solidarity!

Brown returned to this theme later the following year (December 2002) in a speech to the Growing Business Awards. New Labour, he boasted, had “done a lot to make businessmen and women role models for young people” and to “make successful business leaders role models in every community”. They were creating “a wider and deeper enterprise culture”. In effect, British culture had to be “Americanised”.

On 2 December 2005, addressing business leaders at the Advancing Enterprise Conference in London, Brown welcomed the event as “a concrete expression of our partnership”. They had “a shared agenda” and New Labour could be relied on to “take it forward”. He was, he told his audience, particularly looking forward to the session on “our educational priorities” that was being led by that great educationalist Terry Leahy, the chief executive officer of Tesco. Brown promised them

that “if we work together then I believe we shall prove that Britain is made for globalisation and globalisation is made for Britain”.¹⁸

The politics of spin

One point worth considering is how it is that Brown has still managed to appear to some people (admittedly a declining number) as being to the left of Blair. To a considerable extent this has been the result of “spin”, reinforcing wishful thinking, although it also derives from a very deliberate effort, in which Brown has played an important part, to locate New Labour within the Labour Party tradition, arguing that it is a development of “Croslandism”. Let us consider the question of “spin” first.

In 1998, in what one commentator described as a “frenzy of privatisation” that “bordered on the messianic”, Brown proposed the privatisation of the Post Office.¹⁹ This was opposed by the then secretary of state for trade and industry, Peter Mandelson, who instead proposed that it be retained in the public sector, but be given commercial “freedom”. In this particular battle Mandelson carried the day. Charlie Whelan, Brown’s press officer, gave two alternative briefings, “one to right-leaning papers claiming that Mandelson had funk’d a desirable privatisation of the Post Office, and another to left-leaning papers and the trade unions, that Brown had ‘saved’ the Post Office from privatisation”.²⁰

Much the same story can be told with regard to the minimum wage. This is inevitably championed as one of the great achievements of New Labour by its supporters. Brown, however, only agreed to it because experience in the United States, where there has been a minimum wage since 1938, showed that it was not a serious inconvenience to business. Indeed in the United States the minimum wage has proven to be perfectly compatible with the sustained attack on working class living standards and workplace conditions that has been under way since the 1980s. All that had to be ensured was that the minimum wage was set low enough. In Britain, as Simon Jenkins observed, it was set so low “as to be almost invisible”.²¹ The man responsible for this was Gordon Brown.

When it was proposed that the minimum wage should be set at £3.70 an hour, Brown insisted that the most business could afford was £3.50. In the face of his intransigence, TUC general secretary John Monks, certainly no militant, intervened. Monks, according to Tom Bower, was “puzzled that Brown, posing as the champion of the working class and diligently attending the birthday parties of the movement’s leaders, could suggest that the economy was unable to afford the increase”. Monks warned Brown that if he did not drop his opposition he would make it public and thereby “put an end to Brown’s bid to become the Labour Party’s next leader”. Brown retreated, but once again Charlie Whelan spun the story to his advantage. Stephen Byers, who had replaced Mandelson as secretary of state for trade and industry, had publicly advocated a rate of £3.60 an hour. Brown threw his weight behind this. Whelan now briefed journalists that Brown had always favoured £3.70, but had been forced “to compromise with Byers...and accept a £3.60 minimum wage”. Brown did still insist, however, that the full rate should be payable, not from age 21 as the Low Pay Unit (LPU) urged, but from age 22. When George Bain of the LPU told him that only 8,000 young people were affected, Brown remained adamant, telling Bain, “I won’t allow 21 year olds to be classed as adults”.²²

“Croslandism” and New Labour

While “spin” is the main factor in accounting for whatever remnants of a left reputation Brown still has, he has also been centrally involved in the effort to identify New Labour as a species of “Croslandism”. This fascination with the intellectual standard-bearer of the right wing of the Labour Party in the 1950s and 1960s is rather sudden. In the “anthology of Socialism”, *Values, Visions and Voices*, that Brown co-edited with Tony

Wright in 1995, there are only four contributions from Crosland’s writings out of nearly 200 selected extracts. Even that intellectual giant Neil Kinnock has five contributions!²³ By early 1997, however, Brown had decided to lay claim to “Crosland’s rich and lasting legacy to Labour”. He was aware of the need to at least maintain the pretence that New Labour still had some connection with “Old Labour”, even if it was with the Labour right. He fastened on “Croslandism” as the way to achieve this. In a speech that was later published in an edited volume, *Crosland and New Labour*, Brown emphasised the way that Crosland had placed “equality” at the centre of the Socialist project. This was what New Labour was all about, Brown argued: “everyone should have the chance to bridge the gap between what they are and what they have it in themselves to become”. Brown tried to update Crosland’s understanding of equality



with a more modern New Labour definition: “employment opportunity for all”, “continuing and lifelong educational opportunity”, “genuine access to culture” and “a redistribution of power that offers people real control over the decisions that affect their lives”.

The great advantage of this updating of the definition of equality is that it is perfectly compatible with “inequality”. And, moreover, one of the ways that power is to be redistributed is through the market! What Brown is about is substituting “equality of opportunity” for equality of wealth and income – that everyone should have an equal opportunity to become rich. This, of course, has a particular attraction for today’s Parliamentary Labour Party. To be fair though, Brown does concede that “even in a global marketplace”, it might still prove necessary to “address wealth and income inequalities”. “I believe”, he wrote, “that these inequalities can be justified only if they are in the interests of the least fortunate.” This truly original contribution to socialist thought looks remarkably like the good old “trickle-down” effect championed by the Thatcherites. At the very least, it leaves him with considerable leeway. Indeed, judging from his performance as chancellor, he has yet to find any of the increasing levels of inequality in New Labour Britain that are not in the interests of “the least fortunate”.²⁴

More recently, in 2006, Brown contributed an introduction to a new edition of Anthony Crosland’s *The Future of Socialism*. First published in 1956, this book was the intellectual mainstay of Labour’s right wing, the bible of Gaitskellite revisionism. Now, 50 years later, Brown celebrated its publication as “a decisive moment in post-war Labour history” and praised its “freshness” and “relevance”. What Crosland showed was that Socialism “was about the dignity of human beings and the equal right of each individual to realise their potential in a supportive community”. Socialism was “opportunity for all”. All of Brown’s earlier campaigning for “the redistribution of income and wealth from rich to poor” was effectively repudiated.²⁵

This supposed commitment to equality has become central to New Labour’s claim to be a

party of “the centre-left”. They are absolutely passionate about it, so much so that, when it was proposed to include an explicit unambiguous commitment to equality in the Labour Party’s new Clause IV in 1995, Peter Mandelson had it removed.²⁶ Nevertheless “equality” continues to be a tricky concept, encouraging all sorts of unhelpful ideas and attitudes. It has to be continually redefined so as to pose no threat to the rich and the super-rich. The most promising redefinition so far has been that provided by the Equalities Review, set up by Blair in 2005. A panel consisting of Trevor Phillips; Sir Robert Kerslake, the chief executive of Sheffield Council; and Dame Judith Mayhew Jonas, a top lawyer who was made a dame for her services to the City, deliberated at great expense. They came up with something so spurious as to take the breath away:

An equal society protects and promotes equal, real freedom and substantive opportunity to live in the ways people value and would choose so that everyone can flourish. An equal society recognises people’s different needs, situations and goals and removes the barriers that limit what people can do and can be.²⁷

This is New Labour at its most intellectually rigorous.

“Old Labour”

What would Anthony Crosland himself have made of all this? Crosland, after a brief flirtation with Stalinism at university, positioned himself on the right of the Labour Party in the early years of the Second World War. As early as 1941, while serving in the army, he had stated his intention to be “the modern Bernstein” who would defeat Marxist influence within the labour movement.²⁸ *The Future of Socialism* was his attempt at realising this ambition. What is crucial for our purposes



is that Crosland’s arguments were premised on a belief that capitalism had been defeated, tamed, fundamentally changed, and that all that remained for the left was the implementation of a programme of democratic reforms, including “democratic equality”. New Labour is founded on the very opposite premise, on the belief that capitalism has triumphed and that the left has been defeated once and for all. There is nothing in Crosland’s writings to suggest that he would have responded to this defeat in the way that Brown and New Labour have. From this point of view Roy Hattersley, a vocal opponent of New Labour, can be best seen as Crosland’s heir. One obvious consequence of the difference in context is worth pointing out: New Labour is far to the right of anything that Crosland and the Labour right would ever have contemplated in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, New Labour is to the right of the Conservatives in this period.

Interestingly, Crosland had a much more robust attitude to equality, or “democratic equality” as he called it, than anything evidenced by New Labour. While Brown has tried to redefine equality as a watered down equality of opportunity, Crosland explicitly ruled that out. Indeed, he described equality of opportunity as “the doctrine of Tory radicalism”. What Crosland, a Labour right

winger, called for were “measures...to equalise the distribution of rewards and privileges so as to diminish the degree of class stratification, the injustice of large inequalities and the collective discontent”.²⁹ This certainly did not amount to socialism, but nevertheless, it has nothing in common with New Labour.

In 1962 Crosland published another book, *The Conservative Enemy*. Here he was even more forthright than in the earlier volume. According to Crosland, inequality in Britain was “still greater than should be tolerated in a democracy” (it was less than today) and he complained of the rich receiving rewards “far higher than any civilised person should want or need” (they received considerably less than today). He urged that a future Labour government “must grapple with the maldistribution of property”. He was particularly critical of the concentration of newspaper ownership which was a threat to “a healthy democracy” and was contemptuous of “the more depraved and poisonous of the capitalist press”. This was, of course, long before the advent of Rupert Murdoch. In short, Crosland would not have recognised New Labour as Labour at all.³⁰

Crosland talked more radically than he was ever prepared to act. Most famously, while secretary of state for education he had remarked: “If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to destroy every fucking grammar school in England”.³¹ In practice, he rejected the compulsory introduction of comprehensive schemes in favour of “persuasion”, which is why there are still grammar schools today. Similarly, while he argued that the state should take over the public schools and democratise them, he never actually did anything about it when in office. He certainly never suggested that the public schools should be invited to take over state schools as New Labour does today. Nevertheless, during the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis that crippled James Callaghan’s Labour government in 1976, Crosland was one of those arguing for rejection of the IMF’s demand for cuts in government spending. What is the point of the government surviving, he complained, “if Labour measures can’t be implemented”. Callaghan’s government, he went on, “is the most right wing Labour government we’ve had for years”.³² He had not, as they say, seen anything yet.

New Labour in power

Brown’s wholehearted commitment to markets, globalisation and today’s rampant capitalism was made absolutely clear to the whole world by the decision to make the Bank of England independent. He was showing the capitalist class, both at home and abroad, that he was their man and that New Labour was their government. As one sympathetic historian observed, “At a stroke much of the political economy of the Labour Party since 1945 was abandoned”.³³ It is worth remembering that at least one of the reasons Clement Attlee’s government had nationalised the bank had been because of its role in the 1931 financial crisis, which had brought down Ramsay MacDonald’s government and seen him defect to the Conservatives. The bank had represented the interests of international finance, rather than the interests of the Labour government. This was never to be allowed to happen again, although the reality was that the bank always retained considerable independence. What Brown’s action signalled was that New Labour would never find itself in conflict with international finance. Brown had out-Thatchered the Thatcherites. His “great political coup” successfully positioned New Labour to the right of the Conservatives.³⁴ Brown was committed to what can usefully be described as “globalisation in one country”.³⁵ What followed was Brown’s rush to privatise as he came out as “Thatcherism’s most coveted St Paul”. As Simon Jenkins observes:

Brown tore up all he had said in opposition and hurled himself into a frenzy of privatisation, scouring the cupboard for things to sell. He faced down union opposition by seeking to dispose of air traffic control, the Royal Mint, the Commonwealth Development Corporation, and Tote on-course betting. The privatisation of the Post Office...was halted in 1998

only because its departmental sponsor was Brown’s sworn enemy, Mandelson... Privatisation spread even to Whitehall. The Inland Revenue sold its entire estate to a property developer, John Ritblat, who transferred it, quite legally, to an off-shore tax haven... The Treasury even sold and then leased back its own headquarters in Parliament Square.

Brown’s frenzy of privatisation has yet to run its course. His supposed opposition to privatisation in education and the NHS is largely a matter of spin and of the factionalism within the New Labour government. Brown has carried big business into areas of the public sector that the Thatcherites never dreamed of.

Jenkins goes on to write of Brown’s privatisation of “public borrowing” through Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) and Public-Private Partnerships. As he points out:

By July 2003 Brown was boasting of the completion of 450 PFI projects, including 34 hospitals, 239 schools, 34 fire and police stations, 12 prisons and 12 waste projects. The NHS had by 2005 borrowed some £6 billion for PFI schemes, with a further £11 billion in the pipeline. By the mid-2000s virtually all health investment was being financed by the private sector.³⁶

What Brown had done was to find a way to make government spending attractive to and profitable for big business. The inevitable end result will be a public sector, if that is still the right term, that will be effectively in the hands of capital. The first charge on revenue will inevitably be payment of the debts incurred by PFI. In the NHS this makes the introduction of charges a certainty, and one can predict with considerable confidence an attempt by a Brown government to introduce such a scheme, limited to begin with, but preparing the way for later expansion.³⁷

One other thing that Jenkins points out is New Labour’s effective privatisation of civil service functions. Instead of turning to the civil service for advice, New Labour turns to private consultants. This is not a small matter. Whereas in 1995 £300 million was spent on consultants by the Conservative government, by 2003 the cost was £1.7 billion and by 2004 £2.5 billion. Indeed, from 1997 to 2006 New Labour’s spending on consultants has been estimated at £70 billion.³⁸

Why has the Labour Party allowed all this? Well, first of all, many party members, including lifelong members, have voted with their feet and resigned in disgust and despair. Those who remain inhabit a party that is radically different from the Labour Party in 1990, let alone 1964 or 1945. As Stephen Ingle has pointed out, the new intake of Labour MPs in 1997 “contained as many millionaires as it did manual workers”. Indeed, he goes on to put New labour into some sort of historical perspective: “The New Labour government is less representative of organised Labour than was the Liberal Party of Campbell Bannerman and Asquith”.³⁹ The Labour left has never been weaker, and it has been completely unable to seriously hinder, let alone stop, the drive to the right.

What of relations between Brown and Blair? Throughout Blair’s period of office one of the most important features of his government has been the power exercised by the chancellor of the exchequer. To a considerable extent, Blair was effectively excluded from social and economic policy making, with Brown famously refusing to even discuss the budget with him. This unprecedented situation reflected the strength of Brown’s position within New Labour; but, for all that, Brown has never felt strong enough to bring Blair down and at the same time ensure his own succession. Over the introduction of student “top-up fees”, for example, Brown covertly encouraged backbench opposition, but in the end backed down. On Blair’s part, there seems little doubt that if the Iraq War had been the triumph he expected it to be, then the overthrow of Saddam Hussein would have been swiftly followed by the overthrow of Gordon Brown. Far from strengthening Blair so as to enable him to remove Brown from the Treasury, the war mortally damaged him. It is the Iraq War that in the end has made it possible for Brown to take over from Blair.

It is important to recognise, however, that this bitter struggle within the government has not been

over any fundamental policy differences, between a left and a right within New Labour. Brown and Blair’s mutual hatred has been personal rather than political. The differences between them are more differences of style than of substance. Brown, for example, does not share Blair’s relaxed attitude towards political corruption, something he evidenced as far back as the Ecclestone affair.⁴⁰

But those who believe, against all the evidence, that Brown was not fully behind the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq are deluding themselves. One recent New Labourite discussion of a Brown government’s likely foreign policy argues that we should “expect small but symbolic statements” distancing themselves “from aspects of Bush’s foreign policy – Guantanamo, the practice of extraordinary rendition and US hostility towards the UN”. Maybe. It goes on to argue that as far as a US attack on Iran is concerned, “it is almost inconceivable that a Brown government would support such action”.⁴¹ This is so much wishful thinking. It shows the extent to which people still have illusions in Brown. Indeed, it is inconceivable that a Brown government will not support the attack on Iran when it comes. New Labour and the Conservative opposition are both married to the United States, for better and increasingly for worse, and will support US actions, either overtly or, if it is too politically damaging, covertly. There is no comfort whatsoever to be taken from developments inside the Labour Party at the present time. Hope lies outside.

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Notes

1. Brown, 1989, pp119, 121.
2. Self and Zealey, 2007, pp70-71.
3. Carvel, 2004.
4. Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2007.
5. Brown, 1989, pp10, 176-178.
6. HM Treasury, 2006.
7. Cassidy, 2006. Murdoch’s ambassador to Britain, Irwin Stelzer, has gone on record to recommend that Brown appoint Ed Balls as chancellor, and that Balls’s wife, Yvette Cooper, should also be given a cabinet post. The support of someone like Stelzer would once have destroyed the prospects of a Labour politician, but today it does not even raise eyebrows (see Stelzer, 2007).
8. For Brown’s career as a student radical see his semi-official biography: Routledge, Paul, 1998, pp 41-63.
9. Brown, 1975, pp7, 9, 18,19. The book was actually printed by the Institute for Workers’ Control and among the influences that Brown acknowledges were Institute publications, the *Socialist Register*, Antonio Gramsci and Edward Thompson. He even footnotes the publications of the International Marxist Group and of the International Socialists (the forerunner of the Socialist Workers Party). The front cover of the book is illustrated with a photograph of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders workers voting to occupy the shipyards, and the back with a photograph of Leith dockers on strike in 1913.
10. Brown, 1983, pp20, 22.
11. Callinicos and Simons, 1985.
12. Brown, 1986, p298. Brown’s *Maxton* compares favourably, for example, with William Knox’s academic study, *James Maxton* (Knox, 1987). In his biography of Brown, Tom Bower argues that “in his head” Brown “understood how Maxton had undermined his ambitions for a better society by refusing to compromise to obtain power” (Bower, 2004, p51). On the contrary, in his book, Brown recognises that compromise led to MacDonald joining the Conservatives to help save capitalism at the expense of the working class.
13. The best study of the Labour Party remains *The Labour*

Party: A Marxist History (Cliff and Gluckstein, 1988). A new edition would be extremely useful.

14. As one recent sympathetic account has argued, Brown’s “allegiance and enthusiasm for the American way is as great as Blair’s” (Hassan, 2004, p211).
15. Galloway, 2003, p 141.
16. Brown coedited a volume of tributes to John Smith (Brown and Naughtie, 1994). Brown’s own contribution includes extensive quotations from Smith’s speeches, attacking John Major’s Tory government for sleaze, every word of which could apply to New Labour today. He even quotes Smith’s condemnation of “the too-close relationship that has developed between this government and the private sector” (p96). He understandably does not mention the fact that he was criticising Smith for not moving far enough to the right when he died.
17. Peston, 2005, pp23-24.
18. For this and the other quoted speeches, see Stevenson, 2006, pp26, 34, 35, 37, 59, 63, 64, 124, 125, 127, 133, 146-147, 342, 370.
19. Jenkins, 2006, pp258-259.
20. Macintyre, 2000, pp474-475.
21. Jenkins, 2006, p257.
22. Bower, 2004, pp 276, 294-295.
23. Brown and Wright, 1995. *Values, Visions and Voices* is an appalling book, where any hint of class struggle has been altogether exorcised. In its pages Sheila Rowbotham rubs shoulders with Ramsay Macdonald, George Orwell with Neil Kinnock, and William Morris with Hugh Gaitskell. There is, of course, nothing from Karl Marx or Frederick Engels, both of whom had quite a lot to say about Britain. Indeed the Marxist tradition is effectively suppressed. Still, despite every effort to make the collection as inoffensive as possible, some moments of embarrassment still creep in. There is an extract from an interview with Dennis Potter where he lambasts the *Sun* newspaper: “Just pick up a copy of the *Sun*. Is this Britain? Is this what we’ve done to ourselves? How can the people who work on that paper go home and face their families without a sense of shame” (pp149-150). This was, of course, before Blair and Brown had had to abase themselves before Rupert Murdoch, had both written for the *Sun* and had made it New Labour’s favourite newspaper. Indeed, on 1 May 2007, May Day no less, Brown actually had an article in the *Sun* on “Blair’s decade of achievement”. Here he identified Blair’s most memorable success as being “how we stood shoulder to shoulder with America” after 9/11. This was not written to reassure *Sun* readers of his continuing support for the United States, but to reassure Rupert Murdoch. Dennis Potter, of course, named the cancer that was to eventually kill him “Rupert Murdoch”.
24. Brown, 1999, pp36, 41, 43, 44.
25. Crosland, Anthony, 2006, pp vii, viii. Tony Blair had no interest whatsoever in any of this laying claim to a Labour heritage, indeed in 2004 he contributed a chapter to a collection entitled *Neo-Conservatism* (Stelzer, 2004). Other contributors included Margaret Thatcher, Condoleezza Rice and various luminaries of the US Republican right.
26. Macintyre, 2000, pp316-317.
27. Equalities Review, 2007, p7.
28. Jeffreys, 1999, p16.
29. Crosland, Anthony, 2006, pp173,191.
30. Crosland, Anthony, 1962, pp7, 28, 37, 211,212.
31. Crosland, Susan, 1982, p148.
32. Meredith, 2006, p245.
33. Brivati, 1999, p 245.
34. Keegan, 2004. Keegan emphasises the American influence on the decision, quoting Brown thanking Alan Greenspan, then chair of the US federal reserve, for the discussions on “how central bank independence would work for Britain” (p156).
35. The term is not original, but comes from Hirst and Thompson, 2000.
36. Jenkins, 2006, pp259-260, 272. His chapter on Brown is simply entitled “Gordon Brown, Thatcherite”.
37. New Labour’s foremost academic apologist, Anthony Giddens, calls precisely for “user-charging” in his advice to a Brown government: Giddens, 2007, pp83-84. He comforts fellow Blairites with the assurance that while “Brown’s political philosophy is often said to be to the left of that of Tony Blair – meaning that he leans more towards the Old Left...his speeches and writings over the past few years reveal nothing of the kind” (p35).
38. Jenkins, 2006, p266.
39. Ingle, 2000, p157.
40. Blair rode into office on a white charger, without anyone realising it had been given to him in return for a favour. The character of the man was demonstrated immediately by the Ecclestone scandal. In return for a £1 million donation to party funds and the promise of more, the government exempted Formula One motor racing from the ban on tobacco advertising. Darts and snooker were not exempted. This was one of the most blatant acts of political corruption in modern times, carried out by a man and a government elected on an anti-sleaze ticket. Blair defended himself by famously arguing that he was “a pretty straight sort of guy”. Brown, to his horror, was caught out on Radio 4’s *Today* programme, having to lie to cover up for Blair. See Rawnsley, 2001, pp97-98.
41. Mepham, 2006.

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Digital Bungling: Realism in an Unreal World

Alex Law

The State of the Real: Aesthetics in the Digital Age

Damien Sutton, Susan Brind and Ray McKenzie (eds)
IB Tauris, 2007, ISBN: 1845110773

‘Reality’ has been called into question so frequently of late that one is tempted to insist on it all the more dogmatically. But of course it is not reality (without quotation marks) that is being discussed. It is ‘Realism’ or ‘the Real’ that is repeatedly the subject of dispute. In such quarrels ‘reality’ is variously understood as the foundational concept, the fictive assemblage, the representational system, the philosophical agonising, the social construction, the rhetorical device, the repressed trauma. The incredibly banal conclusion is reached with tedious repetition that there is no longer, if there ever once was, any unmediated access to what is really real.

Such repetition has the effect of presenting an actual ideological consensus as a matter of ritualised contention. Again and again, the idea that we can have direct access to reality must be heroically unmasked with all the force that anti-Realists can muster. This recurring anti-Realist exposé stands somewhere between theological revelation and scientific discovery. Somewhere, simple-minded Realists or Modernists or Marxists are supposedly holding out against the finality of this insight. Anti-Realists wrestle with the reflection of reality among the shadows cast in a hall of mirrors. For this bloodless struggle to be reproduced, and with it the social conditions of reproduction that it presupposes, the ‘anti-Realist’ story has to be continually retold and affirmed as new-fangled. In the 1920s the struggle against Positivism united thinkers otherwise diametrically opposed. In the 2000s the struggle against Realism unites ‘postmodern’ merchants of culture.

Alien Central

There is a history to all this that often goes unremarked. It is one where the everyday, and more specifically the mass of people who populate it, are disdained as caught up in an unreflexive second nature, so completely immersed in banal technological artefacts that they are unable to penetrate to the deeper, more authentic reality expressed in art, science and philosophy. An ideology of transcendence, of genius, of authenticity, has often acted as a mask for ignoble motives, including the abolition of criteria for judging the truth content of ideological claims.

When an ideology of transcendence is joined by the latest technologies and techniques, alienation is deepened on a vast scale. For instance, production technologies are introduced into workplaces on the basis of the rationality and efficiency claims advanced by innovative managers and technicians, often with the conscious intention of degrading, deskilling and routinising the embodied capacities of workers. This despoliation of human labour is not, as some think, an old outdated story, romantically hankering after the ideal of skilled manual labour, a world that has largely disappeared, replaced by a post-industrial world of immaterial labour creatively fashioning objects of technological wonderment.

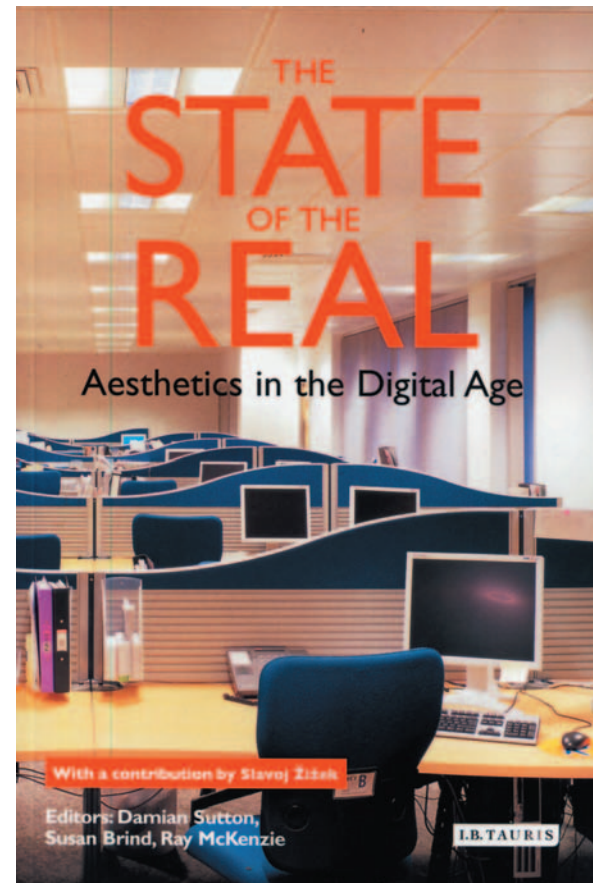
Alienation is not some accidental oversight. It is designed into the rationalised socio-technical environments we inhabit as workers and consumers. Call centres, for instance, have become the very acme of control over the service function once carried out on a face-to-face basis. In the *State of the Real*, Andrew Lee’s photo essay ‘Centres’ features a series of photographs of

bare call centre spaces in Scotland.¹ Here the contrived monotony of work spaces is pared down to soulless functionality. Even emptied of people/operators these spaces appear as claustrophobic environments of control. Although they serve a range of interchangeable sales functions – holidays, insurance, double-glazing – the same windowless, open architecture recurs of clustered ranks of desks, chairs, equipment, artificial lighting. Lee shows working spaces compressed under false or bare ceilings. This tedium is only relieved on occasion by potted plants or company brochures or ‘motivational’ signage hung from the ceiling that mixes the names of high performance car manufacturers with animals such as wildcats and pumas. Even if the function is to protect the natural environment, presumably seen as a ‘first nature’, as in Lee’s photograph of the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency office, it is performed, ironically, under the sparse, artificial glare in the ‘second nature’ of the call centre environment. If there is no return here to a bare naked ‘authentic’ nature from an alienated existence, Lee’s photographs invite us to critique that condition and perhaps reflect on the possibilities of escape.

Can alienation be reversed with a turn back to some more ‘authentic’ relationship to technology? In making a stand for the sheer empirical facticity of socio-technical systems based on digital technologies, a blow may be struck against the mystificatory and redundant abstractions of philosophies of transcendence and essences. Something of an authentic relationship to technology might be preserved, a relationship without illusions that its own socio-economic preconditions might be altered. In contrast to this, Realism does not simply reflect this condition by lapsing into existential simplicity and forgetting all about technical mediation, as is often claimed. It need not even dispute the veracity of claims made by empirically-minded anti-Realists about the ‘mutually constitutive’ relationship of society to technology. Instead, Realism seeks to return us to the more fundamental question of whether this reality is one that we ought to live within any longer.

Too often social relations ensure that the quest for an ‘authentic’ relationship to cultural technology becomes a self-defeating chimera. Too often also, the social and cultural reception of technology is ‘bungled’, distorted by the concentrated possession of material and intellectual resources in private hands. Industrialised technologies that once promised liberation from unnecessary toil and suffering were diverted into Taylorism and imperialist warfare by economic and political imperatives.² So also were the possibilities for early photography deformed by artistic pretensions and private studio practices of large and small photographer-entrepreneurs.³

The pressing question confronting the cultural reception of digital technology refers then not to some existential essence of a localised ‘authentic’ relationship harking back to the ideal of a pre-modern face-to-face community. Nor does it come down to the celebration of the empirical immediacy of the human-technical ‘interface’, a deeply entangled relationship where it is impossible to know where ‘the human’ ends and technology begins. Neither is technology to be reified as an autonomous actor in its own right, unfolding according to its own logic and even revealing its own ‘nature’. Instead, we are forced to interrogate the reception of digital technology



within the bad reality of social decomposition and polarisation.

If we can speak about a ‘digital age’ at all it cannot be that of a universal signifier. That role has already been commandeered by global capitalism. Society in the age of digital technology remains one constructed by the antagonistic relations of specific classes of people to other classes of people, their unequal relationship to resources, financial, technical and natural, at specific times and places. Consciousness lags behind these processes. Only in retrospect is the latest configuration of nature, class and technology given a catch-all name, ‘the digital age’, ‘the knowledge economy’, ‘the network society’, or whatever.

Does this mean that technology is forever a direct expression of the will to accumulate, as some wiseacres are wont to misrepresent historical materialism? Absolutely not. Any distortion of technology derives not from some pure essence inscribed in the objectification of its material existence. Rather, technology is ‘bungled’ from the point of view of its *virtual* history, not simply its empirical trajectory or ‘path dependency’ understood as the expression of some intrinsic technical logic. Bungled technology reflects the destruction of emancipatory possibilities by alienated social relations. A piling-up of the technological wreckage lies squarely at the door of social relations that express an overriding priority other than those of freedom and democracy: namely, the accumulation of capital.

All change

As the case of call centre design shows, digital technologies are being pressed narrowly into the service of accumulation, and with it the furtherance of alienated lifestyles. Might there be other possibilities that lie unexpressed or are rendered marginal by the euphoric reception of digitisation? *The State of the Real* addresses itself precisely to the critical relationship between digital technology, the real and visual culture. It assembles contributions from international scholars and practitioners to explore the altered practices and perception of reality in ‘the digital

age’. It explores the core assumption that with the emergence of digital technology an irrevocable shift has occurred with profound implications for visual culture. Traditional fine art practices have to contend with this culture-wide shift. It is exacerbating feelings of a loss of authenticity, originality and genius at exactly the moment when ‘authenticity’ is being organised as an urgent matter of public policy objectives.

New practices intent on developing digital culture can abruptly find themselves moving from the margins to the centre of our concerns. Digital creators are credited as standing among the radical innovators currently re-constituting reality and our perception of it. One example of this is the Lazarus-like powers of the ‘creative class’. Cast by Richard Florida as digital-savvy entrepreneurs with tasteful lifestyles, this class fraction has been deemed capable of reviving the urban decay of depressed industrial towns into vibrant ‘cultural quarters’ of consumption and innovation. Nothing needs to be done about the decay of social relations, no progressive redistribution of society’s resources is called for. Art and creativity will find a way to spontaneously release the potential of ‘human capital’ without affecting the wealth or self-image of the affluent. Indeed, it flatters them further, that by following a culturally tasteful lifestyle and by living and networking in the inner city they are already making a selfless contribution to social justice. Throw in the most up to date clean digital technology into the mix and human spoliation is seen as a grim and unnecessary hangover from the more downbeat, pessimistic days of dirty technology.

Hyper-market

In the face of such claims a nagging doubt surfaces that, like the dot.com bubble some years ago, it is becoming difficult to separate reality from hyperbole. Worryingly, the current reception of digital technology places yet another layer of lost opportunities over previous rounds of technical innovation. The book’s introduction shares these misgivings. It proceeds to talk about the radically new digital age as a ‘working hypothesis’ only, rather than an empirically established fact. What this means for Realism as a set of cultural conventions and a certain kind of representation runs through most, though not all chapters of the book.

This is raised with particular acuteness in the chapters concerning photographic practices by Jane Tormey, Neil Mathieson and Damian Sutton. Photography’s power of re-presentation relied on a chemical process to index the traces of an independently existing reality. Once images are captured by means of digital coding they become manipulable in ways that no longer command confidence that the photograph, if it can still be called that, remains an accurate re-presentation of some original, objectively-given reality.

Ready to hand here is the late Jean Baudrillard’s notion of ‘hyper-reality’. For Baudrillard it is already impossible to separate reality from the image. All that is left is the simulation of reality in the images circulating around us. Walter Benjamin’s famous thesis that artworks lost their charm or ‘aura’ when they could be reproduced in identical multiple copies by mechanical technology is driven much further by Baudrillard. Now the copy has effectively done away with reality, has become reality itself.

Baudrillard divides opinion sharply. With his penchant for exaggeration and the provocative gesture, critics find notions of simulacrum and hyper-reality banal, trivial and derivative. Others accuse Baudrillard of falsely or prematurely erasing reality behind symbolic hype. However, many cultural theorists see in Baudrillard both an unmasking of symbolic domination and a resigned acceptance that things today could not be otherwise. As some chapters in the *State of the Real* argue, in this Baudillardian sense, visual culture works ‘on the edge’, in-between reality and the image. ‘Postmodern’ photographic practices share in an ‘irreal’ search for non-meaning. Authorial intention to represent reality is surrendered to a naïve aesthetic that contrives to relinquish any claims to affirmative documentary value

and hence the idea of an objective reality to be recorded.

But as Jane Tormey concludes in her chapter, photography’s appeal to the ‘irreal’ merely displaces, rather than disproves, the objective real world. Such practices echo an older Modernist story of contriving to unlearn the dominant aesthetic in order to return to a more primal aesthetic beyond positivist truth claims. However, it is one thing to consciously reassemble authorship, replacing the documentary function with an allegorical one as Neil Matheson suggests to valuable effect in his discussion of the work of German photographer Thomas Demand. It is far less easy to escape the embodied habitus that reproduces a certain kind of conceptualist aesthetic among specific social groups. The detached critique of Realism cannot be divorced from institutional training.

Bodily functions

Concern about the presence or absence of bodies in visual culture offers a clue about the digitised mediation of the real. In Lee’s call centre photographs and Demand’s reconstructions bodies are deleted. Such bodily erasure decentres the human figure as an independent agent or object of contemplation. In such work, any appeal to some basic level of identification of a shared corporeal existence is resisted. In the middle section of the book, ‘Realism in Practice’, practitioners reflect on the body, mind and artistic detachment. James Coupe’s work *Digital Network Warfare* uses mobile phone text messaging to construct a non-representational artwork from which the artist can disengage and allow the technology to ‘develop autonomously’ as a developing system. Bodily intervention is displaced by a concealed technical infrastructure. Coupe develops a ‘systems analysis’ that concedes agency to technological processes governed by the ‘corporate body’.

Mediated by technology, heightened impersonality in the digital age raises issues of political and economic power and the evisceration of the mythical public sphere. Jennifer Willet and Shawn Bailey’s BIOTEKNICA turns on ethical dilemmas of biotechnological science and the power it represents. Potentially liberating, biotechnology is in serious danger of being bungled by capitalism, with horrific consequences. BIOTEKNICA’s installations and virtual environments pose weighty questions about the alluring and repulsive contradictions and exploitative potential of corporate biotechnology. As Willet and Bailley put it:

“BIOTEKNICA is intentionally both aesthetic and horrific in its manifestation. It is a beautiful immersive environment rooted in scientific optimism, clean design and technological wizardry. It is also a freak show – a site where disease is allowed to grow and proliferate – all within the capitalist model of exploitation at any cost in exchange for financial gains (p. 133).”

Bodily manipulation is also at the heart, so to speak, of Alan Dunning and Paul Woodrow’s *Einstein’s Brain Project*. They take the decentred self on a journey through the psycho-geography of the interior. Any assumption of a literal reality is disturbed by narrative disruptions so that reality and art cannot be told or torn apart. As metaphorical effect the constant struggle to centre the self in a dynamic world of objects can assume a destabilised reality, a world where everything is in flux, play, questioned, and negotiable. But the historical context, the reality of neoliberal capitalism, is missing. An older existential model of authenticity resurfaces, only this time affirming the flexible subjecthood of hyper-capitalism where the earlier authenticity of the Situationists (Debord is quoted favourably) sought to challenge the conformist subjecthood of the previous bureaucratic stage of capitalism.

Contrary to those who think that, just as we can’t live in unmediated authenticity, that this is also news, the self-contained human subject was long ago dethroned as a sovereign overlord. Slavoj Žižek in his chapter in the book recalls the part played by Copernicus, Darwin and Freud ‘and many others’ he adds, including Marx and Nietzsche. This has not been an unmitigated

triumph, combined as it has been with the technological arrogance and ideological illusions of class society. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud in their ways aimed to ‘demystify’ the reality of surface appearances. Even way back then reality was understood through technical devices. Marx compared the alienated reality of capitalism to the *camera obscura*.

Žižek notes that Marx, Nietzsche and Freud shared what he calls a ‘desublimating’ hermeneutics of suspicion. By this he means that some high-minded function like art or ideology depends on but conceals conflicts taking place in some lower region. Today, Žižek argues, the real action is found in the immediacy of the ‘thing-like’ appearance of bodies and objects. In philosophical vitalism, existentialism, and phenomenology there is no longer any need to look behind or beneath to explain the motions of observable phenomena. But the point is that the constitution of alienated reality was never for historical materialism that of a false cover for some underlying authentic existence. Ideology may be duplicitous but it is always *necessarily* so given the prevailing conditions. Objective falsehoods are truthful social facts.

Failure to understand this plays into the hands of the bungler of technology. The bungler’s shadow looms over BIOTEKNICA’s exposure of the contradictions of biogenetics. What Žižek calls ‘a state philosopher’ is called upon to keep intact an outdated liberal model of ‘the human’, the representative example of which is Jurgen Habermas. On the one hand, further scientific research is permitted and even condoned by the ‘state philosophy’ but, on the other hand, everything is done to contain and compromise its social and ideological impact. Better a moral consensus than a leap in scientific knowledge. Meanwhile capitalism sweeps the globe as a universal system without meaning. Capitalism has a worldwide, and hence a ‘worldless’, capacity to live with all manner of belief systems, regimes and cultures. It also exposes and overturns once cherished illusions, say about democracy or freedom, which the liberal democratic state once depended on.

Neoliberal triumphalism cannot be contested on the field of meaning and morality. Instead it is to be taken to task on the field of the Truth in ‘the real of capitalism’. Here Žižek draws on and critiques the remarkable revival of historical materialism in Alain Badiou’s notion of the event. But Badiou’s ‘event’ seems too narrowly conceived and weakly political to rupture neoliberal capitalism, hence his hostility to the global ‘anti-capitalism’ movement. Contrary to received wisdom about the separate logics of state and economy, capitalism does not tolerate any split into distinct zones in reality because the economy is already political. And so any challenge must for Žižek become a ‘pure politics’ of the ‘economic’ domain. There he speculates the Truth of the Real might be exposed.

This is an eclectic, fascinating, and sometimes infuriating book. The theme of visual culture is not always tagged to questions of Realism, ‘digital aesthetics’ or the ‘digital age’. However, the aim of the book is not to be comprehensive in the manner of an ‘A to Z’, though it does manage the ‘B to Z’ from Baudrillard to Žižek. It managed to avoid any mention of Marshall McLuhan, who seems to turn up in all discussion of digital culture these days, and from whom Baudrillard is charged with daylight robbery. That the book ends in typically explosive stuff from Žižek is a credit to its ambitions to leave the dilemmas of Realism, digitisation and visual culture as a matter for praxis than one prepared by premature analytical foreclosure.

Notes

1. Damien Sutton, Susan Brind and Ray McKenzie (eds) *The State of the Real: Aesthetics in the Digital Age* (IB Tauris, 2007).
2. Esther Leslie forcefully makes this point in her *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (Pluto Press, 2000).
3. For a historical materialist approach to class society and early English photography see the excellent study by Steve Edwards, *The Making of English Photography: Allegories* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

How the Beast Lives

J. Dondan

The Nature of the Beast: Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector

A study of policies, initiatives and attitudes 1976-2006, Richard Hylton, published by ICIA

It is not unusual that once in a while, a book is published that seeks to make sense of what on the face of it looks simple, but in the process begins to point at embarrassingly complex questions. Richard Hylton's *The Nature of the Beast*, is a book of the kind. The full subtitle is *Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector, A study of policies, initiatives and attitudes 1976-2006*. It is an achievement for the author that no one reading *The Nature of the Beast* will fail to spot the Orwellian doublespeak through which statutory institutions deal with the issues of equality and equity on the one hand and, simultaneously, widen the gap between reality and fantasy on the other hand.

Predictably it is only too evident from the book, (as it is in the everyday encounter with bureaucracy for those who know how to feed off it) that cultural diversity has created its own vocabulary. Yet while Hylton appears to mock several of the terminologies, he also falls for them rather too easily. The very idea of describing the visual arts as 'a sector' will sound repugnant to those with a more nuanced attitude to the whole field of culture and the arts. More worryingly, he fails to critically unpack what is meant by 'culture' or by 'diversity' as in 'cultural diversity' and whether any justification exists for applying the term to the practice of arts, in all its varieties.

Notwithstanding this early irony, however, the book demonstrates how well Hylton has trawled through the papers of the Arts Council England and understood the histories of the defunct Greater London Council, whose pioneering work on 'ethnic arts' and the like was a major influence in the shaping of Arts Council England's policy towards what is now known as cultural diversity. He is also acutely aware of everything that has been taking place since the 1990s when cultural diversity became an ever recurrent term across social policy and politics in the UK.

Hylton's central thesis is perhaps eloquently summarised in chapter eight of the book 'Summary: the Golden Age and Cultural Diversity', as follows:

"Since the late 1970s, cultural diversity initiatives within the visual arts sector have arguably exacerbated rather than confronted exclusionary pathologies of the art world. There has been very little in the way of resistance to such initiatives over the past thirty years or so. It could be argued that a resistance or boycott en masse of such schemes might have curtailed their existence or lessened their credibility. However, as evidence suggests, far from resisting or boycotting 'culturally diverse arts' initiatives, Black artists have often appeared to be enthusiastically accepting of them. This has in effect legitimised the existence of cultural diversity initiatives." (P131)

Hylton suggests that notwithstanding their willingness to collaborate with 'such initiatives' black artists have not, collectively that is, enjoyed either rewards or recognitions other than those which tend to place their work in the category of ethnic oddity. It goes without saying that those of them who have managed to transcend such fixations have done so either because the law of unintended consequence worked in their favour when they willingly submitted themselves

as marionettes to the manipulative visual arts establishment, or they have been plainly fortunate, or both! This, of course, is a highly contentious suggestion, but it is one of the better deductions one can make from Hylton's analysis.

One suspects that Hylton is insinuating a sense of cynicism here because he wants to see a more informed problematisation of Blackness within the arts that is so patronised. This is one issue that Hylton could have done more to investigate by asking questions such as what category of 'Black artists' is preferred by the arts establishment, or whether it is possible, given the structure of the UK arts funding system, for any Black artist of whatever shade to resist any form of patronage and still be able to earn any form of living from their practice? That Hylton fails to pursue this sort of enquiry adds to the puzzlement of the book, but then there are so many hinted but unexplored insights in *The Nature of the Beast*. An example is Hylton's instinctive rejection of the 'black' and 'white' polarity in favour of a better nuanced colour/race-blind 'mainstreaming' of artists and arts practice. However, this instinct eventually disappears totally in his discussion and therefore the book falls into the same trap of segregated development about which Hylton rightly feels uncomfortable.

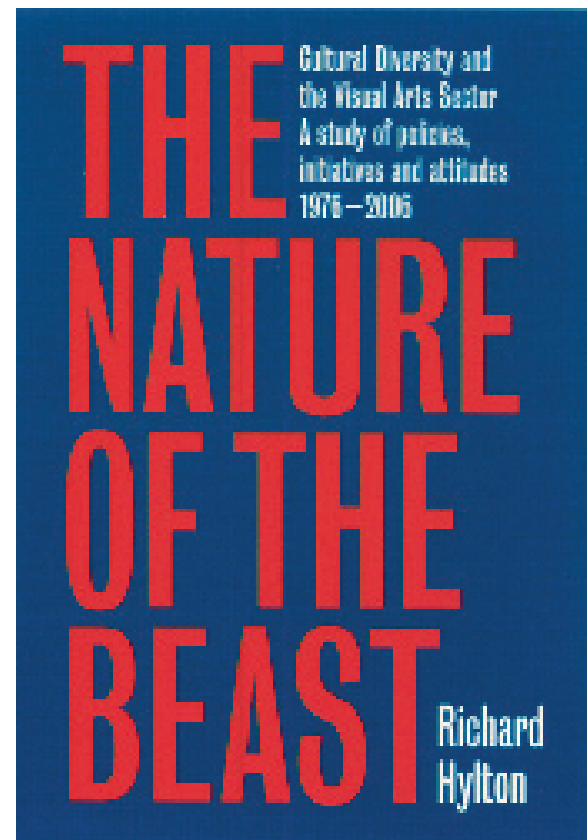
Hylton infers that not much changed in those 30 years covered by his investigation. This may generally be true and there is much in his documentation to prove it. What is lacking in his labour is a clear explanation (beyond the 'failure of policy' sort) as to why these initiatives have had no effect or who may be held accountable for their lack of effectiveness. Of course that is an unfashionable sort of discussion to pursue, leading, as it would, into a broader discussion about a transitory and psychological political economy of identity.

Of all the initiatives that have been devised and promoted so far, none seems to have angered Hylton as the multi-million pound *decibel*, routinely described by Arts Council England as an initiative aimed at promoting the work of artists from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Hylton writes of *decibel* as:

"Attracting millions of pounds worth of investment and employing significant numbers of staff across England, *decibel* appeared to be a fitting response to the growing interests of government, for public institutions to address issues of 'inclusion' and, by association, cultural diversity. However, despite this level of financial and structural input and its focus across all art forms, it could be argued that in the visual arts sector alone, *decibel* has, thus far, failed either to sustain a national profile or to instigate a genuine debate around issue of cultural diversity." (p.19)

decibel started a little over five years ago, but it has gone through a number of transformations and reinterpretations, not least to demonstrate the awareness of those behind it of the enormous power of marketing. Now said to be in its final stage, *decibel* currently brands its programme as *decibel legacy*, which in some way goes to corroborate Hylton's remarks about lack of genuine debate around issues of cultural diversity.

Yet, for all the industry and sometimes unhidden anger of *The Nature of the Beast* about the underlying politics of 'race' that Hylton rightly sees lying behind the so-called 'policies' and 'initiatives', this book is at best sympathetic



towards the Arts Council as a helpless institution and at worst ambiguous about that institution's culpability in supporting a politics of parallel development between white artists and institutions and their non-white counterparts. Thus, it is not clear how much its widespread mockery of the Arts Council's ineffective efforts to bring about the sort of mind shift that could enable cultural diversity to function in the arts can be taken seriously. His frustration with *decibel* apart, it is difficult to know who or what exactly Hylton holds responsible for the continuation of what he calls the "exclusionary pathologies of the art world".

Is this failure to name itself symptomatic of the nature of the cultural diversity beast or simply an evidence of poor radical politics on the part of Hylton? The latter seems more plausible an explanation, not least because of the manner Hylton ignores the way cultural policy is ultimately meaningless if separated from social policy and disconnected from ideology.

For an author who excellently trails the beginning of any serious discussion of race and arts practice in the UK to the little known yet pivotal publication *The Arts Britain Ignores* (1976), by Naseem Khan, some of the elementary analytical mistakes are unpardonable. Unlike nearly all those initiatives that have subsequently lifted off its back, *The Arts Britain Ignores* did not seek to racialise arts. On the contrary, that book's greatest strength was in its plea for investments to be directed into the ethnic minorities' communities for the purpose of improving the arts activities taking place within them. The box ticking bureaucracy will of course overlook that qualitative emphasis, which, inscribed with idealism, makes the important distinction between society and community. Failure to recognise the theoretical implications of the distinction which *The Arts Britain Ignores* made between *gesellschaft* (society) and *gemeinschaft* (community), and how its various successors have collapsed the two to create the basis for an *identikit* politics, is sufficient reason for casting aside *The Nature of the Beast*.

It is within the terms of *gesellschaft*, and the

implicit problem of community which is evident in Naseem Khan's 1976 work, that one could reasonably ask questions about the quality of practice, aesthetic innovation and indeed the far from abstract issue of the number of non-white practitioners who get into arts schools and courses annually in Britain. And following from that, one would ask how they fare 10 years and more after graduation. All this is a far cry from the communitarian ideology that now holds sway among those who speak in the name of 'community'.

The manner in which Hylton jumps from a critique of pre-New Labour 'social inclusion' politics of the defunct Greater London Council (the major part of which was expressed in and symbolised in the courtship of anything that Margaret Thatcher and her Tory band would consider irritating) to what he sees as Tony Blair's New Labour's economic instrumentalism of everything from expansion of nursery places (so that young single mothers could be driven off benefits while they seek work that pays below decent living wage) to funding universities (so that they could do more R&D as a way of attracting several times more funding from industry) is far too mechanistic to really be taken seriously.

It may be true that with cultural diversity an attempt is being made to impose on cultural institutions a duty which their structure cannot successfully translate. Indeed, it is bad politics not to recognise that in the UK, and indeed the whole of Western European context, the politics of race almost always defines itself within the larger national politics-policy nexus. One of the consequences of official 'cultural diversity' being driven by the arts bureaucracy is that it not only anthropologises every instance of participation at the level of what used to be called community arts practice, but seems also to subvert critical issues of aesthetics and genre formation and reformation that constitutes real diversity in the arts.

Where does it all come from?

Within the past two decades or thereabouts, the formulation of cultural policy in the UK context has been overtaken by what Jim McGuigan calls "instrumental thought and research", which seek to justify "cultural policy most typically on economic grounds and, to a lesser extent, social grounds as well, that is, grounds that are not specifically cultural". This recourse, he suggests, is not happening in isolation as it is part of a general confusion of both language and purpose, no doubt with a view to masking the question of power and relationships, without which the term culture itself ceases to have any serious meaning. The recourse also represents the remaking of the purpose of the state against the backdrop of the neo-liberal ascendancy or what McGuigan calls transition from state to market thinking. Though McGuigan does not address cultural diversity, it can be taken for granted that it is included in what he calls "grounds that are not specifically cultural".

Britain may not have reached the level of 'culture war' similar to what occurred in the US in the 1980s, but no one who has paid any attention to the ongoing attempt to strip down culture into a specific category of instrumentalism, part of what McGuigan denounces, will deny that the UK is moving in the same direction.

Yet, while the US 'culture war' – before it spilled into and was later overtaken by a vulgar incursion into areas of cultural intimacy that turned the whole issue on its head – was originally about ideas and expressions, formulated as it were on the back of the

enduring struggle within a state founded on mass migration and the ideals of freedom, the UK sub-version seems to be beginning at the vulgar end. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in 'initiatives' such as 'cultural diversity', when it becomes the janus complex in the discourse of citizenship, nation, identity, migration, etc.

A generation or two ago, the situation was easier to understand. As Etienne Balibar once summarised it: "In Britain people speak of 'race relations' ... – which evokes a much more directly post-colonial situation and imagery."

Often, what should have been a straightforward acknowledgement of Britain's late (and often non-existent) acceptance of inescapable cross-over between Empire building and non-white migration with consequences on 'the public space', is being subtly defined as a series of moral hazards about which something must be done. The instrument is *cultural diversity*. Over the past five years even those with impeccable credentials for progressive politics have been seduced by the panic behind the title. A good example is David Goodhart, who in February 2004 identified a so-called 'progressive dilemma', which, he said had been drawn to his attention by David Willetts, a conservative party politician and Member of Parliament:

"The basis on which you can extract large sums of money in tax and pay it out in benefits is that most people think the recipients are people like themselves, facing difficulties that they themselves could face. If values become more diverse, if lifestyles become more differentiated, then it becomes more difficult to sustain the legitimacy of a universal risk-pooling welfare state. People ask: 'Why should I pay for them when they are doing things that I wouldn't do?' This is America versus Sweden. You can have a Swedish welfare state provided that you are a homogeneous society with intensely shared values. In the United States you have a very diverse, individualistic society where people feel fewer obligations to fellow citizens. Progressives want diversity, but they thereby undermine part of the moral consensus on which a large welfare state rests.

Lifestyle diversity and high immigration bring cultural and economic benefits but can erode feeling of mutual obligation, reduce willingness to pay tax and encourage a retreat from the public domain." (p.202).

It is, of course, bizarre that a commentator of Goodhart's pedigree could be swayed by an ominously reactionary nationalism and uses it to make a plea for the progressive defence of the welfare state. Such a surrender of human and political rights takes us towards the territory occupied, not foolishly, by the identity politics of the BNP! Lamentable as the error might seem, the subtle connection Goodhart makes between citizenship and racial identity is as difficult to forgive as it is to overlook. It is the sort of remarks that often blur the line between enlightened politics of solidarity and sheer populism. Populism is all about reaction and with the clever, often a gifted ability to redefine language to suit one's purpose. It is possible to identify with popular sentiments without ceasing to be progressive and radical simultaneously and be able to reject the racism-laden atavism. This is why we cannot ignore the behaviour of politicians – especially those among them whose actions and words can influence and inform the sort of debates that lead to laws which we are all obliged to respect and by which our conducts, whether alone or in communion with others, are to be regulated. Nearly all of those who replied to Goodhart when his piece was published three years ago, bar a few, did so without challenging his notion of citizenship, which he falsely suggests to be homogenized and inherited *jus*

sanguinis (by 'right of blood'), but sought to erect an equally false notion that citizenship can function unregulated by the state.

It is always worth bearing in mind that the developments which led to the adoption of 'cultural diversity', both as a term and widely embraced if little practised policy, were initiated by way of resistance to exclusion from the ordinary benefits of citizenship, such as the right to be able to walk in the streets without being spat upon. To that extent, the whole thing has been part of an evolution that the state could not ignore. Naturally, it was the enlightened segment of the state that rightly sought to use race relations as one of the desperately needed expressions of change from a sterile plurality to something more dynamic. That everything having to do with race relations now has to be couched in the language of cultural diversity may, in some cases, look opportunistic, but this is nothing compared to its usefulness as a strategy for mobilising consensus around the surrender to exploitation by external markets.

This is precisely the dilemma of a book like *The Nature of the Beast*. Such works will tend to ignore the failure of institutions that define and perhaps control the public space on behalf of *all* citizens to function *sui generis* (by default) while uncritically analysing the initiatives with which these institutions mask their failings. But that is always the better place to begin slaying the beast.

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