

# The awfulness of the actual

## Counter-consumerism in a new age of war

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It is more than four years since the September 11th attack; there is turmoil, daily death and anguish in Iraq, and no sign of a resolution to the ramifying problems created by the invasion and the subsequent ignominious actions of the occupying forces, or by the ‘insurgents’ whom the illegal invasion has predictably summoned into being. Terrorist retaliation for UK participation and support has claimed its first victims in Britain, and we are promised more to come. This article has been written in a week resounding with lamentation for the near one thousand who perished in a panicked stampede in Baghdad; and with the despairing cries of those thousands who, as their cities descended into chaos in the richest country in the world, were appealing for the means of survival in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina.

The humanly inflicted suffering in Iraq cannot be compared in either its causes or consequences with that ensuing from a terrible wind in the Gulf of Mexico. And yet there are some parallels and connections to be noted: the nonchalant and blundering quality of the Bush administration’s responses (one might speak of a malevolent disregard were one sure that the glazed-eyed president had a proper grasp of the unfolding realities on which he is called to act); the evidence that wherever you are and whatever the source of the destruction visited upon you, if you happen to be Arab or black or relatively poor and without a car, then your further deprivations and sufferings will count for far less than if you are wealthy, white and accommodated with the means of private transport. It is salutary, too, to observe how the nation that is keener than any to export its model of civility to other cultures so readily leaves its own citizens to fend for themselves in difficult times. And then there is the role played in every scenario involving US interests by liquid gold: an essential of the American way of life that has been a major – even if not the only – precipitating factor in the war; an asset whose rising price appears to have been of more concern to the Washington elite, and many of those they govern, than the rising waters in New Orleans. But there is also, perhaps, a further link. For as the sea continues to heat in the Mexican Gulf, more storms are forecast, and the insurance companies begin to mutter about global warming, the problems of sustaining the ‘American way of life’ are becoming ever more exposed, not only in the dire troubles they create for others abroad but in the homelands as well.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that American people as a whole are unaware of or without concern for these developments. The last election indicated the faultlines opening up in their responses, even if these have not as yet had seismic

effects on party politics. There are those, too, although they remain a minority, who are implacably opposed to what is being done (or not being done) in their name. The anti-war marches and anti-globalization protests in the USA were on a similar scale to those elsewhere in the world, and the beleaguered Left, starved as it has been of signs of support for a countering ethos, has understandably seized upon this promise with enthusiasm and sought to build upon it. One notable instance of this was the broadsheet *Neither Their War Nor Their Peace* distributed at the 2003 anti-war demonstrations by Retort, a group of around fifty individuals, some with links to *New Left Review*, who have long been writing and agitating in the San Francisco Bay area. The broadsheet proved influential at the marches, and it has now been expanded by four of the group into an altogether more ambitious analysis of US imperialism and foreign policy in the aftermath of September 11th.\*

### Permanent war

*Afflicted Powers* describes itself as a ‘polemic on the eve of war’ and associates its argument with the earlier pamphleteering tradition represented by Rosa Luxemburg’s *Junius Pamphlet* and Randolph Bourne’s *The State*. Depending on its focus at any point, its judgements veer between the despairing and the elated. On the one hand, it tells us, we have seldom been closer to hell on earth; on the other, it hails the peace

march as a ‘great new fact of politics’ and foreshadowing of a ‘different form of life’. Nor is it inclined to moderation in its symbolic alignment, since it borrows its title from Satan’s address to the fallen in *Paradise Lost*. This is an identification with the Satanic sublime that certainly captures the grim defiance of Bush’s authority and insupportable rule that has inspired its authors. However, given the Arch-fiend’s insistence that the devil’s work must always be to pervert any good that evil may promise, the association is risky, especially for anyone committed to a dialectical perspective on history. It is also a trifle dodgy given the competition in the field of diabolical opposition presented by revolutionary Islamic terror. For *Afflicted Powers* has no intention of lending itself to that particular rebuttal of Western culture, and delivers a strictly secular and socialist plague upon both the US administration and its jihadist counterparts. If this is a work of apostasy it is one that is seeking, dare one say it, some third way out of that dualism, some place of being and talking beyond the ‘good and evil’ banalities of both Christian and Muslim fundamentalisms.

For the moment, however, we are all caught, it claims, in a new–old temporality, a complex of the atavistic and the newfangled. Or, if preferred, we are shaped by a world in which the hyper-modern is itself seamed with the barbaric and retrograde. Nowhere is this more evident than in American imperialism’s strategy of ‘permanent war’. War and contemporary capitalism (at least in its US form) are inextricably linked, since, under the compulsion to open up ever new sources of ‘primitive accumulation’, the American state is committed to a continuous round of military inter-



João Louro, *Blind Image no. 66*, 2004

\* Retort (Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Mathews, Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in the Age of War*, Verso, London and New York, 2005. 211 pp., £9.99 pb., 1 84467 031 7.

vention. This argument presides over the extended consideration given in *Afflicted Powers* to the ‘blood for oil’ thesis (rejected as lacking the more structural understanding allowed through the ‘permanent war’ thesis). It also drives the book’s analysis of the role of US foreign policy in precipitating revolutionary Islam, and the ‘new Leninism’ of its vanguard terrorism. Petro-capitalism’s ruin of the secular nation-state; its ‘permanent war’ liquidation of any left politics or secular criticism in the Muslim world; and a hyper-modern yet all too regressively bleak urbanization are here presented as the major contributing factors.

Unsurprisingly, this optic prompts some of Retort’s gloomiest forecasts, such as, for example, that it will not really matter to Washington what ensues in Iraq. Even if the war issues in a chaos of factionalized and fratricidal zones, it will have succeeded to the extent that it has facilitated a greater US military presence in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East (and in the process excluded Saudi Arabia from the



equation). In short, success in such adventures simply means securing a position for the next phase of imperial projection. American power here figures as unassailable if only because it is content with such narrowly military objectives whatever the collateral damage elsewhere, and whatever the longer-term historical consequences.

At the same time, however, and running counter to this pessimism, we learn that the concept of ‘afflicted’ power is intended to refer as much to the vulnerability of the administration as to the present impotence of the opposition to corporate capital. For the ‘American empire’ now lives, they argue, in a partly factitious and partly justified fear that has led it to take actions (notably in Iraq) that have brought it close to ‘real strategic failure’. The state itself, then, today is ailing and exposed to its countering forces (more or less identified here with the anti-war marchers), even if this ‘multitude’ has yet to take advantage of its weakness.

What is emphasized in the development of this perspective (and this is where the Retort polemic departs most sharply from the Marxism of its precursors) is the unprecedented role of the ‘image-wars’ in the maintenance and affliction of political power today. A reworking of Debord’s theses on the ‘society of the spectacle’ is here invoked to explain how September 11th has acquired such epochal importance and prompted so much irrational and counterproductive reaction to it. For what underlies this, it is argued, is the exposure of the state today to its own ever more concentrated and historically abstracted reliance on the image as the key to social power. In the society of weakened citizenship that the market requires and the state is expected to supply, the control of imagery becomes all-important to the cementing of some quasi-political community. Power is thus increasingly identified in or with the key monuments, icons, logos, and other signifiers of the ‘imaginary earth’ – which means it is also vulnerable to an attack that succumbs to the same fantasy and is willing to exploit it at the cost of efficacy or political recognition at any other level.

Those, therefore, of the Left who have dismissed the Twin Towers attack as engaging in a hopeless symbolic gesture have been in one sense right, since their perpetrators attacked nothing other than an icon; but, in another sense, it is precisely in making the Towers their target that they revealed their sophisticated grasp of the present and the extent of its symbolic governance. And by thereby creating the image that now *cannot* be shown, this ‘spectacular’ eruption changed the historical course and set off the relay of events that has created the new global context for us all. In this respect, so it is claimed, the Twin Towers attack represents a catastrophic ‘image-defeat’ for the Bush administration, managed in full and cynical awareness that it would do little to unsettle the circuits of capital, but designed precisely to set off the ‘war on terror’, raise the profile of al-Qaeda, and summon the hydra of suicidal insurgency. In all of this, of course, it has spectacularly succeeded – as the Retort authors put it, the state’s reaction to the precision bombings ‘has exceeded in its crassness and futility the martyr-pilots’ wildest dreams’.

The outlook of *Afflicted Powers* is exceptional in combining an orthodox Left refusal to see US foreign policy today as significantly breaking with its earlier patterns, with a less orthodox readiness to take seriously what is distinctive to the current ‘moment’: the altogether more significant role of the ‘spectacle’ and its often horrendous – and highly material – consequences. The approach certainly helps to explain the exceptional convulsion within the ‘business as usual’ ethos of American capitalism that was brought about by the Twin Towers attack. It also illuminates the vulnerability of state power generally in an age of increasingly uncontrollable media exposure. (As the Retort authors drily put it, it remains unclear ‘how the brutalities of primitive accumulation can be properly attended to in the age of al-Jazeera and the torturer with the Toshiba PDR’.) And it is an approach employed convincingly in the discussion of US policy towards Israel, where the continued, but increasingly irrational, loyalty of the administration to this one-time ‘McJerusalem in the Middle East’, but now failing state, is explained as in part due to ‘real’ historical factors, in part to the way in which the USA has been captivated by the mirror image that Israel has provided of its own strategic aims and methods. However, this is now an image so strained that it is possible to believe that the move into Iraq might even have been fuelled by a fantasy-wish to supply a substitute mirror, an alternative image of ‘the only Middle East democracy’.

### **Consumer ambivalence**

Yet this argument is also weakened by its overreliance on a monolithic and depersonalized depiction of ‘state’, ‘empire’ and ‘capital’, whose strategic needs are often presented as quite abstracted from the interests of their human supports (especially in their role as avid consumers of its goods and services). ‘The endless accumulation of armed power,’ it is said, ‘proposes itself (or wishes to propose itself) *as the very basis of the social order*’. As hinted earlier, there is a problem of knowing whether such formulations are meant to refer to ‘capital’ only in its US formation or to capital as such, for if the latter, some account needs also to be given of how capitalism thrives elsewhere without the same commitment to permanent war. Such claims also convey the impression of a USA given over to permanent war simply for the sake of it, a war in which even the greed of corporate giants – which *is* acknowledged in passing – figures as mere contingency. It is not that the impression of hypostatized power is entirely false: US capitalism does *seem* like that, but there is something evasive all the same in pretending that its runaway success can be analysed or understood without reference to the collusion of its ‘multitude’ of consumers in the building and consolidation of the American empire: a multitude that is surely not entirely distinct from that of the peace marchers, even if the latter do also intimate ‘a different form of life’.

One can sympathize with this evasion, driven as it is by a resistance to seeing

the Bush regime, its Halliburtons and Cheneys, as being in correspondence with the popular will. Yet realism requires that despite the heady swell of the anti-war movement and the continued and impassioned opposition of the anti-globalization forces, we recognize that Bush has enjoyed massive support for its military programme, at least until recently. It requires us to recognize – despite the analogies drawn in *Afflicted Powers* between Bush and Hobbes's Sovereign – that most Americans fear his reign rather less than that of al-Qaeda. And, above all, it requires us to recognize the complexities and contradictions of a culture in which the mass of people are thoroughly integrated in their role as consumers of the 'American way of life' and its capitalist provision of their automobiles, air flights, life insurance and pensions, even as many of them – for differing reasons and in differing ways – are also alienated, exploited and politically disaffected. It is true, as *Afflicted Powers* claims, quoting Thomas Friedman, that 'McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas'; but it is also true that it cannot flourish without those who want to eat its hamburgers.

This is where the abstract vocabulary of 'empire' and 'multitude' seems less than helpful (and indeed the recourse to it is rather puzzling, given that Hardt and Negri scarcely figure otherwise and are said in a footnote – rightly in my opinion – to have been received over-reverentially by the Left.) But the advantage, of course, of this discourse is that it allows a kind of theoretical bracketing off of all those who are neither the anti-globalization and peace movement radicals pressing for a countering ethos nor the faceless agents of a monolithic state machine. And once they have been bracketed off, the radical thinker can also be spared the hugely difficult and embarrassing decision regarding their degree of autonomy and the status of their desire: are they to be theorized as the unfortunate and deluded dupes of the system or as the highly reflexive and freely supportive beneficiaries of it? No one on the Left can be blamed for wanting to avoid answering this troublesome ideological query at the present time, but I also suspect that there is no way in which the Left can adequately come to terms with the current situation without confronting it more directly and taking its measure.

I agree with Retort that 'the Islamists' rage and contempt for the modern "Life" they go on savaging in their communiqués will never be understandable until what they have suffered – what they have lived through – is taken seriously again.' I agree, too, that the suicidal terrorist manifestation of this opposition is driven by an 'ascetic ideal' that it is impossible to endorse even as we can understand some of the rationale for it. The task of the Left, then, is indeed to provide an alternative to this abjection and negation. But this demands, I would argue, not only that we take seriously the contest over the management of the 'spectacle', and acknowledge the newfangled atavism of our age, but also develop a more dialectical understanding of the interaction of government and its public, capitalism and its consumers, both in its forms of mutual reinforcement and its possible lines of fracture.

Despite the very great manipulative powers and pressures of the market, this is not simply a matter of the state versus its constructed and victimized 'masses'. But nor should we assume that it is only in the more extreme reactions of the anti-globalization protesters that all the disaffection with the consumerist lifestyle will be located in the future. There may, it is true, be few signs of it as yet in the USA, but in Europe one might already claim the beginnings of a new consumer ambivalence, both in the sense that other conceptions of the 'good life' are gaining more of a hold among some affluent consumers, and in the sense that there is a more pervasive sense of disenchantment with the supposed blessings of consumerism, compromised as these are by the stress, pollution, traffic congestion, and ill-health that goes with them. Where this newly emergent sense of an 'alternative hedonism' is likely to lead, and how, if at all, it will connect with existing social movements, remains to be seen. But the Left today should not only not ignore it; it should seek to further it by spearheading a much more explicit cultural representation of the non-puritanical but at the same anti-consumerist 'political

imaginary' to which it is gesturing. It might also seek in the process to open up more of a dialogue around both the points of contact and abrasion with the 'anti-Coca-Cola culture' responses of Islam.<sup>1</sup>

All this requires more engagement than hitherto with the emergence of consumption as a potential source of subversion. As one theorist has put it:

On the one hand, consumption appears as the key contemporary 'problem' responsible for massive suffering and inequality. At the same time it is the locus of any future 'solution' as a progressive movement in the world, by making the alimentary institutions of trade and government finally responsible to humanity for the consequences of their actions.... From the legacy of Ralph Nader in the United States, through consumer movements in Malaysia, to the consumer cooperatives of Japan, to the green movements of Western Europe, the politicized form of consumption concern has become increasingly fundamental to the formation of many branches of alternative politics.... Nevertheless, it is vital not to view consumption as simply important when it is politicized, but also to consider the implications of these movements for our imagination of politics.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the signs of this growing political weight of consumption are not only to be found in the protests and refusals of the Green parties and No Logo generation, but also in the recent, slightly anxious, invitations to the public to view consumption not just as a matter of private expenditure, self-styling and gratification, but as an act of political identification through which the 'patriotic' consumer signals support for the Western way of life. For to promote shopping, that bastion of private choice, as a civic 'duty' is an act of contradictory 'interference' on the part of the neoliberal state that cannot but hint at its vulnerability. There are tensions, in other words, to be explored – and exploited – between the collectivizing pressure of a summons to 'patriotic shopping' and the promotion of a deregularized global marketplace whose supposed virtue is to allow all individual consumers to exercise a choice untrammelled by compulsion other than private desire.

It is true that, stifling their distaste for jeremiads against the commodity, the Retort authors do, in their final pages, turn their attention to the pressures of consumer desire, and offer a sensitive, if fairly standard, critique of consumerism as compensatory for a 'fundamental meaning-deficit' in the modern world. They also offer some interesting reflections on the obsession with digital replay, instant messaging, and other devices of distancing and mediation as attempts to expel 'the banality of the present moment'. And they suggest that it is precisely this resistance to living in the present that most distresses the Islamic opposition. But this remains essentially a negative critique of commodification, and the promised connections between it and the call for a 'non-orthodox, non-nostalgic, non-rejectionist, non-apocalyptic critique of the modern' are never quite made. Very little, in other words, is said about what a counter- or post-consumerist order might look like, what alternative seductions to McDonaldisation it might evoke, how or why these might begin to win support among the yet unconverted 'multitude', and what their role in any democratically achieved transition would be. The opposition of the peace and anti-globalization movements is eloquently summoned, but only, it seems, in its capacity to expose the awfulness of the actual, rather than as the exponent of a compelling alternative to it. In the end, then, despite the indisputable energy and analytic brilliance of *Afflicted Powers*, there is a sense that it is still too caught in that somewhat magisterial Leftism that thrills to the sublimity of the absolute, post-revolutionary other to capitalist modernity, precisely because it never has to be represented.

## Notes

1. For details on 'Countering Consumerism', a conference to be held on 20–22 April 2006 at London Metropolitan University, whose aim is to provide a forum for discussion of some of these ideas, go to [www.londonmet.ac.uk/research-units/iset/events/conferences.cfm](http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research-units/iset/events/conferences.cfm).
2. Daniel Miller, ed., *Acknowledging Consumption*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, pp. 31, 40–41.