

NATURE PROSPECTS

Reflections on Affliction

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It is now nearly five years since the September 11th attacks. There is turmoil, daily death and anguish in Iraq, and no signs of any resolution to the problems created by the invasion and by the subsequent ignominious actions of both the occupying forces and the “insurgents” whom the illegal invasion has predictably summoned into being. Terrorist retaliation for U.K. participation and support has now claimed its first victims in Britain, and more attacks are promised. This column was written in a week resounding with lamentation for the near 1,000 who perished in the panicked stampede in Baghdad; but also with the despairing cries of thousands in the richest country in the world who were forced to beg for the means of survival as their devastated communities descended into anarchy in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina.

One cannot compare the causes or consequences of the humanly inflicted chaos and suffering in Iraq with that ensuing from a terrible wind in the Gulf of Mexico. And yet there are some parallels and connections: the nonchalant and blundering quality of the Bush administration’s responses in both cases (one might speak of a malevolent disregard were one sure that the glazed-eyed President had any proper grasp of the unfolding realities on which he is called to act); the evidence given in both, 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 car-less, 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 a U.S. administration that is keener than any to export its model of civility to other cultures so readily abandons its own citizens in times of need. And then there is the role of the liquid gold: an essential of the American way of life that has been a major (if not the only) precipitating factor in the war and whose rising price appears to have been of more concern to both the Washington elite and many of those they govern than the rising waters in New Orleans. But there is also another link. As the sea continues to heat in the Gulf of Mexico and more storms are forecast, the insurance companies begin to mutter about global warming. The problems of sustaining the “American way of life” are thus becoming ever more exposed not only in the dire troubles they create for others abroad but in the homeland as well.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that the American people as a whole are unaware of or without concern for these developments. The last election indicated the fault lines opening up in their responses, even if these have not 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 U.S. were on a similar scale to those seen elsewhere around 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. A notable example is the broadsheet, *Neither Their War Nor Their Peace*, distributed at the 2003 anti-war demonstrations by the Retort group, which has long been writing and agitating in the San Francisco Bay area. The broadsheet proved influential at the marches and has now been expanded by four of the group into the book, *Afflicted Powers*, an altogether more ambitious analysis of U.S. imperialism and foreign policy in the aftermath of September 11th.

Afflicted Powers describes itself as a “polemic on the eve of war” and associates its argument with the earlier pamphleteering tradition represented by Rosa Luxembour’s *Junius Brochure* 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 hand, it hails the peace march as a “great new fact of politics” that foreshadows a “different form of life.” Nor is *Afflicted Powers* 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. 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* certainly has no intention of lending itself to that particular rebuttal of Western culture and delivers a strictly secular and socialist critique of both the U.S. administration and its jihadist countering forces. If this is a work of apostasy, it is one 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 new-fangled, 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 “permanent war” strategy. War and contemporary capitalism (at least in its U.S. form) are inextricably linked, since the need to open up ever new sources of “primitive accumulation” requires the American State to carry out a continuous round of military intervention. This argument presides over the extended consideration given in *Afflicted Powers* to the “blood for oil” thesis (which is rejected as lacking the more structural understanding presented by the “permanent war” thesis). It also drives the book’s analysis of the role of U.S. foreign policy in precipitating revolutionary Islam, and the “new Leninism” of its vanguard terrorism, which the authors attribute to petro-capitalism’s ruin of the secular nation-state, the “permanent war” liquidation of any Left politics or secular criticism in the Muslim world, and a hyper-modern—yet all too regressively bleak—urbanization.

Unsurprisingly, this optic prompts some of Retort’s gloomiest forecasts, for example, that it does not really matter to Washington what ensues in Iraq. Even if the war ushers in a chaos of factionalized and fratricidal zones, it will have succeeded to the extent it has facilitated a greater U.S. military presence in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East. 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 or the longer term historical consequences.

Counter to this pessimism, however, the concept of “afflicted” power is also said 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 over the last four years, 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 Retort emphasizes (and where the group 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. Retort presents a re-working of Debord’s theses on the “society of the spectacle” to explain how September 11th has acquired such epochal importance and prompted so much irrational and counter-productive reaction to it. Underlying the U.S. reaction, the group argues, 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 foster, 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.” But this means the state is also vulnerable to an attack that targets the same fantasy and is willing to exploit it at the cost of efficacy or political impact at any but the symbolic level.

Therefore, those of the Left who have dismissed the Twin Tower attacks as engaging in a hopeless symbolic gesture have been right in one sense, since the perpetrators attacked nothing other than an icon. But, in another sense, it is precisely in targeting that icon that the attackers revealed their sophisticated grasp of postmodernity and the extent of its symbolic governance. Furthermore, by 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, the Twin Towers attacks represent a catastrophic “image-defeat” for the Bush administration, crafted in full and cynical awareness that it would do little to unsettle the circuits of capital, but designed precisely to unleash the “war on terror,” raise the profile of al-Qaida, and summon the hydra of suicidal insurgency. In all of this, the attackers have succeeded spectacularly. As the authors themselves put it, the state’s reaction to the precision bombings “has exceeded in its crassness and futility the martyr-pilots’ wildest dreams.”

Afflicted Powers is exceptional in that it combines an orthodox Left refusal to see U.S. foreign policy today as significantly breaking with its earlier patterns with a less orthodox readiness to take seriously what is distinctive about 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” of American capitalism triggered 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 dryly 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 U.S. 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 partly due to “real” historical factors and partly to the way in which the U.S. has been captivated by the mirror image that Israel has provided of its own strategic aims and methods. (This image, however, is now so strained that it is supposed 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.’)

Yet the argument is also rather too reliant on a monolithic and depersonalized depiction of “state,” “empire,” or “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 good and services). “The endless accumulation of armed power,” we are told in the book “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 only to “capital” in its U.S. formation or to capital as such. For if it is the latter, some account needs also to be given of how capitalism thrives elsewhere without the same commitment to permanent war. But such claims also convey the impression of a U.S. 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: U.S. capitalism does *seem* like that, but there is something evasive in pretending that its runaway success can be analyzed or understood without reference to the collusion of its multitude of consumers in the building and consolidation of the American empire—a multitude not entirely different from the peace marchers, even if the latter do also represent “a different form of life.” One can sympathize with this evasion, driven as it is by a resistance to seeing the Bush regime and its Halliburtons and Cheneys as in any 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 the Bush regime has enjoyed massive support for its military program until very recently. It requires us to recognize—despite the analogies drawn in *Afflicted Powers* between Bush and Hobbes’ Sovereign—that most Americans fear his reign rather less than that of al-Qaida. 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 burgers.

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 the measure of it.

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 new-fangled atavism of our age, but also develop a more dialectical understanding of the interaction of government and its public and capitalism and its consumers, both in their forms of mutual reinforcement and 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 all the disaffection with the consumerist lifestyle will be expressed only in the more extreme reactions of the anti-globalization protesters. Although there are few signs of it as yet in the U.S., in Europe one can already see 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 that the downsides of consumerism—the stress, pollution, traffic congestion, and ill-health that goes with it—are becoming ever more apparent. Where this newly emergent sense of an “alternative hedonism” is likely to lead, and how, if at all, it will connect with existing social movement politics, remains to be seen. But the Left today should not only recognize the growing disaffection with consumerism, it should also seek to further it by spearheading a much more explicit cultural representation of the non-puritanical but anti-consumerist “political imaginary” to which it is gesturing. In the process, it might also seek to open up more of a dialog around both the points of contact and the points of abrasion with the “anti-Coco Cola culture” responses of Islam.

All this requires more engagement 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.

The signs, moreover, of the growing political weight of the issue of consumption, can be found not only 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 hints 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 de-regularized global marketplace whose supposed virtue is to allow all individual consumers to exercise a choice untrammelled by any 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 attention to the pressures of consumer desire

and offer a sensitive, if fairly standard, critique of consumerism as compensating for a loss of meaning 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 suggest that it is precisely this resistance to living in the present that most distresses the Islamic opposition. But this remains essentially itself 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 McDonaldization it might evoke, how or why these might begin to win support among the yet unconverted “multitude,” or what their role in any democratically achieved transition would be. The opposition of the peace and anti-globalization movement 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. The energy and analytic brilliance of *Afflicted Powers* are indisputable. Would that they might be put to work now in the imagining of the “other” order to capitalist modernity and the means of advancing the mandate for it.