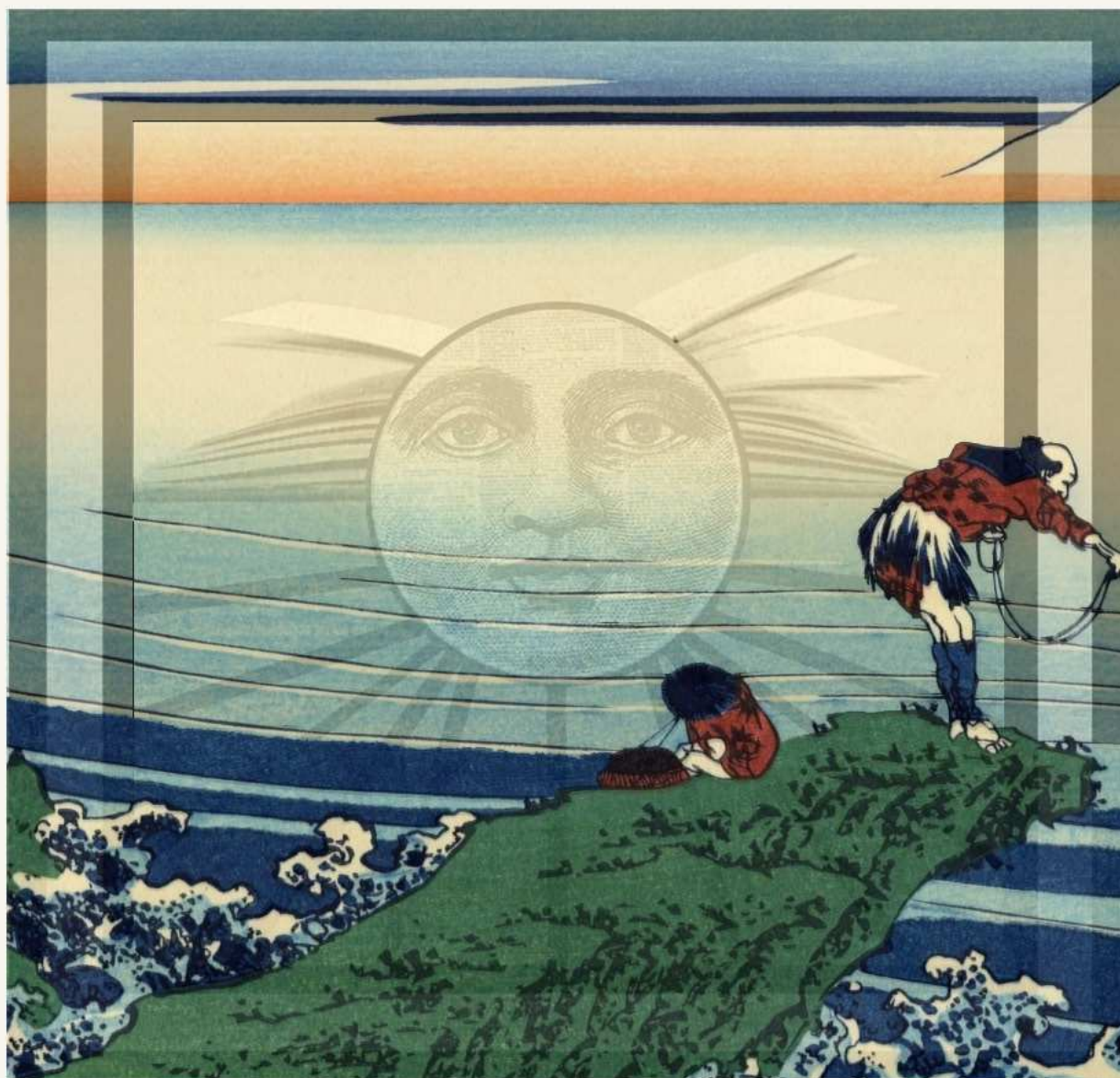


# THE CAMBRIDGE HUMANITIES REVIEW

Issue Five  
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A JOURNAL OF LITERARY AND INTELLECTUAL ESSAYS



*hinc lucem et pocula sacra*

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## EDITOR'S LETTER

Amongst this term's submissions, one word cropped up with sufficient frequency to arouse attention: the verb, 'to leaven'. Hovering between unfamiliarity and recognition, the word remains distinctly redolent of a Biblical past whose repeated intrusion was surprising in a modern journal and across so many disciplines. Unleavened bread is used during Holy Communion. Had some resurgent interest in Eucharistic practice insinuated its way into the metaphoric psyche of our writers? Or perhaps, on trend with Britain's rising fussiness about food, our contributors were that much more clued up on flatbreads and sourdough than they were a term ago. Such speculations are indeed idle, but it remains, though unstated, one of the ancillary aims of this review to collate a sample of habits of thought and expression at the time of publication, however skewed, narrow, and selective this sample may be. (On which note, the editors would warmly welcome any responses that diagnosed any collective fallacies, pathological misconceptions or unacknowledged prejudices in the issues as a whole. We may even publish them, provided they aren't too riddled with expletives.) Students of literature, especially in Cambridge, are bred to believe such cognitive habits are discernible in the smallest verbal tic; that choices of metaphor are not accidental or peripheral, but symptomatic of how people think and argue. As will be evident in the ensuing essays, the way we define evidence can forge the tools applied to that very evidence: metaphor is used to explicate metaphor, just as the language of mathematics can only be unpicked in that very same language. Such an outlook, though, is not the monopoly of one discipline. Political Thought as practised by the Cambridge School is very much taken by the minutiae of style, and, as Richard Riddick will note in his essay on Derrida, it was the English Faculty at Cambridge that most strongly campaigned against the deconstructionist's honorary degree on the grounds, at least in part, of stylistic excesses. Leavened by these introductory musings, I hope that, alongside its other preoccupations, the current issue will ferment some healthy debate on the importance (or, indeed, triviality) of style in academic writing.

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PROF  
DAVID  
RUNCIMAN  
DEMOCRACY  
AND THE  
CONFIDENCE  
TRAP

*(The Cambridge Humanities Review is grateful to Princeton University Press for permission to reprint this edited and abridged extract from *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy and Crisis from World War I to the Present*).*

The history of democracy and crisis over the last hundred years shows repeated patterns of behaviour: misapprehension, confusion, brinkmanship, experimentation, recovery. Democracies are not good at spotting crises before they occur. They ignore the warning signs of impending trouble. At the same time, they overreact to the routine hiccups of political life, which adds to the air of distraction. Scandals grip democracies while systematic failings get overlooked. Democracies lack a sense of perspective. This produces repeated crises as mistakes mount up. But it also enables democracies to escape from crises, because no single mistake is ever conclusive. Democracies continue to adjust, adapt, and find a way through. This process is not pretty, and it creates a pervasive feeling of disappointment. In crises there is always the hope that something more fundamental will be revealed. The search goes out for real democracy, the true story concealed behind the mess of democratic life. This quest is invariably fruitless. The confusion that produces the crisis is the same confusion that dissolves it over time. Alongside the disappointment and frustration comes a lingering complacency. Democracies survive their mistakes. So the mistakes keep coming.

The current crisis fits this pattern. It was not anticipated. It was caused by a mixture of complacency and skittishness. It has generated a series of improvised solutions that have prevented the worst from happening. At the same time, frustration with all this improvisation has continued to mount. We want something more: a resolution that is in keeping with the scale of the problem and with the scale of the greed and ineptitude that brought it about. The hope persists that we might achieve a fundamental rescue of democracy, one that finally breaks the cycle of crisis and recovery. But that hope has to compete with a corresponding fear that piecemeal solutions are merely papering over the cracks. At some point the repeated failings of democracy will catch up with it. As we muddle our way through this crisis, from summit to summit and election to election, it is tempting to think the real story about democracy is being concealed. The reckoning is still to come.

If the pattern repeats itself, these hopes and fears will remain unrealised. Muddling through is the true story; the reckoning never arrives. When they have no choice, democracies adapt, often reluctantly and almost always inadvertently. In the adjustment there are winners and losers, though these rarely correspond with the heroes and villains of the drama. It is one of the unavoidable frustrations of modern democracy that we don't get to dole out the punishment commensurate with the scale of the crisis. Defeated dictators can be torn apart by the mob; defeated democratic politicians retire in comfort to compose their self-justifying memoirs.

But how can we be sure the pattern will keep repeating itself? We can't. We should not assume that democracies will always be able to improvise a solution to whatever challenges they face. There is nothing about democracy that guarantees this will happen; it is simply more likely to happen under democracy than any other system of government. The assumption that it is bound to happen increases the likelihood it will stop happening. It breeds the sort of complacency that allows dangerous crises to build up, invites decisive action to be deferred, and encourages brinkmanship. This is tempting fate. The crises of the twentieth century, from the Cuban missile crisis to the global financial crash, all contained moments of real peril, even if the perils were ultimately overcome. Yet there is a never-ending risk of encountering the crisis that is too great to solve.

As well as being cyclical, the history of democracy and crisis in the modern age is cumulative. The experience of crisis builds up over time: no crisis is quite like the one before, because the one before is always there to serve as a warning and a temptation. The repeated sequence of democratic crises over the past hundred years also describes a single, overarching narrative. It is an obvious success story. The democracies of the West emerged from the twentieth century as the richest and most powerful states the world have ever seen, they defeated their enemies and enabled their citizens to prosper. But success on that scale comes at a price. It has helped blind the democracies to the enduring threats they face. On this version of events the cumulative success of democracy has created the conditions for systematic failure. The time may be past for muddling through. Democracies must either confront their endemic indebtedness, their growing inequality, and their environmental irresponsibility, or they will find themselves beyond rescue.

Here are two ways of thinking about the current state of democracy: on one view the present crisis is not so different from previous crises, which means we will eventually stumble across a solution. The alternative view is that the present crisis is the cumulative result of previous crises, in which case we will need to make a more fundamental adjustment. Which is right? Is this crisis a temporary glitch or a permanent watershed? One reason to think it might be a watershed is that it signals the unravelling of an extended political / economic experiment. Beyond the relatively short cycles of crisis and its aftermath, there are also transgenerational shifts. The forty-plus years of the Cold War was one. Another is the near-forty-year arc from the birth of the post-Bretton Woods order in the 1970s to its apparent demise in the current crisis.

This was the age of "neoliberalism": open markets, deregulation of finance, rapid currency flows, regressive taxation. Many people have come to see it as a prolonged conspiracy against democracy: unfettered global capitalism enriched the few at the expense of the many. Now we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rebuild democracy from the ground up, to make it more equal, more liveable, more stable. However, neoliberalism still has its champions, who draw a very different moral from its failure. The real story of the last forty years has been the inability of advanced democratic societies to tackle their propensity to overspend. The damage of the previous forty years of Keynesianism has never been undone. The current crisis is a crisis of democratic indebtedness, not of oligarchic greed. It provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to retrench.

This argument has been played out in many different forms: it's Nancy Pelosi vs. Paul Ryan, Paul Krugman vs. Niall Ferguson, Ed Balls vs. George Osborne, François Hollande vs. Angela Merkel. It is a version of the argument that has always accompanied democracy. The doubters think democracy is in danger of becoming a confidence trick (this claim that democracies cannot face up to their own weaknesses, because the politicians never tell the public what the public does not want to hear, runs from Plato to Nietzsche and on into

the present). Its champions think it has been the victim of a confidence trick. Both are looking to the crisis as a moment of truth. But one big difference between the twenty-first-century version of this argument and earlier incarnations is that where both sides would once have hesitated to call themselves democrats, now both sides call themselves democrats, even the doubters. Notwithstanding the current crisis, few people in the West are giving up on democracy just yet. The ideological alternatives remain deeply unappealing. There is a pervasive fear that China is gaining the upper hand. Countless books forecast coming Chinese dominance. But the fellow travellers of Chinese state capitalism in the West are very thin on the ground. We worry about the Chinese threat; we don't want to emulate it. When western states experiment with technocracy, it is in the cause of preserving their democracies, not abandoning them. For most of us, democracy is still the only game in town.

This is the other overarching story of the last hundred years: our growing knowledge of the lasting appeal of democracy. At the start of the twentieth century democracy was a largely untried and untested form of politics. But over time and through a succession of crises, democracy has spread, strengthened, and endured. Now, in many parts of the world, it looks entrenched. There appears to be a confidence threshold for any successful democracy. Once the threshold is passed, it becomes very unlikely that the move to democracy will be reversed.

The threshold is confirmed by the empirical data. No democracy has reverted to autocratic government once per capita GDP has risen above \$7000. When it reaches a certain level of prosperity, democracy reinforces itself; with the arrival of material comforts the high risk, high stakes game of authoritarian politics loses its appeal. There also seems to be a demographic threshold for stable democracy. Countries where the median age is in the twenties or below are much less likely to wait out a democratic crisis than countries where it is in the thirties or above. Young people, especially young men, are impatient and reckless. Older people are more willing to give things time; they learn to live with the tentative, experimental quality of democratic politics.

The existence of these thresholds is hard to square with the apparent uncertainty generated by repeated democratic crises in the West. Where is the risk for democracy if it is so secure? One way to keep the doubts about democracy alive is to raise the threshold for what counts as proof of durability. In 1951 the economist Kenneth Arrow argued that democratic decision making would have to be heavily constrained if it was not to be entirely arbitrary; on his account there could be no such thing as a stable democracy. This work earned him a Nobel Prize. In 2008 the octogenarian Arrow was asked in an interview how he reconciled his views about the "impossibility" of democracy with its enduring strength over the course of his professional lifetime. Didn't the success of democracy show he had been wrong? No, Arrow replied. It simply showed that it was too soon to pass final judgement. The instability was just getting going.

It is always possible to adjust the time frame to suit the argument you want to make about democracy. Any lasting success can be made to seem temporary by expanding your time horizons (look at the ancients!), just as any fleeting failure can be made to look definitive by fixating on the present (look at us!). Nothing gets resolved this way. The real story of democracy is that the long view and the short view must coexist. One never trumps the other. The on-going success of democracy creates the conditions for repeated failures, just as repeated failures are a precondition for its on-going success. It is a permanent relationship. It is also an unstable one. The instability is where the real risks lie.

The future of democracy remains open. I do not know what will happen. No one does (and anyone who says they know what the future holds for democracy is either deluded or lying). But it is possible to say where the challenges lie. The present crisis has highlighted the four areas where the established democracies have performed poorly over the last decade: they have fought unsuccessful wars, mismanaged their markets and finances, failed to take meaningful action on climate change, and seemed frozen in the face of China's growing power. Whatever the result of this present crisis, these challenges are not going away. I will briefly consider each in turn.

First, war. A lot of modern political science has been devoted to understanding the performance of democracies at war, and establishing where the advantages of democracy lie. Two relatively firm conclusions have

been reached: one, that democracies do not go to war with each other; two, that democracies tend to win the wars that they do fight. One explanation for both these facts is that democracies are less likely to fight needless wars. The structure of democratic politics (regular elections, a free press, civilian control of the military) makes democracies more cautious about military conflict and less prone than autocracies to wishful thinking. But this knowledge can undermine itself: once democratic politicians have internalised how good democracies are at war, they become more likely to fight needless or reckless ones. The recent history of democracy at war tends to confirm this, from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan (this not simply an American problem: a similar account can be given of Israeli democracy at war, from Sinai to Lebanon and Gaza.) Democracies have remained trapped in cycles of confidence, over-confidence and failure.

What about the relation between democratic failure and market failure? One widespread view is that free markets are needed to correct the mistakes of democracies (that tends to be the position of libertarian economists); another is that democracy is needed to correct the mistakes of markets (that tends to be the position of social democratic politicians). But a further possibility is that democracies and markets can go wrong in the same way and at the same time, because they share the same structural weaknesses: a tendency towards overconfidence.

At moments of financial crisis it is tempting to think the market has been exposed as a confidence trick. Its critics, from Marx on, have always hoped that each crisis will prove to be the moment of truth. But it is more accurate to say markets fall victim to their own successes: feedback loops inflate the value of good news to the point where bad news gets drowned out. Markets work, so we trust markets; because we trust markets, they overheat; at the same time, because we trust markets, we fail to spot when they overheat; when we finally recognise it, we panic, and markets crash; for a while, we lose confidence in markets until the process starts over again. It would be nice if democracy could correct for this by being immune to such temptations. And there are certainly circumstances when that has happened: in the aftermath of the Great Depression democratic politicians were much less likely to have excessive faith in markets. But the real danger is when confidence in markets and confidence in democracy coincides, and that is what seems to have happened in the recent economic crisis. In the aftermath of democracy's triumph in the Cold War and the victory of the free market over the planned economy, economists came to believe in democracy and at the same time politicians came to believe in markets. As a result, no one wanted to say that things were getting out of hand: the bankers did not want to call out the politicians; the politicians did not want to call out the bankers. It is unlikely to happen again for a while, but when it does the consequences could be devastating. And the next financial crisis is due in about forty years. But only if nothing goes wrong first.

Third, climate change. Have we failed to act so far because democracies are basically weak and foolish and won't take tough decisions? Or is it because democracies are basically sensible and strong and therefore know they will take tough decisions when they have to? I think the second explanation is more plausible than the first. Our success in dealing with previous crises has become a kind of security blanket. As a result, democracies facing looming crises can become engaged in a game of chicken. You see the seeds of this problem in the speech Al Gore delivers at the end of his film *An Inconvenient Truth*, where he lists the past successes of American democracy:

Are we as Americans capable of doing great things even though they are difficult? Are we capable of rising above ourselves and above history? The record indicates that we do have the capacity. We formed a nation. We fought a revolution and brought something new to this Earth, a free nation guaranteeing individual liberty. America made a moral decision that slavery was wrong and that we could not be half free and half slave. We as Americans decided that of course women should have the right to vote. We defeated totalitarianism and won a war in the Pacific and the Atlantic simultaneously. We desegregated our schools and cured some diseases like polio. We landed on the moon, the very best example of what's possible when we are at our best.

We did all this, Gore is saying, so now we can do this. But the fact that we did all that could make us think that we'll get around to dealing with this when we need to, confident that we have always got our act together in the past. And that could be a recipe for disaster if climate change (unlike the various challenges listed by Gore) requires pre-emptive action. One

of the dangers of over-confidence is an assumption that any difficulty you face is simply a replication of some difficulty you have overcome in the past. So you fail to notice that this time it's different. This is the potentially fatal version of the confidence trap.

Finally, China. We are torn in the West in how to think about the rise of China. On the one hand, the Chinese seem to enjoy a lot of short-term advantages by dint of not being a democracy: they can take decisive action without consultation and democratic checks and balances; they do not feel constrained to fight wars for reasons of justice and morality; they can be as pragmatic (i.e. as unprincipled) as they like in seeking to expand their global influence. Yet we also know that in the long run autocratic regimes struggle to match the rising expectations of their populations and to meet their growing demand for a greater say in their government: democracy is likely to win out in the end. So we are caught between a sense of our relative weakness compared to China and also our relative strength.

Alexis de Tocqueville recognised precisely this problem one hundred and fifty years ago, thinking about European monarchy in relation to American democracy. He thought that democracy would win in the end, but in the interim democracy risked being outmanoeuvred by more decisive and less consultative autocratic regimes. This created a dangerous world, in which both sides were liable to miscalculate: democracies might shirk an immediate challenge in the hope that their long-term strengths would tell eventually; autocracies might try to pre-empt their disadvantages by seeking a confrontation in the short term. Nonetheless, Tocqueville thought that democracies needed plausible rivals in order to puncture their complacency. He believed that the role of the United States was to let Europe know that democracy was possible, but the role of Europe was to let America know that democracy was not inevitable. So there was a kind of paradox at work here: democracies needed autocracies to keep them honest and stop them drifting along with their fate; however, the existence of autocracy in a democratic world was very dangerous because autocracies were unpredictable and also liable to collapse in chaotic circumstances. The rise of China places the West in a similar position today. Of course, there are plenty of differences, not least the global spread of democracy, including to India, whose rivalry with China may turn out to be the central political contest of the twenty-first century. But Indian democracy is hardly immune from the promise and temptations of democracy that Tocqueville identified: a sense of destiny combined with a tendency to drift along with its fate, confident that history is on its side. No democracy has an easy way out of the confidence trap. Without plausible rivals democracies are liable to become complacent. With plausible rivals they are liable to become jittery. There is no equilibrium between these two states of mind.

The triumph of democracy in the twentieth century was inadvertent and incomplete. It may well become more complete during the twenty-first century. But it will not be any more advertent, which means that history goes on.

Anne Carson's new offering is a sequel of sorts to her 1999 verse-novel *Autobiography of Red*. This time round, the poetry's printed not in lines alternating between page-width and half page-width, but in narrow, centre-justified columns of text; the characters of Red live their next lives within a formal coffin. To write a second autobiography requires belief in a life being somehow more than full, going on beyond and despite itself, containing things that keep needing to be said even after the first time they seemed ready for the speaking. Morrissey will probably get round to it, like his literary peers Price and Rooney. Carson, though, has loftier examples in mind, such as Gertrude Stein, whose *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was an attempt to write a personal account without being the person in question. This is intriguing or egomaniacal, depending on your point of view (maybe both), but the brilliance of Carson's book is in its patchwork games, the way her subjects never stacked up as flesh-and-blood persons in the first place. You can play more with personhood if you can slip in and out through the cracks in the masks. The youthless 'G' of *Red Doc* was "Geryon" fourteen years before in *Autobiography of Red*; Herakles, destroyed by war, has become "Sad But Great"; someone called "4NO" represents a kind of stunted Prometheus, who "seems / to foresee about five / seconds ahead of every / instant". What *Red Doc* does with insistence, such a gracefully sharp incursion into the twin territories of literary criticism and creative reinterpretation, is to make any curious reader wonder whether 'was', 'has become' or 'represents' are the right ways of talking about the peculiar things that happen when characters walk through the corridors connecting one Carson book, a previous Carson book, the fractured Greek sources, and their distant oral progenitors.

'Book' is the safest bet. It could be described as a novel in verse, or an extended poem, or a wide variety of other things; this kind of generic slipperiness, the labelling and naming we feel bound to perform, is something *Red Doc* itself spends a long time considering. It's a book obsessed by books – by reading and memory, and the hazy experiential middle-ground between the two. As if tempting a determination of genre, Carson tacks on half a dozen incomplete and teasing Notes, a wry gesture to the kind of reader who picks poetry apart looking for sources and allusions. T.S. Eliot was acidly kind to those readers when providing his extensive *Notes to The Waste Land*; instead, Carson puts on a languorous air, as if the events of her book were

Politics is sometimes described as a tragic mode of life. We face irresolvable dilemmas and the long term certainty of failure; there are no happy endings. This is too bleak. Democracy is not a tragedy; it is too inadvertently comical for that. It is a trap. We are not doomed. We are boxed in.

People have to believe in democracy for it to work. The better it works, the more they believe in it. But the more they believe in it, the less likely they are to know when something is wrong. Democracy lives in the moment and displays its strengths over time. This mismatch produces confusion and uncertainty. We can't wait out the confusion and uncertainty because waiting them out gives them the room to grow. We have to live with them, from crisis to crisis, and from recovery to recovery. It is always possible that we encounter the crisis that overwhelms us. But it does not make sense to assume this is bound to happen. If we assume it we more or less guarantee it, because we will have become fatalistic. It is better not to assume it. That too is a form of fatalism, but it is at least fatalism of the adaptable kind.

The history of writing about politics is full of images of escape from our bounded horizons. On the final page of *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama describes history as a long wagon train, progressing over the hills and deserts, making its way into town. Some wagons will get there and some won't; a few will break down or get attacked by Indians. But the majority will make it in the end. The day will come when enough wagons have pulled into town, "such that any reasonable person would be forced to agree that there had only ever been one town and one destination." We are not there yet, Fukuyama insists. Nor can we know, once the wagons do arrive, "whether their occupants, having looked around at their new surroundings, will not find them inadequate and set their eyes on a new and more distant journey."

It is a nice image, but it is not a convincing one. It imagines a moment when the democracies finally recognize where they are and where they have come from – the moment of truth. That moment will never arrive. The long view and the short view do not come together like that. There is no moment of recognition. Democracies are always prone to mistake their surroundings and stumble on.

A better image comes from the best book ever written about democracy. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville invokes the idea of democracy as a river flowing through history. We are afloat on a rickety craft (perhaps one of the American steamboats that Tocqueville so hated). The river is wide and fast moving but it is also hemmed in by the banks on either side. It is heading out to sea, but the sea is a long way off, and no one is thinking about that. The waters are choppy and there are hazards ahead. How do you steer? If you fix a point on the shore you risk losing sight of what is in front of you. If you fix on the eddies and currents in front of your craft, you risk losing sight of where you are heading. There is no easy way to do it, just a constant back and forth. Without the back and forth the ship will eventually go down.

CAL  
REVELY-  
CALDER  
IN AND  
OUT OF  
BATCATRAZ  
A REVIEW OF  
RED DOC>

BY ANNE CARSON  
ALFRED A. KNOPF, 2013

already beginning to dissolve in the rain of the final page, when the new “old dawn” ebbs “out and out and out”. The sentence where “Proust / observes the momentarily impaired surface of the / eye of a person who has / just had a thought she will / not tell you” – a paraphrased chunk overflowing Carson’s rigorous columns – is given a brief citation in the Notes, but there’s no such help with the “four / pages in volume V” where Marcel watches Albertine sleep, even though you’ll find it on the facing leaf. Carson can’t have forgotten about it – but maybe her book did, or did the forgetting for her. *Red Doc* is intrigued by haziness and full of Proust – again and again, we see G reading, musing, and underlining with his red pencil – as its author was while writing. She read *À la recherche du temps perdu* for half an hour every day over seven years, and with that project exhausted she now talks about her mind being stuck in a “desert after Proust”; yet this book reads like Proust travelling in a desert, or a system of ice-caves, holding onto a mythical world long after it lost its life.

Afterlives are what *Red Doc* both worries about and lives within. The plot is streamlined enough: G has left his mother and home to tend the herd (the original one of Greek myth) with his companion Ida. Sad But Great falls back into his life, and a tarmac odyssey begins, taking them across the countryside and into a gigantic glacier, within which a psychiatric hospital – disguised as a garage – holds various figures imprisoned by the traumas of what they once were. By the time they escape, a volcano is chewing up the sky, and their car is pursued by weird creatures, “the bats of / Batcatraz”. There’s more than a hallucinogenic touch of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* about all this, but it’s not just surface frenzy: like Hunter S. Thompson, Carson has a canny sense of the parts we can play even when utterly beside ourselves. The CMO is in charge of the glacier-clinic; in one sense, he’s the Chief Medical Officer, exiled from the military proper, but in another, the Chief Marketing Officer, who’s “waited years for his Warhol / in a clinic full of Valerie / Solanases”. Acronyms can occlude, can hide by their scissoring, every bit as much as their short-hand can clue you up; cutting down and cutting away is a recurring motif, from the names of the characters – “name rations,” G suggests – to their deathless afterlives. The only character with the good grace to die is G’s mother, a death openly presaged by the book’s back cover, and when she does, her body and breath fuse and dissolve together, as if words were all that had kept her alive: “her voice thin / enough to see through”. The mother is entirely a figment of Carson’s imagination, given life in her words and then left for dead. By the time *Red Doc* ends, the original Greek myth – that Herakles came to kill Geryon as the tenth of his Labours – has been cut into pieces too small for sight. The part-playing goes on only as long as the author will write.

Fortunately, Carson is as deft as they come, handling the differing parts of *Red Doc* with panache and a well-tuned ear. *Autobiography of Red* was full of the angst and maudlin musings that all red-winged teen monsters go through; she’s able to re-ignite those moody stabs at profundity with an opaque gauze of tiredness and self-doubt on top:

Do  
they experience the entire  
cold sorrow acre of human  
history as one  
undifferentiated lunatic  
jabberwocking back and  
forth from belligerence to  
tender care? G has  
thought all this before.

This folds a past speech into a present weariness, shuffling through registers as easily and clearly as G picks up and drops his teenage thoughts. Not only can Carson do Carson, but Carson can do Tarantino, as when Ida drops in on the glacier and finds an irate Geryon wondering who’s looking after the herd: “you got arrested / you could say / how / hit up a Laundromat / shit Ida / was okay except a few details / details / off-duty cop happens to be doing his laundry [ . . . ]” The slashes here are the author’s, to mark the back-and-forth of conversation, and in all her sections of pure dialogue there are no tags telling you who’s who. *Red Doc* even begins in the middle of a kitchen-table chat between G and his mother, though you won’t be told that by any helpful narrator. It places enormous pressure on Carson’s handling of the voices involved; she not only has to create characters, but people so characterised that you can read their identities from their speech alone – that, and a decent dose of knowing who they were in other books, before this one got going. It’s a bravura performance. There are always new speeches, new ways of lifting sound off the page: 4NO sounds like he’s stepped out of Ed Dorn’s *Gunslinger* – “am I talking outside your experiential zipcode” – while Lieutenant M’hek could be a minor Beckett figure after years of military service: “Hello Hello M’hek here – herd report – nothing wrong with the herd – absolutely – eating well – shitting well –”. They sound like they have nothing in common, and it’s through that sonic kaleidoscope that *Red Doc* plays its game of bringing distant lives and echoes back into earshot, by turns playful and deadly serious. All these figures and tones are just passing through, in and out of Batcatraz; they belong so surely to Anne Carson, and, even more surely, they don’t.

# NICHOLAS MULDER

## THE LEFT- HEGELIAN WELTGEIST AT THE OSS

A REVIEW OF  
*SECRET REPORTS ON  
NAZI GERMANY: THE  
FRANKFURT SCHOOL  
CONTRIBUTION TO THE  
WAR EFFORT*

ED RAFFAELE LAUDANI  
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY  
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Throughout the social sciences and humanities, the name of the Frankfurt School is well known. An old infatuation of many a college professor, ‘critical theory’ in its different manifestations still features prominently in college curricula. But its continuing popularity among students and academics alike contrasts starkly with the decline that the work of the Institute for Social Research, as the Frankfurt School was officially called, has undergone outside of the academy since the late 1960s and early 1970s.

There are many reasons why the arguments of the Frankfurt School no longer possess the force they once did, and why most of its concepts have all but disappeared from public discourse. First, the post-war welfare state under which its distinctive blend of social theory and social criticism could blossom has undergone a transformation. Its comfortable but parochial conditions have given way to the more cosmopolitan but also more fractured landscape of the globalized ‘knowledge economy’. There is less time for lengthy reflection on power relations and more pressure to be efficient and productive in academia than in earlier times. The same thing that made the Frankfurt School one of the most cogent spin-offs of the Marxist tradition from which it originated. Its focus on Praxis over doctrine also made its observations more time-bound than old-fashioned Marxism, which has survived on the margins of political conversation today only due to its invariant theoretical abstraction. A final reason for the disappearance of the Frankfurt School’s perspectives must lie in the historical distance that now separates us from the total wars of the first half of the twentieth century. The spectre of totalitarianism which hung over Europe for several decades has passed out of sight since the end of the Soviet Union in 1989, a few deranged Islamophobes notwithstanding. As a response to an era of total warfare and totalitarian systems, the apparent relevance of the school’s analysis has decreased in a Western world where these two phenomena are no longer realities.

Given these prevailing impressions about the sympathies and orientation of the Frankfurt School’s theorists, Raffaele Laudani’s collection *Secret Reports on Nazi Germany* is highly surprising and allows us to reconsider the role of the Frankfurt theorists in mid-century politics. At the heart of Laudani’s book is the arresting fact that three prominent members of the Institute for Social Research worked for the American government as intelligence analysts for over a decade between the 1940s and 1950s. Thanks to his editing of many of their intelligence reports, dug out of the US National Archives in Maryland, we now have comprehensive and revealing record of the wartime work done by Otto Kirchheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Franz Neumann. This trio constituted the core of the Central European Section at the Research and Analysis (R&A) branch of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the predecessor agency of today’s CIA.

Established by a presidential decree issued by Franklin Roosevelt on June 13, 1942, the OSS was headed by William Joseph "Wild Bill" Donovan, a highly decorated veteran of World War I and one of FDR's informal ambassadors abroad. The OSS was the epicentre of a sophisticated Washington-based bureaucracy until 1945, when most of its members transferred to the CIA and the foreign desks of the State Department. What is evident from the start of Laudani's book is just how useful and vital the conscription of intellectual *émigrés* from Central Europe was for the American war effort. Kirchheimer, Marcuse and Neumann were German Jews from middle-class backgrounds who had entered Germany's professional and academic class under the Weimar Republic and had amassed considerable knowledge of the workings of German institutions and the interests of its elites. The coming to power of the Nazis in 1933 forced them to flee Germany, after which all three became researchers for the Institute, which moved in quick succession between Geneva, Paris and New York over the next four years.

Once Germany declared war on America in December 1941, the American government scrutinized the nation's university departments for talented academics. This enterprise constituted a tremendous raising of intellectual capital, probably the largest ever conducted by a state up to that point. The members of the Institute for Social Research, which was then hosted by Columbia University, were all recruited under this initiative; by the time they ended up at the OSS in early 1943, they had already been inducted into government service through other assignments. Neumann had been a consultant for the Board of Economic Warfare and the chief economist of the Intelligence Division of the Office of the US Chief of Staff. Kirchheimer had prepared a crucial study, *The Fate of Small Business in Nazi Germany* for the US Senate Special Committee to Study Problems of American Small Business. Marcuse had worked for the Office for War Information, advising American public relations officials on how to depict the enemy in the press, film and propaganda.

The activities of the R&A Branch's Central European Section focused on three main goals: providing the American high command with insight into the German strategic position in the war, clarifying the inner workings of the Nazi regime and preparing a comprehensive set of policies for the post-conflict occupation of Germany. From the moment that the section, under Neumann's acting leadership, began to work on these assignments, it was clear that the Allies were set to win the war. After the 1943 German defeats at Stalingrad and in North Africa, it was clear in Washington that it was not a question of whether but of when the Allied occupation of Germany would start. To this end, the Frankfurt analysts and their assistants planned a mundanely titled *Handbook on Nazi Germany*, consisting of forty reports on various political, economic, legal and administrative aspects of the German state which the future military government would have to confront. Thirty of these reports were eventually produced, and some of the most important ones are included in Laudani's selection. They provide an impressive overview of Nazi German society, and it is evident that with scholars of the calibre of Kirchheimer, Neumann and Marcuse in their service, the Americans possessed a major advantage over the Nazis when it came to understanding their enemy. Those who expect either impenetrable bureaucratic jargon or abstract philosophical jibber-jabber will be surprised at the extremely clarity of the reports; a highly detailed exposition of the class structure of German society by Marcuse ("German Social Stratification", dated 26 November 1943), or a lucid dissection of the German legal system and how the occupation authorities could go about de-Nazifying it by Kirchheimer ("The Abrogation of Nazi Laws in the Early Period of Military Government", dated March 1944) prove that for all their flaws, one thing that the Frankfurters did not lack was analytical rigor.

The major strategic concern for the Frankfurt analysts at the OSS, a worry that kept them up late at night chain-smoking cigarettes while working fastidiously at the R&A Branch's headquarters on Navy Hill in Washington D.C., was that the Germans would conclude a separate peace with the Western Allies and continue the war with Russia, or vice versa. The possibility that the Nazi regime might drive the Allies apart haunted them. As Marxist scholars who knew the Soviet Union well and worked with the architects of American strategy, they were under no illusions about the fact that the alliance with Stalin was a marriage of convenience. But they correctly assessed that the chance that the coalition would break down due to infighting was slight. Instead, the increasing desperation of the German leadership was a far greater destabilising factor. In a report dated August 10 1943, Marcuse spelled out the dilemma for the Nazi leadership with great simplicity. Because the war was clearly militarily lost, only a political solution could provide a way out for Germany. Since effective demoralisation of the Allies was beyond their

reach, the sole remaining 'political' option for Germany would be to drive a wedge between the Allies by brokering a peace with one while continuing to fight the other.

As much as Marcuse and the other Frankfurters feared this prospect, they also realised that it would grow less likely as the Nazi elite grew more desperate. During late 1943 and early 1944, all the intelligence coming from Germany pointed towards a further radicalization of the German leadership and an increased preparedness to fight to the bitter end. This fact in itself made a partial peace less and less likely. Marcuse acutely observed that there were two factors that prevented the Allies from negotiating with Germany short of a total defeat. First, the lack of any deliberative political bodies at the apex of the Nazi state precluded the possibility of establishing an interim political leadership if Hitler would step down as part of any peace agreement. Second, administrative institutions at almost every level of German society were becoming ever more subordinated to the Nazi party, which reigned supreme over civil society and the civil service. Marcuse soberly concluded that 'These two facts—the shapelessness of the German political system and the supremacy of the Party—make it impossible for the Nazi system to hope for acceptance by, or to bargain successfully with the Western Powers or Russia.'

The one breach of security committed by the Frankfurt analysts took place in connection with the threat of breakdown in the alliance of the 'Big Three' (America, Britain and the USSR). In May 1944, the director of the OSS station in Switzerland, Allen Dulles (later head of the CIA under Eisenhower and Kennedy) met in secret with a retired German general who was a leading figure in the anti-Nazi underground movement. In the OSS report that he wrote about the July 20 assassination attempt against Hitler, Franz Neumann drew on information about the anti-Nazi resistance obtained in this meeting. Dulles' interlocutor, who was probably General Ludwig Beck, is classified in official records as 'OSS Source #33696'. Importantly, Beck revealed that the conspirators were prepared, even eager, to conclude a peace with the Western Allies if their coup against the Nazi leadership succeeded. Neumann must have recoiled at this information, for it meant that the new German government would continue the war in the East. We now know, due to signals intercepts from the American Venona programme, that in late July 1944 Neumann relayed information about Dulles' meeting to the Soviet intelligence agent Elizaveta Zarubina, who passed it on to Moscow. At least one of the Frankfurt scholars thus participated in espionage for a foreign state while working at the OSS. And yet we can understand due to the reports in Laudani's collection that this act was not intended to undermine the American war effort. Rather, it stemmed from Neumann's profound desire to keep the American-Soviet alliance together. None of the three Frankfurters in the Central European Section were willing to accept a peace that would end Nazism but would maintain Germany under an authoritarian and militarist regime determined to continue the war with the Soviet Union.

In spite of this, the Frankfurt School did not consider Prussian militarism to be at the root cause of Nazi aggression. In a report on this issue from October 1943, Marcuse and his young colleague Felix Gilbert—who later became a famous historian of Renaissance diplomacy—were at pains to point out that the aristocratic class of Prussian Junkers were one of the Nazi regime's main domestic opponents. Marcuse and Gilbert argued that the declining economic fortunes of the Prussian landowning nobility had forced it into an uneasy alliance with industrial interests, which were far more ardent supporters of the Nazi party. This report might stand as an early and decisive refutation of the *Sonderweg* thesis that was picked up by historians after the war, according to which Germany's belligerence was the result of its abnormal political and social development since the start of the modern era. As the Frankfurt School realised, this line of thinking took German nationalist myths at face value. The real enabling conditions of the Third Reich, its rationalised administrative machinery and industrial capitalist base, were hereby pushed out of sight. Franz Neumann, whose now classic work *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (1942) first brought him to the attention of the OSS, made this argument in great detail. Neumann's reports in this volume present a more condensed version of his thesis in *Behemoth*, but they lack none of its acuteness.

Nevertheless, an important question has not been answered: how were the Americans willing to accept a group of left-wing quasi-Marxist scholars into their bureaucracy and entrust them with some of their most sensitive intelligence? In his foreword to *Secret Reports on Nazi Germany*, Cambridge political philosopher Raymond Geuss, not one of liberalism's greatest fans, nonetheless praises 'certain older

forms of liberalism' for 'emphasiz[ing] the inherent value of tolerance and the connection between toleration of intellectual deviancy and success in the pursuit of genuine understanding of the world'. It is difficult to say whether this attitude was characteristic of American liberalism itself (probably not), but it certainly was part of the idiosyncratic approach to the art of government in the New Deal era. For the famous 'Brain Trust' of intellectual advisers that Roosevelt had consulted since his presidential campaign in 1932 was not the only such cluster of experts. Hitler's coming to power in 1933 and the Nazi conquest of Western Europe in 1940 produced two large waves of emigration by European intellectuals to the United States. The first wave consisted largely of German and Austrian intellectuals, academics, professionals and civil servants who fled Nazism either because they were Jewish or political opponents of the regime, and often both. Much of this cohort took up faculty positions at the New School for Social Research. Owing to their administrative and technical expertise, many of them were employed as advisors by various New Deal agencies as the American federal government grew in the 1930s.

When the looming threat of war in Europe necessitated the expansion of America's underdeveloped military and security apparatus, a similar growth of new institutions took place in the defence sector. The second wave of émigrés that had escaped the fall of France in the summer of 1940 brought over thousands of highly skilled Central Europeans and French. The war produced an all-hands-on-deck mentality that resulted in unprecedented numbers of these foreign specialists gaining access to American government, not just in advisory and analytical positions but also in administrative and executive roles. Émigrés staffed the Office for War Information, the Board of Economic Warfare, the War Production Board and the Office for Price Administration. Coupled with the home-grown American talent that had already been recruited, the result was extremely impressive, especially at the OSS, which was even more determined to recruit every useful foreigner it could find than other agencies. With over 1200 employees, of whom 400 were stationed abroad, by 1943 its Research and Analysis Branch was the largest American research institution of the first half of the twentieth century. In his introduction, Laudani rightly emphasizes that 'in many respects, it was the site where post-World War II American social science was born'; at the height of the war, Gregory Bateson (anthropology), Norman Brown (classics), John Fairbank (Sinology), Hajo Holborn (history), Arkadius Gurland, Barrington Moore Jr., (political science), John Herz (international relations), Talcott Parsons, Leo Löwenthal, Friedrich Pollock (sociology), Charles Kindleberger, Paul Sweezy, Paul Baran, Walt Rostow and Wassily Leontief (economics) were all on the OSS payroll.

The diversity of the talent attracted did not decide the war in favor of America and its allies—as the Nazis themselves well realised, the eventual outcome of the war was a foregone conclusion after December 1941. But how long the intervening struggle would take, and what kind of regime would be established in Germany after the end of the conflict was far from certain when the Frankfurters arrived to run the Central European Section. The Roosevelt administration's purposive and systematic use of foreign experts in pursuit of military and diplomatic victory must be regarded as one of the factors that allowed the US to deploy its industrial and technological might against the Axis Powers much more effectively than it could otherwise have done. On top of that, the American occupation of Germany could not have been as successful without the thousands of pages of intelligence reports prepared on the topic of post-war administration by the R&A Branch.

That the Frankfurt School was instrumental in a military victory that paved the way for the projection of unprecedented American power across the globe is more than a little ironic. But then again, many of the institutional innovations of the wartime period have a paradoxical quality. In his book *Fear Itself: the New Deal and the Origins of our Time*, published earlier this year, Columbia political scientist and historian Ira Katznelson offers a revised view of the New Deal and the political changes it brought. In his view, the 'New Deal era' (the five administrations of Roosevelt and Truman between 1933 and 1953) was marked by a series of Faustian bargains with long-lasting unintended consequences. First of all, the progressive policies of the New Deal could not have passed Congress without the consent of the segregationist South, where the Democratic Party maintained a political monopoly of white supremacy and racial exclusion. In doing so, the New Deal erected the foundations of the American welfare state, but at the price of postponing black emancipation for another generation. Furthermore, the legislative opportunism of the southern Democrats and recalcitrant Republicans, coupled with the post-war Communist paranoia, led to the emergence of a strange kind

of dual state. After the war America's position was characterised by what Katznelson calls 'Janus-faced politics': a domestic political system heavy on procedure but short on substance, with a lot of space for powerful private economic interests, coupled with a technologically advanced national security apparatus projecting American power abroad.

This image of a double-headed hydra comprised of domestic oligarchy and international might would not have struck the Frankfurters and their fellow *émigrés* as strange. Indeed one of them, the political scientist Ernst Fraenkel, had described exactly this kind of twofold political arrangement—except that he was not talking about New Deal America, but Nazi Germany. In his work *Der Doppelstaat* (*The Dual State*, 1941) he distinguished two aspects, or domains, of Nazi power. On the one hand the totalitarian regime had grown out of a parliamentary and constitutional tradition from which it could never fully separate itself. As a result, it slowly shaped German society by enacting strongly politically and racially coloured laws while maintaining a legal order within which normal civilian life and economic interaction could continue as before. This domain Fraenkel called the normative state (*Normenstaat*). On the other hand, the Nazis were of course absolutely ruthless in their application of brute force. The way in which they used coercion and aggression to meet their goals, first domestically through the security services and later throughout all of Europe by means of military expansion, conquest, forced labour and genocide displayed the other face of modern power, the so-called prerogative state (*Maßnahmenstaat*). Fraenkel never applied the dual state hypothesis beyond the Nazi case, but thanks to Katznelson we can use an adapted version of this framework to understand how a less violent, but equally powerful, dual state emerged in America in the late 1940s. The Frankfurt analysts at the OSS found themselves working roughly at the intersection of this state's dual domains, wedged between the legal and administrative organization of Washingtonian bureaucracy and the unpredictable prerogative powers of military and strategic intelligence services.

But the conditions in which the American government waged a new superpower conflict were less amenable to the Frankfurters' political affiliations. The wartime alliance between democratic Western nations and the Soviet Union fell apart almost as soon as the goal of defeating Nazism had been accomplished. The Second World War had been an all-devouring total war, but it was open in character. By virtue of its secretive nature, the Cold War that followed was less favourable to intellectual and political dissenters within the United States. Old-fashioned great power politics took the place of strategic cooperation, with the important difference that the new war was as much—if not more—driven by uncertain ideological factors than by concrete considerations of national interest. Under the inquisitorial climate of McCarthyism, the position of the Frankfurt scholars and their émigré colleagues who remained at the CIA and the State Department soon became untenable. What had been brought together by magnanimity and pragmatism was undone by paranoia and chauvinism. The most savage irony of the whole affair was that the Frankfurters themselves had done much to solidify the American national security state whose increasingly dominant role in domestic investigation and international subversion they came to despise.

Laudani's book does much to demonstrate the virtues of the Frankfurt School's analysis of fascism and Nazism; it further deepens our understanding of the excellent Franz Neumann; and it raises our estimation of Otto Kirchheimer, who has suffered from a lack of attention relative to other Frankfurt School thinkers. But the figure whose role *Secret Reports on Nazi Germany* forces us to reconsider most is Herbert Marcuse. Fittingly, the final document in the volume is Marcuse's last report for the Division of International and Functional Intelligence at the State Department. Written a mere month before the detonation of the Soviet Union's first nuclear weapon and two months before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, this report, "The Potentials of World Communism" (August 1, 1949), heralds an ominous start to the Cold War. It displays Marcuse as a critical observer of communism who was simultaneously well positioned to understand why it was so popular in the wake of the war. He noted that 'the major appeal of Communism stems from the paradoxical situation of the coexistence of immense social wealth, technological mastery of the productive forces, and widespread want, toil and injustice...it offers both a doctrine and instrumentality through which the structure of world society can allegedly be altered to solve this paradox'. Anticipating the challenges that American modernisation theorists would start to address in the years to come, Marcuse noted that communism would be reinvigorated by the plight of underdeveloped countries and would serve as the marching banner of global discontent for as

long as their political and economic subjugation continued.

At the end of the sixties, when Marcuse encouraged student radicals to resist the 'repressive tolerance' of capitalist liberal democracy, he was not merely engaging in a frivolous old-age rebellion. The riveting material collected in *Secret Reports on Nazi Germany* allows us to understand that he was also criticising a regime whose overweening global power he had himself helped to develop. The political invective he directed against consumerism, democracy and capitalism was not all rancour. It

was also an expression of a hope betrayed—a hope for a world in which Soviet communism and New Deal capitalism would peacefully administer a new global order. The conditions for that hope were more fleeting and fragile than Marcuse and his fellow Frankfurt analysts realised at the time. But we can at least forgive their nostalgia for the days when, as Kirshheimer's aide John Herz put it, 'the left-Hegelian *Weltgeist* had taken up temporary residence in the Central European Section of the OSS'.

Bad writing prospers in the humanities and social sciences, so we are spoilt for examples. In one famous case, Martha Nussbaum rounded on Judith Butler for her obscurity, arguing it was an insidious form of stylistic collaboration with the power structures targeted by her writings. Nussbaum's review, 'The Professor of Parody,' raised the profile of a sentence already legendary as a result of Butler winning the Bad Writing Contest held by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*. Loosing a sentence from its contextual mooring is always risky, but this *mille-feuille* of complexity is hard to swallow:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

Nussbaum rewrote this sentence:

Marxist accounts, focusing on capital as the central force structuring social relations, depicted the operations of that force as everywhere uniform. By contrast, Althusserian accounts, focusing on power, see the operations of that force as variegated and as shifting over time.

Not all unscrupulous sentences are this sexy. Michael Billig's book on bad academic writing in the social sciences features many banal cases, the kind of writing that circulates on email mailing lists, conference call-for-papers, and article abstracts. Here is one:

Recognising the potential that this approach offers for accessing the different layers and dimensions of a complex and constructed social reality brings with it both curiosity and questions about its ontology, epistemological tenets, theoretical frameworks, and practical applications.

I will forgo an extended retinue of such examples since bad sentences are often lengthy (Butler's behemoth ran to ninety-four words). But single words and phrases can bear signs of academic malpractice. "Autocondimentation" is my favorite example from *Learn to Write Badly*. Suddenly, the application of ketchup is reified into a process worthy of grants and articles, or a little lunchtime research.

Seemingly anyone can write this poorly with the practice facilitated by most Bachelors degrees. Here is my attempt at a snappy summary of the main themes of Billig's work:

This book instigates a reversal of nominalization and de-agentalization in the social sciences, in an attempt to re-instill the neglected subject lost in contemporary academic governmentality.

Actually, the *book* does nothing of the sort. Michael Billig is the only agent here. He sets out a series of arguments to challenge the way that a lot of contemporary social scientists write. Billig has not written a book about academic style. Nor does he make aesthetic arguments, although he is clear that much writing in the social sciences is stilted and ugly. Instead, *Learn to Write Badly* is Billig's attempt to explore the relationship between certain linguistic trends and good social science. At root, Billig's conclusion is that bad writing, often disguised behind a veneer of sophistication and technicality, generates bad academic research.

How are we to understand this claim? Surely the people who need to understand research in the social sciences are the researchers themselves, and since they write in this way they must comprehend the results. It may be inconvenient to have to translate their findings into more popular media, but that is what journalists are for, isn't it? Billig would deny this. The majority of his book examines the relationship between bad writing and bad research.

Billig's primary concerns are that social scientists are keen to create and disseminate nouns and noun phrases instead of active verbs, and that they overuse the passive voice. Butler's laboratory specimen of a sentence clearly manifests these features. Billig charts the development of the first tendency, noting that, "noun phrases, comprising solely nouns, represent

# LUKE BRUNNING

## UNSCRUPULOUS SENTENCES

A REVIEW OF  
*LEARN TO WRITE BADLY:  
HOW TO  
SUCCEED IN THE  
SOCIAL SCIENCES*

BY MICHAEL BILLIG  
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY  
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one of the most important linguistic developments in modern English and that they are prominent in academic writing" and that apparently, since 1961, there has been "an increase of roughly 200 per cent in the use of acronyms" in English academic writing.

These tendencies should concern us for several reasons. First, they reify processes and other conceptual items to the status of things with independent theoretical significance. Second, they leave our writing depopulated; human agents vanish. Many of Billig's case studies, from the micro-contexts of conversation analysis to more expansive social psychological experiments, illustrate how social scientists can unwittingly give more importance to their conceptual constructs than to the agents those constructs are supposed to describe; "having emptied their prose of people, acting as agents, they can refill it with things that act like people". Ironically, 'reification', the name of the error here, was opposed to 'deification' that is, the mistaken attribution of godly characteristics to ungodly things. If Billig is to be believed, and I think he should be, many social scientists appear to have unwittingly deified reification itself. This is a problem insofar as social scientists profess to be describing and explaining human behaviour. Once you notice it, there is something unsettling about a field that is oriented towards human activity, yet whose predominant prose style is resolutely unpopulated.

Note that Billig is not arguing that all jargon is problematic, or that long words are never appropriate. Instead, he notes that "the problem with using 'jargon' as our critical concept: the word is grammatically indiscriminate", that is, critiquing jargon in general will tell us little about how words are being used in their contexts. This ties into Billig's perceptive thought that "we should not assume that technical terms are clearer and more precise than the ordinary ones, for [...] they are often used less precisely and that is why social scientists find them useful".

Too often, critiques of academic language address its overly 'technical' nature. But Billig wants us to change focus. Technicality has its place, but 'technical' terms are not exempt from imprecise handling (as if we could create words that are immunized against improper use). Billig illustrates this with an insightful study of Freud's writing style, which became vaguer the more technical he started to write. Conversely, 'ordinary' terms are often used with extreme precision as there is not much room to hide. Admirably, Billig also avoids unwittingly fetishize the 'ordinary', as many philosophers are wont to do. His book is stronger for this.

Alongside the overuse of nouns and ghastly noun-phrases, Billig is particularly critical about the overemployment of the passive voice. With George Orwell, whose recommendations about good prose style he often endorses, Billig is keen to stress that when people use the passive, their writing suffers in two ways. First, their research conveys less information than if the active voice is used in descriptive material. Second, it becomes harder to ascribe agency to the things being written about.

This consolidates the issues arising from the over-use of nouns and noun-phrases, but it brings a rhetorical pay-off, which makes this kind of writing attractive. For if agency is not clearly ascribed, if 'it' or 'the flows' or 'governmentality' are the agents, then an academic can withdraw from the scene and capitalize on the vagaries of their constructions. Billig evidences the power of these rhetorical moves in his study of social psychology. He argues that "[...] experimental social psychologists have developed conventional ways for describing their results which not only are vague, but which also manage rhetorically to produce the effect of exaggerating their findings". Usually, academics exaggerate without a conscious eye to the possible benefits. Indeed, Billig is clear that presenting research in this manner is considered good practice; that is why this concealment is so egregious: it is prevalent and ordinary. Many of Billig's examples are too detailed to justly summarize here, but he uses them to convincingly show how academics "can slide between technical and non-technical meanings, exaggerating without noticing that they are exaggerating, boosting the importance of chosen variables, theories and approaches" in a manner that is to the detriment of good social science.

So why do many contemporary social scientists write like this? Part of Billig's answer is simple: people cannot write well when their institutional context is not structured to allow them to do so. The following story is familiar to most academics. Higher education has

expanded rapidly in the last fifty years. Academic teaching loads have increased. Key decision makers, under the influence of economic and political pressure, developed successive reforms designed to measure and control research outcomes; the theory being that this would maximize the research-output of limited resources. Paradoxically, perhaps, this has led to an increase in publications. Billig notes that, "in American universities the proportion of faculty, who had produced five or more publications in the previous two years, exploded from a quarter in 1987 to nearly two-thirds by 1998".

Yet whilst outputs have grown, their form has changed. Longer monographs are now a rarity in the social sciences, with the loss of that extra level of thought and editorial processing that influences long forms of writing. Many other complex reasons have shaped the contemporary academic landscape, with the consequence that researchers are under increased pressure to 'get out there'. This leads to quick writing. It also generates the "salami slicing" of research to find the smallest publishable unit, or to more egregious repackaging. I once spotted an article, that later became a book chapter, being re-published as an article in a different journal: three publications, one piece of work.

Researchers are under pressure to 'have something', to secure results, to communicate them. In response Billig asks a question that many young academics ask themselves, "Did anyone really imagine that travelling to conferences, staying in hotels with expenses paid, attending drinks receptions and attracting the attention of established figures was a good means to develop original, critical thinking? The more academic friends you make, the longer your list of academics whose work you cannot publicly criticize". There is some sense here, although exceptional friends can withstand critique.

Our deeper concern should be about the tightness of the networks that arise organically in contemporary academic contexts. Linguistic islands arise as a consequence of these interactions. If you use certain jargon or terminology then some journals are a no-go area for your work. This makes interdisciplinary research much harder because few academics are sufficiently polyglot to navigate multiple disciplines.

Billig perceptively compares academic development to the learning of a trade. Younger researchers quickly learn the rhetorical gains of certain terms and stylistic traits. Their use of language can both advance an argument of whatever merit and signal that they are members of a certain tribe. All too often, this signaling function is overlooked in arguments about the character of academic language, that is, critics do not attend to how academic language is *used*. Unsurprisingly, Billig explicitly hails his intellectual indebtedness to Ludwig Wittgenstein and Pierre Bourdieu (only the latter is discussed at length).

One part of this academic apprenticeship is the development of 'an approach'. Billig leads us through the complexities and restrictions of idea, quipping "all social scientists need two approaches: the approach you take and the approach that your approach has taken against". The pressure to produce, and to secure funding, often makes it more important to be more explicit about those approaches you oppose, rather than your positive contribution to good social scientific research.

Much rests on what "good social science" is, exactly. And Billig does not elaborate that at length, beyond the plausible thought that social scientists should be able to distinguish between their theories and theoretical constructs, and the things their theories aim to describe. Any book of this kind will be imperfect, and Billig carefully prefaces his argument with an acknowledgment of its limitations; evidently, any text that examines whole disciplinary swathes will involve some generalizations and risks overlooking positive examples of writing that deviate from the norm. Billig is open about this danger.

He is also forthcoming about his personal failings, "just in case anyone is thinking of trawling through my earlier writings, in order to see whether I was guilty of the very faults that I am now accusing others of committing, let me spare them the bother. I was. In those days I was a good boy, still trying to do what I have been taught to do". Finally, let me address an obvious outstanding question: Yes, Billig writes well, very well indeed. His prose is richly populated and often funny; any academic who denigrates his own narcissistic love of citation counting by calling himself a "knob head" at the same time as

making a point about dual-noun constructions has my admiration.

His argument will interest most academics, not merely those in the social sciences. (Those that are instinctively disinterested should re-read their own work.) Moreover, Billig's thesis provides succour to those with antecedent resistances or aversions to intellectual writing, a common condition in our society. However, as Billig notes sanguinely, I doubt the book will have a substantial affect on how academics actually write, and thus on the quality of their work. Indeed, his argument was presaged in the

words of William Hazlitt, who noted in 1821, "the proper force of words lies not in the words themselves, but in their application. A word may be a fine-sounding word, of an unusual length, and very imposing from its learning and novelty, and yet in the connection in which it is introduced, may be quite pointless and irrelevant" (*On Familiar Style*). Although not much has changed, Billig's thesis is true nonetheless, and any self-reflective academic or writer will benefit from reading his accomplished study.

Three lavishly illustrated erotic books, each in three volumes, occupy pride of place in *The night of longing: Love and desire in Japanese prints*, an exhibition currently at the Fitzwilliam Museum. These books impress in terms of the aesthetic quality of the images that fill them, the remarkable skill with which those images were printed from cut woodblocks in rich and distinct palettes, and their sexual explicitness. They represent an art form that is unfamiliar to gallery goers versed only in Western art, both in terms of their format and their content. This essay seeks to provide an introduction to this unfamiliar material.

Attitudes toward sex in the Edo period (1603-1868) were relaxed and open. Guilt was not attached to it; post coital depression was unknown. A good sex life was considered essential for an individual's health and well-being. It is in this context that the explicit representations of sexual activity in Edo-period art should be seen. High rankings samurai and wealthy merchants commissioned exquisite erotic painted handscrolls from leading artists. The emergence of commercial publishing in the middle decades of the seventeenth century made sex-art accessible to a much wider audience with the production of illustrated erotic printed books (hereafter referred to as *shunpon*). At present, some two thousand *shunpon* titles are extant but they represent only part of the total produced. Many that survived into the twentieth century were lost in the conflagration that destroyed Tokyo in the aftermath of the great earthquake of 1923 and the fire bombing of nearly all Japanese urban centres in the closing months of World War II. *Shunpon* that survived those catastrophes suffered further attrition during the American Occupation (1945-52), when antiquarian book dealers are reported to have destroyed stock so as not to fall foul of perceived American puritanism.

By 1680 *shunpon* were established as a genre profitable to authors, artists, publishers, booksellers and rental libraries. They are indistinguishable in terms of their size, format, materials and production values from contemporary, commercially published non-erotic books. Artists of the *ukiyo-e* school monopolised the genre. Their *shunpon* are closely linked in style and subject matter to their non-erotic book illustrations, and single-sheet prints. In the latter *ukiyo-e* artists suggest the erotic potential of the women and actors they depict; in *shunpon* they spell that potential out in graphic detail. The images in them do not reproduce existing paintings; they were original works of art in book format issued in multiples. They are defined by their unflinching depiction of male and female genitalia in various stages of arousal and conjunction.

In Japan there was no native religious or ethical objection to the open representation of genitalia or sex acts. Some samurai-officials, who had internalized imported Confucian values, argued that preoccupation with sex distracts a man from his principal duties in life, which are to be a filial son and loyal subject. These moralists therefore opposed the production and free circulation of erotic texts and images on the grounds that they would prove distracting. The proponents of this attitude are dismissed in the preface to the earliest known *shunpon*, *Yoshiwara makura-e* of 1660, as: "Sour lemon-eaters, stinking of Confucius, [who] try to deceive us with talk of conscientious duty..." Despite this elite distaste for *shunpon*, they were published without hinderance until 1722.

In 1722, as part of a larger government reform movement, *shunpon* were denounced as 'lascivious books' (*kôshokubon*) and banned. This development did not mark the ascendancy of Confucian values; the ban was imposed because *shunpon* had been published that appeared to make light of the hierarchic social order that was an essential component of the *Tokugawa* political settlement. The authorities were not concerned with explicit representations of sex per se, but rather with sex that transgressed the hierarchic social divisions, such as that between a gardener and a willing princess. The prohibition of 1722 remained in place to the end of the Edo period but only halted the production of *shunpon* for about two decades. Thereafter, sporadic attempts at enforcement in 1781, 1804 and 1843 never interrupted production for more than a year or two. While the government was prepared to legislate against 'lascivious books', it did not put much energy into suppressing their production and distribution. Its chief concern was to ensure that no printed material intended for a mass audience carried any criticism of *Tokugawa* rule or challenged its legitimacy. Producers responded by refraining from using *shunpon* for political ends, knowing full well that the authorities would respond swiftly to criticism however oblique. As a result, sex art never played a subversive role in Japan as it did, for example, in eighteenth-century France.

At the same time that *shunpon* were banned, the government decreed that every commercially produced book would henceforth carry a colophon. The colophon, placed on the last page of the last volume of a book, provided the names of the publisher and distributor, their business addresses, the names of the authors and artists involved in the book's production, and the date when the cutting of the printing blocks was completed. (Although sets of blocks might remain in use over many decades, the date of printing of a particular copy is never indicated, to the despair of present-day bibliographers and collectors.)

With the resumption of *shunpon* production in the early 1740s, in addition to avoiding sensitive topics, publishers, authors, and artists no longer openly identified themselves as they had done before 1722. To have continued to do so would have invited prosecution. The mandatory colophon had no place in these forbidden books; without a colophon officialdom appeared to be incapable of 'seeing' them. Thus, despite reiterated statements of government disapproval and the occasional crackdown on publishers, authors and artists, *shunpon* were produced and distributed with relative impunity through most of the Edo period.

# DR ELLIS TINIOS

## AN INTRODUCTION TO JAPANESE PRINTED EROTIC BOOKS

A REVIEW OF THE  
*THE NIGHT OF  
LONGING: LOVE AND  
DESIRE IN JAPANESE  
PRINTS* EXHIBITION

FITZWILLIAM  
MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE  
UNTIL 12 JANUARY  
2014

'Lascivious books' even formed a part of the stock of rental libraries, which made them accessible to less wealthy readers. These libraries did not work from fixed premises but sent agents out on rounds, carrying a great oblong parcel of books on their backs. Owners of the rental libraries appear never to have been targeted by the authorities for supplying their subscribers with *shunpon*.

Throughout the Edo period, both painted and printed erotica images were conceived as sequences of unrelated scenes that moved from dalliance to penetration to orgasm to post-coital satisfaction. Artists charted this trajectory of passion through images of couples of all ages and stations, in a wide range of locations and situations. In *shunpon* the images are followed by text pages offering erotic stories that are usually unrelated to the preceding images.

What we do not encounter in *shunpon* are systematic surveys of 'positions' for coitus. Nor do we often find a continuous storyline focused on the sexual exploits of a single individual or a couple. Certain themes common in European visual and written erotica are also largely absent. Flagellation never appears in *shunpon*. Forced deflowering of girls desperately seeking to preserve their virginity, a popular motif in Europe, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, is absent. Sadism including sexual violence, torture and murder is almost entirely absent. It is only in the closing decades of the Edo period that we encounter violence, rape, abuse and murder combined with sex, but this is restricted almost entirely to a handful of *shunpon* designed by Utagawa Kunisada.

Before 1722, artists who gained renown for their *shunpon* openly signed their printed erotica. When production resumed twenty years after the imposition of the ban, the producers of erotica did not want to leave consumers in any doubt about who designed what. As a result, artists made recourse to pseudonyms that they employed exclusively in their erotica. Initially, these names might be embedded in the preface.

In the nineteenth century, they were usually recorded prominently on a title sheet pasted onto the inside front cover of the first volume of the three-volume format *shunpon* that had become the norm. In addition, artists commonly inserted their *shunpon*-pseudonyms as signatures on the hanging picture scrolls or painted screens that often formed an important background element in a scene. The pseudonym guaranteed the quality of the illustrations; it also sufficed to shield an artist from official prosecution.

Parody also played an important role in the construction of *shunpon*. Authors and artists mined a wide range of non-erotic texts in search of subjects. Among the genres they subjected to erotic parody are Noh plays, Buddhist morality tales, *kabuki* plays, popular novels, medical texts, manuals of deportment for women, classical tales, and school books. Whatever the source, the action was invariably shown in fashionable, up-to-date settings. These reworkings were meant to amuse as well as to titillate. Sex and humour were not regarded as incompatible.

*Shunpon* devoted to male-male sex was not uncommon in the eighteenth century. No stigma attached to such relations. The standard paradigm in literature and art was of a man taking an active role with a passive youth. Members of the merchant class are usually depicted with female role actors (who were in effect male prostitutes) or apprentices, Buddhist priests with male prostitutes or temple pages, and *samurai* with younger *samurai* or pages serving in their households. In addition to entire books devoted to the subject, some of the large eighteenth-century sex-compendia include lengthy sections devoted to male-male sex. After 1800, male-male couples only appear occasionally as a single pair in a run of images of heterosexual couples. Books devoted exclusively to male-male sex suffered particularly severe attrition in the twentieth century.

On rare occasions, contemporary scandals involving leading actors of the *kabuki* stage were recounted in *shunpon*. However, the topicality of the subject meant that these books enjoyed a short shelf life. The ever-enterprising publishers re-used the printing blocks of scandal-*shunpon* to create non-topical *shunpon*, which would not date quite so quickly. To do this, they cut out the actors' faces from the printing blocks, plugged the gaps and recut the plugs with generic features. They also replaced the text blocks.

*Shunpon*, like all other Edo-period woodblock printed illustrated books, were commodities intended to make a profit for their producers in a highly competitive market. The survival of so many titles produced over such so many decades demonstrates continued demand for these products. There can be no doubt that for the producers, *shunpon* were lucrative. Despite having been banned in 1722 and the often-reiterated disapproval of the authorities, this corner of the printing industry flourished.

*Shunpon* represent the finest that Edo publishing could achieve. In terms of their production values, they consistently rank among the best books produced in any given year. Every advance in printing quickly appears in them. They display the richest palettes that exploit the most expensive pigments, special printing effects, papers, and bindings. So dominant were they at the luxury end of the book market that between 1800 and 1868 nearly all commercially produced multi-colour woodblock-printed books were *shunpon*.

They were expensive to produce, requiring the most skilled artisans (copyists, block cutters, printers, and binders) and gifted artists and authors in addition to the best available materials. At the same time, the complexity of the printing evident in so many surviving titles suggests that they were issued in relatively small numbers, perhaps no more than three hundred copies. How were these costly luxury goods financed? It seems likely that publishers would join forces to produce top-line *shunpon*, as this is how other costly publishing projects were financed. Publishers may also have secured advance financing by offering new titles on subscription to wealthy merchants and high-ranking samurai with a taste for such luxuries.

Commercial sponsorship, as evidenced by advertisements placed on the colophon page, helped finance some important non-erotic colour-printed books produced between 1800 and 1868. No firm would wish to run the risk of prosecution by placing its adverts in *shunpon*. While overtly assisting in the production of *shunpon* may have been risky, possessing and distributing them for profit was not. In recent years, rental library seals impressed on the first and last pages of individual volumes have been identified on numerous nineteenth-century *shunpon*. Additionally, some carry notices about terms of use printed by the rental libraries and pasted on their covers. The owners of rental libraries were prepared to invest substantial sums in acquiring *shunpon*, certain in the knowledge that they could recoup their initial outlay and go on to make a profit on the basis of the rental fees they could charge their clients for high quality books. Many more readers could afford the rental fee than could afford the purchase price of such books.

It seems likely that the rental libraries played a significant role in financing the production of *shunpon*, particularly in the nineteenth century, either by providing direct subsidies or committing themselves to the purchase of an agreed number of forthcoming publications. Until documentary evidence regarding the financing of production comes to light, we can do no more than speculate along these lines.

Production of *shunpon* collapsed in the mid 1860s as a result of the political turmoil and economic dislocation triggered by the forced opening of Japan to foreign trade. At precisely this time the first *shunpon* reached Europe, where they astonished, delighted, and inspired artists, connoisseurs, and collectors. Production resumed by the end of the decade, but in response to complaints from foreign diplomats and merchants living in Japan, the authorities banned the public display of *shunpon* in shop fronts and on bookstalls. The government crackdown extended to production, which remained severely constrained through the remainder of the century. Japan's new leaders, in their determination to achieve parity with the leading Western nations, rejected those aspects of their past they feared would shame them in foreign eyes. *Shunpon* fell into that category. Much was sacrificed in the process. The pursuit of pleasure, joy, and humour informs the erotic art of the Edo period, but to this day that art is denied public recognition in Japan. The inhibition is so strong that no institution in Japan would accept the magnificent and extensive exhibition of Japanese erotic art currently mounted at the British Museum, as well as the modest but no less fascinating exhibition at Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum.



Attributed to pupil of Utagawa Kuniyoshi 'Tôsei komonchô' [An album of Fashionable Patterns] c.1855 Colour woodblock-printed book. Private collection. Courtesy of Ritsumeikan University Art Research Center

On 11 September 1932 a handful of men crowded into Reinhard Heydrich's fourth-floor apartment in central Munich, only steps away from the prestigious Ludwig Maximilians University. This was the first official meeting of the Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst*, or SD) of the SS. Modelled on the British Intelligence Service and the French *Deuxième Bureau*, the SD was created to gather information both on the Nazi Party's (NSDAP) enemies and on intraparty rivals. In 1932 the SD was ill-equipped for the task envisioned by Heydrich and Himmler: with no more than thirty employees and an extremely limited network of informers, it was unable to collate reliable intelligence reports, let alone function as a national spying service. Yet only ten years later the SD — now integrated into the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) — had grown into vast security apparatus, with local bureaus stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Polar Circle. Within Germany the SD had played a central role in disseminating Nazi ideology and suppressing opposition to the Hitler regime. In the 'Bloodlands' to the east, it was responsible for maintaining National Socialist control in all areas outside of the Wehrmacht's operational zones and for creating German Lebensraum — a racial utopia cleansed of all 'non-Aryan' elements.

The Nazi security apparatus has been the subject of extensive historical research in recent years. The labyrinthine structures of the RSHA are now relatively well understood, as are its activities, responsibilities, and crimes in wartime Europe. Christian Ingrao's *Believe and Destroy: Intellectuals in the SS War Machine* builds on the most valuable findings of this scholarship, but also expands the parameters of the present historical debate. Along with documenting the institutional history of the SD, Ingrao examines the ideational world of its members — the beliefs, emotions, and fears that transformed well-educated middle-class youths into mass murderers. Ingrao reconstructs this system of representations from the writings and reports composed by the leadership of the SD, as well as from the actions they performed during their deployment in the East. His account is based on the study of eighty SS intellectuals, the vast majority of whom were recruited into the SD through academic networks between 1934 and 1939. These men (and men specifically: the RSHA had only one female section head) were far removed from the stereotype of the Nazi thug perpetuated by the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) paramilitaries. They were, in Ingrao's words, "handsome, brilliant, clever and cultivated." They held advanced degrees from Germany's elite universities, and often performed their political duties in tandem with academic careers. They were seemingly unencumbered by the competing demands of intellectual integrity and political loyalty, between fidelity to truth and obedience to power. Instead, they consciously fashioned themselves as 'officer intellectuals,' brought their academic training to bear on their work in the SD, and devised theoretical justifications for the greatest crimes committed in the name of the Third Reich. The image cultivated by structuralist historians in the 1960s of Nazi 'desk criminals' (*Schreibtischtäter*), asinine bureaucrats who mindlessly organized murder with a flick of the pen, has long been subject to historical revision. Ingrao's study provides further evidence that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were not dutiful and unthinking administrators, but intellectually gifted and politically dedicated activists.

The question of how educated members of the middle class could commit gross acts of violence is presumably only genuinely paradoxical for educated members of the middle class themselves. Ingrao himself is less concerned with the issue of whether or not these men "should have known better," as with the beliefs that drew them into the service of the SS and the doctrinal discourse they produced in support of it. His answer is rooted in the eschatological fears and millenarian hopes instilled in a generation of young Germans by the First World War. Born in the decade after 1900, the future leaders of the SD were typically too young to serve in the trenches and instead experienced the war from the home front. Saturated by wartime propaganda iterating Germany's 'defensive struggle' against a 'world of enemies,' encouraged by parents, teachers, books, and magazines to think that the great sacrifices would be rewarded by immeasurable gains, and yet deeply traumatized both by the loss of individual family members and by the threatened 'existential destruction' of Germany as a whole, these young men emerged from the war holding an inchoate set of repressed anxieties and hubristic fantasies that shaped their later commitment to National Socialism. Their childhoods were scarred by a "collective narcissistic wound that was interpreted in apocalyptic and eschatological terms"; National Socialism would offer a "consoling, soothing system of beliefs." Establishing a connection between the German defeat in 1918 and the rise of the NSDAP hardly constitutes an original thesis of course — the Nazis themselves never tired of iterating this link. Ingrao's study becomes more innovative, however, as he traces the specific representational form that this relationship took in the minds of the German *Bildungsbürgertum*.

If men too young to fight in the First World War often viewed it as a missed opportunity, the chaotic early years of the Weimar Republic provided them with numerous smaller stages on to play out patriotic heroics. Several future leaders of the SD served in the anti-Communist *Freikorps*, others participated in the resistance to the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. Yet the majority of the men studied by Ingrao were radicalized not as paramilitaries but as students. Over two-thirds of the future members of the RSHA attended university or college; a third possessed doctoral degrees. They studied within and typically across a variety of subjects: law, economics, history, German studies, linguistics, philosophy, and *Volkstumwissenschaft* ('ethnic science', already a burgeoning discipline in the Weimar Republic). The natural sciences proved altogether less popular with these men — its methodological precision perhaps discouraged the type of 'world-historic' thinking that seemed to fuel their imaginations. Notwithstanding its obsession with 'racial science,' the RSHA contained almost no science graduates, evidence that the racism which presented itself as science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was largely the product of the humanities.

Not all future SS intellectuals were brilliant students of course, but many excelled. Heydrich and his deputy Werner Best actively recruited the best and brightest from Germany's top universities, drawing information from a network of sympathetic professors and administrators, and exploiting pre-existing sympathies among recent graduates for the Hitler movement. Student fraternities, sports clubs, and political associations had long been fertile breeding grounds of *völkisch* and anti-Semitic attitudes. Through its message of secular deliverance, National Socialism successfully transformed the post-war anxieties of young Germans into fervent political activism. Convinced that the NSDAP alone could save the German Volk from enemies within and without, they developed a "visceral attachment" to the movement in general and the SS in particular. The SS represented a select organization within the National Socialist

DR MAX  
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CRIMINALS

A REVIEW OF  
*BELIEVE AND  
DESTROY:  
INTELLECTUALS IN  
THE SS WAR MACHINE*

BY CHRISTIAN  
INGRAO  
TRANS ANDREW BROWN

POLITY, 2013

movement, and it self-consciously distanced itself from the plebeian and boorish atmosphere of the SA. In the SS, young graduates could indulge their *völkisch* enthusiasms while simultaneously cultivating their status as a social and intellectual elite.

By 1935, the Security Service had been promoted into a main office of the SS and confirmed as the sole intelligence service of the NS-DAP. Its new recruits assiduously compiled reports on the ideological enemies of the Third Reich: Jews, Communists, Catholics, and Freemasons above all. This was not — as it may sound — a distasteful but largely harmless academic exercise. By 1936, the SS had assumed complete control over the German police force and the ever-expanding network of concentration camps. As officers in the SD understood, defining the enemy was the prerequisite to neutralizing him. The intelligence reports of the SD recast political foes as natural adversaries, condemned not for what they had done, but for who they were. The project of identifying enemies thus bled into the broader task of ascribing distinct and mutually incompatible racial essences to the people of Europe.

Alongside research into ideological or racial foes, a separate department within the SD was charged with the surveillance of the entire 'domain of life' (*Lebensgebiet*) in Germany. Regular reports commissioned by Himmler detailed the political situation in the Reich and the general morale (*Stimmung*) of the population. The ambition, stated if never fully realized, was to provide the Party leadership with "information on every aspect of the country's social, cultural, and economic life" — a remit with disturbing resonances in today's security obsessed world.

SS intellectuals brought their considerable academic and legal expertise to bear on their work, producing files with systematic scrutiny and following the formal criteria of scientific discourse. Adolf Eichmann, who joined the SD in 1936, was immediately struck by the pervasive "zeal for scientificity" in the office. Extensive research, detailed footnotes, quotations, systems of cross-referencing, statistics, charts, and graphs gave conspiratorial reports the stamp of scholarly objectivity. Unlike the vitriolic anti-Semitism of the SA or Julius Streicher's tabloid newspaper, *Der Stürmer*, the anti-Semitism of the SD was cooler and more calculating in tone, couched in a specific historical discourse, and channelled into a form "shaped by academic rhetoric." Truth and power thus became fully enmeshed in the Nazi Security Service. The 'Nazification' of German universities (both institutionally and intellectually) was glaringly apparent to contemporary observers and has been well documented by historians ever since. But Ingrao demonstrates that the Third Reich bore witness not only to the Nazification of scholarship, but also to the academisation of politics. The SD, he argues, produced a "new combative, activist science, the science of government and security." Its members recast an ideological belief system rooted in racial determinism as objective truth, apparently confirmed by historical inquiry, science research, and modern statistical analysis. Irrational prejudice was thus transformed into expert opinion, creating a discursive practice for oppression and providing perpetrators with doctrinal justifications for their transgressions.

The leaders of the SD ultimately sought to be heroes, not merely pen pushers. They embraced an ideal of the intellectual as a man of action, whose ultimate worth was confirmed by his worldly influence. The Second World War opened horizons for thought and action that flattered these revolutionary pretensions. Within the SS, self-criticism was condemned as a sign of weakness and potential disloyalty, while 'acting decisively' was transformed into a virtue in itself — a combination that was to have disastrous effects during the course of the War.

The RSHA was created in September 1939, immediately after the German invasion of Poland, and brought the Security Service, the *Gestapo*, and the Criminal Police together under one administrative structure. Whilst innumerable competing spheres of interest and interne-cine struggles frustrated Heydrich's ambition to create a fully integrated organization, the offices of the RSHA were nonetheless unified by their ambition to vanquish any and all enemies of the German *Volk*. The RSHA was very much an institution of war, possessing a vast sphere of influence in the newly conquered German territories and pursuing its mandate of racial struggle largely free from legal restrictions and procedural norms. It was a flexible, dynamic, and mobile organization, capable of reconstituting itself in the face of ever more radical objectives.

Intellectuals in the SD played a crucial role in framing the ideological parameters of the nascent conflict. They lectured new recruits at the RSHA on the historical significance of the present struggle, and

invested extensive time and resources into devising new 'solutions' to the 'Jewish problem.' For Ingrao, there can be little doubt that "SS intellectuals believed they were acting in self-defence against the Jews, thereby reactivating — whether consciously or not — the theme of the *Abwehrkampf* [defensive struggle] that had crystallized in the Great War and the turbulent years that had followed." Feelings and emotions inherited from the First World War thus underpinned the "consent to violence" displayed in the Second. Far from simply following orders or routinely implementing "initiatives", SS leaders launched a "crusade" to the east in which "anxiety and fervor [...] merged to generate an absolute violence."

Beginning with the annexation of Austria in 1938, the SS provided *Einsatzgruppen* (task forces) to compel conquered populations into submission, arrest or execute political and/or racial enemies, and confiscate important documents from government buildings and archives. Political violence increased further with the invasion of Poland, as *Einsatzgruppen* were ordered to suppress partisan resistance, a task that in practice routinely involved executing civilians and hostages. Yet it was only with the invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 that the killing took on truly genocidal proportions. Hitler viewed the conflict with the Soviet Union as a struggle between two racial ideologies, and gave Himmler a virtually free hand to pursue the Nazi dream of a racially cleansed Europe. The RSHA established four *Einsatzgruppen* with extensive operational and jurisdictional independence from the *Wehrmacht*, first and foremost for the purpose of mass executions. Three of the four commanders of the *Einsatzgruppen* held doctoral degrees: Franz Walter Stahlecker, Otto Ohlendorf, and Otto Rasch (who in fact possessed a double doctorate in law and political economy). A further seven of nine leaders of *Einsatzgruppe A* under the command of Stahlecker held doctoral degrees, as did over half of the attendees of the Wannsee Conference in early 1942. The administrators of death in the East were thus not a criminal lower class but an intellectual elite, whose education sustained rather than immunized them against transgression.

Plans drawn up in the RSHA for the creation of a German *Lebensraum* in the East testify to the extremism of SS intellectuals. Working from their programs, reports, and speeches, Ingrao calculates that they designated 35 million people in the expulsion beyond the Urals and an additional 21 million for death (either by starvation, work, or execution). The attempt to realize the Nazi utopia commenced immediately upon the invasion of the Soviet Union. Between June and August 1941, the *Einsatzgruppen* killed around 50,000 people behind the advancing German lines. SD reports continued to explain these massacres as defensive actions, designed to prevent crime, social unrest, black marketeering, theft, fraud, partisan resistance, disease, and racial miscegenation. Yet as the focus of the German deployment switched from invasion to occupation, the *Einsatzgruppen* began annihilating entire communities. Between September and December 1941, over half a million people were executed. The death toll, that is, climbed from hundreds to thousands, and even tens of thousands per day. The specific role of SS intelligence officers (as opposed to other cadres in the RSHA and police battalions) is somewhat eclipsed in Ingrao's account behind the spiraling body count. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the 'expert ideologues' in the RSHA explained and justified the murderous operations of the *Einsatzgruppen* to the men committing them, frequently on the sites of the massacres themselves. Their influence can be seen in the letters sent home by members of the killing squads, in which images of annihilation are tempered with exculpatory rationalizations concerning the biological survival of the *Volk* and the subaltern barbarity of the enemy. Almost all the SS intellectuals deployed with the *Einsatzgruppen* participated in the killings. Several actively participated in the executions, sometimes to expedite the process, sometimes in order to give their subordinates a lesson in 'courage,' sometimes because of pure hatred of the enemy. Others undertook their 'special task' with thinly veiled revulsion and quickly applied for medical exemptions or transfers back to Germany. None refused to obey their orders, however, and those who harbored doubts were often more concerned with the wellbeing of the perpetrators rather than the victims. Indeed, Ingrao suggests that SS intellectuals, "whose work had hitherto consisted in developing the rhetorics of legitimation [...] that, in their view, gave meaning to the act of extermination," were more hardened than most to the bloodshed.

If Ingrao demonstrates the role of SS intellectuals in creating and preserving the consent of the rank and file to genocide, the promise to interpret the violence in the East as a 'language' reflecting a particular cultural system remains incomplete. Ingrao's investigations into the practice and procedures of genocide in the East are insightful, but ultimately fail to establish a comprehensive argument between the methods of ex-

ecution and the belief system that underpinned them. The sporadic invocation of anthropological 'explanations' of the practice of violence are largely otiose, and seem out of place in a text that is otherwise exactly researched. Believe and Destroy nonetheless makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the ideational character of the SS. Ingrao shows that the perpetrators of National Socialism's greatest crimes were neither banal functionaries nor born psychopaths. Instead they were a social and educational elite, whose commitment to National Socialism was sustained by a unique set of historical anxieties and aspirations. The dis-

course of legitimation they produced in support of the regime — rooted in notions of racial self-preservation, the historical struggle for the Reich, and an imperial mission in the East — consolidated National Socialist rule and furnished the *Einsatzgruppen* with a rationale for murder.

The Third Reich was hardly the first place in modern Europe in which intellectuals cooperated with power in pursuit of an imaginary utopia. Yet it does provide a sobering example of the manner in which ideology and scholarly 'objectivity' can become mutually intertwined, and of the ability of intellectuals to become consumed by their own hubris.

# RICHARD R. RIDDICK

## IVORY-TOWER INFIGHTING

A REVIEW OF  
*DERRIDA:  
A BIOGRAPHY*

BY BENOÎT PEETERS  
POLITY, 2012

On May 9 1992 an international group of philosophers wrote to *The Times*. The open letter was entitled 'A question of honour', and it was every bit as self-important and fuddy-duddy as the title suggested. The writers voiced their support to the faction within Cambridge (most vocal in the then truly antediluvian elements of the English faculty) opposing the University's decision to award the French philosopher Jacques Derrida with an honorary degree. They opined that, "In the eyes of philosophers and certainly among those working in leading departments of philosophy throughout the world, M. Derrida's work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour". A week later, a placet/non placet vote on the award took place, transforming the black-and-white chequered marble floor of Senate House into a theatre of the academic cold war between the partisans of 'Continental' and 'Anglo-American' philosophy (some have suggested that 'Germano-Austrian' might be a more accurate moniker). The latter faction lost the vote 336 to 204, and Derrida received his doctorate. In a final turn of the screw, having cocked a snook at the philosophy establishment, Derrida found an unexpected ally in no less decrepit an institution: Prince Philip, then Chancellor of the University, remarked to the French maestro that the Royal Family too had been having problems with 'deconstruction'. In the wake of these events, *The Cambridge Review* (the spiritual predecessor to this publication) interviewed Derrida in an October special edition, where he gave a withering retort to his critics, arguing that their letter, "violates the very principles in whose name these academics pretend to speak ('reason, truth and scholarship') [ . . . ] Nothing means that I am right, or that I should be believed merely because I say so, but let those who want to criticise take the trouble to do so; let them read, quote, demonstrate, and so on". Quite.

Benoît Peeters' *Derrida: A Biography* weaves together a series of vignettes like this with a feather-light touch, doing a sterling job of breathing life into ivory-tower infighting and a figure around whom many debates have revolved. Mercifully, Peeters has chosen to write "a biography of Derrida, not a Derridean biography", which avoids the kind of irksome imitation-Derridean style practised by smarty-pants postgraduates. Himself a former student of Roland Barthes, Peeters is well aware of the tensions between the necromantic biography genre and Derrida's thought, engaging with the issue unobtrusively but well. (One suspects that book reviews are also anathema to Derridean thought, but I will not indulge in my own riff on the subject.) Derrida is extensively quoted, both in his published works and his private correspondence with a huge number of friends (many of whom are A-list public intellectuals in their own right). Peeters' extraordinary grasp of context makes his writing illuminating in regard to both French and Anglophone reactions to Derrida (Catherine Malabou's account of being unemployable in France after having been supervised by Derrida, by then France's most famous public intellectual, is telling). His fine-grained glosses and summaries of Derrida's works are easily understood without having read the books themselves (given Derrida's prodigious output, surely few have digested his entire oeuvre other than card-carrying Derrideans), but rarely succumb to anything close to caricature or simplification. The book is structured around the shifts in the way Derrida's name reflected his reception, from 'Jackie' to 'Jacques Derrida' to 'Derrida'. This is a conceit without being conceited, and never comes across as a point that is laboured. In short, Peeters knows his eggs and is no ideologue nor given to being overwrought.

More than anything else, one single event, or the media echoes of it, have shaped our view of the man: the de Man Affair. In 1987, a scholar unearthed the wartime writings from occupied Belgium of the late Paul de Man, leading light of the 'hermeneutic mafia' group of Derrideans at Yale. Some considered them to be 'clever' in a bad way and, as such, they had plenty of detractors with an axe to grind. De Man's articles turned out to require no exaggeration on the part of his critics — they contained viciously anti-Semitic propaganda. The find made the front page of the *New York Times*, and Derrida came in for some heavy flak in place of his dead friend. At first, Derrida wanted to have the articles made public in full so people could judge for themselves, but then he wrote two long, rambling confused responses that played into the hands of his detractors — his lack of bite in responding let them conflate his philosophical teachings with de Man's own despicable past.

In retrospect, Jeffrey Mehlman's bowlderised comment that Derrida's work might be viewed in light of de Man as "a vast amnesty project for the politics of collaboration during World War II" is, of course, delirious, written as it is of someone who endured discrimination in occupied France first-hand. (Mehlman is a fine scholar who has written thoughtfully about Derrida elsewhere; he objected strongly to the journalist who bowlderised "the politics of collaboration and resistance", but this is rarely mentioned by those who put this quote to their own ends.) Far more level-headed was Avital Ronell's criticism that Derrida had surrounded himself with too many flunkies (Jean-Luc Nancy concurs on this point) and allowed himself to be persuaded away from his initial good intentions to have the de Man articles published and be damned. The tenor of the public debate completely missed all subtlety: Derrida's response had been inappropriate, but this was and is a feeble basis on which to dismiss his life's work or worse to out-

rageously slander him with the slightest connexion to the complete moral vacuum of National Socialism. This latter accusation plays into some of the most unpleasant, downright nasty discourses about the failure to resist Nazism on the part of its victims. There are echoes of Ben Urwand's *The Collaboration*, dealing with Nazi Germany's relations with Hollywood, a recent book which has been hyped up as revealing shocking allegations of complicity between (Jewish) studio bosses and Hitler.

Peeters' sketches of Derrida's life gives us a more balanced sense of the reasons, both good and bad, for which he was so committed to complexity, seemingly to the point of obfuscation when moral issues demanded solid statements of support or censure rather than what might pass for sophistry. One aspect of his life that emerges most powerfully is his struggle with identity. How could one not take a more balanced view of his intense discomfort over de Man's past if one is aware of the childhood trials and tribulations of the "Jewish boy from Algiers who felt neither French nor Jewish", a kind of 'Arab Jew' in his own words. Nowadays, we may be tempted to diminish the virulence and the banality of the anti-Semitism Derrida was subjected to, not only when Vichy began to adopt Nazi racial laws, but even after the war when elements in the French ruling elite remained as unreconstructedly Fascist as they had been when they had volunteered as Hitler's willing helpmeets. Subjected to a tirade about Jews at an upper crust dinner party, Derrida, then in his early twenties, writes a letter of incredible dignity to his friend (the son of the guilty party), explaining why he cannot tolerate his parents' anti-Semitism. However, despite his firm line on anti-Semitism, Derrida found it impossible to fully assume Jewish identity, as seemingly he would of any identity that he felt bound him to one community – in a 1986 speech fittingly in Jerusalem, he spoke of being both a Jew and an Arab. His powerful statement, "I think that respect for Jewish martyrdom under Nazism obliges us not to centre all possible martyrdoms on that one", is, in Peeters' portrayal, as much a response to the strident pronouncements of his philosemitic protégé Lacoue-Labarthe as to Yosef Yerushalmi. As with many aspects of his life, however, the refusal to accept this identity was not uncomplicated – one of his closest personal friends and intellectual inspirations was Emmanuel Levinas, and he apparently kept his tallith, or prayer-shawl, his whole life, and liked to hold it in moments of contemplation.

If in private Derrida struggled with his identity as a French Algerian-Jew, he struggled no less in his life as a public intellectual with the different factions that wanted to claim him for their own. Peeters' description of the pressure-cooker environment of the Parisian and later American intelligentsia is as strong as his evocation of a childhood in Jewish French Algeria. Derrida's former friend Philippe Sollers, stridently Marxist after his marriage to Julia Kristeva, was but one of many who incessantly badgered Derrida to publicly proclaim his loyalty to the party. Peeters offers the alternate explanation that jealousy developed between the two men when Derrida, until then an academic writer, began to experiment with writing in a way that threatened his novelist friend. Having refused to be drawn into any such declaration of loyalty, Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, published long after the intense internecine struggles and navel-gazing of 60s and 70s French Marxism, was typical of the man. If the price of making his voice heard over others was simplification, Derrida would rather shut up – even if it meant waiting decades.

Alongside the strands in Derrida's public and private life that illuminate his obstinate sticking to complexity, there are episodes that are simply moving. From his intense early friendship with Michel Monory

and his struggles with depression as a student, Derrida never fully led a charmed life. Insight into the friendship between Derrida and Louis Althusser is particularly touching and fascinatingly seems to have not suffered in the least from Althusser having been for sometime the darling of the radical Marxists, even Stalinists, whom Derrida was deeply suspicious of. First, as his director of studies at France's elite *École Normale Supérieure*, Althusser helped Derrida through periods of depression. Later, when Althusser was frequently hospitalized with mental issues, it was Derrida who would visit him every day. When the older man tragically killed his wife during a psychotic episode, it was Derrida again who rallied his friends around him, instructing a lawyer to plead mental incapacity. Could there be any starker contrast with the way he reacted to the de Man affair, again a case of close friend having committed a terrible act? Derrida's own last days are moving. The image of the career scholar and teacher correcting students' papers on his deathbed certainly has more of an air of Steven Spielberg about it than Derrida would have wished for, but is one of the powerful evocations of his generosity and professionalism that Peeters makes.

This is not to whitewash Derrida. His failings as an intellectual are dealt with by Peeters, as are his human frailties. As was, and is, commonplace among upper middle class men in France – one has only to think of the blasé attitude in France toward Dominique Strauss-Kahn pre-2011 – Derrida had numerous extra-marital relationships: affairs, mistresses, dalliances, flirtations – whichever euphemism one prefers. It's difficult to excuse the exploitation of privilege and fame evident in some of these relationships without risking the ethical bankruptcy of 'boys will be boys'. Peeters makes sources describing Derrida's relationship with his long-term lover Sylviane Agacinski and also mentions the coded messages he would write to both her and his wife in his later more imaginative works. They separated acrimoniously over her desire to have a child, and her politics drifted far to the right of his. There are things we will never know about the relationship with Agacinski, because Derrida burnt hundreds of their letters, and his letters to his wife remain sealed.

Peeters' biography is a great achievement – I have focused on its human aspects, but its dealing with difficult concepts and contexts mired in the fog of time is equally admirable. There are moments of real comedy that any humanities student forced to pore over their annotated copy of *Of Grammatology* will appreciate: Derrida's mother asks him, "But Jackie, have you *really* written 'difference' with an 'a'?" Those moments of tittering aside though, I was profoundly impressed by the fragmented picture of a man portrayed in this series of portraits. When Judith Butler came to Cambridge last year to a rock-star reception, I was worried that she would only tell her audience (some of whom would manifestly have been comfortable with being considered her acolytes) what they wanted to hear. Instead, Butler gave a speech of extraordinary courage and subtlety, warning against rejoicing too soon in the "thrill of bodies in the street" that she herself has often felt and has even written from and of. Despite its difficulty, she said all of this with the utmost simplicity and without pretension – it was clear that she wasn't being difficult for the sake of it. While I do not know if either thinker would be flattered to be compared to the other, Butler reminded me of the best that is in Derrida as Peeters portrays him, the things that make his failures worth forgiving – the humanity, the moral courage, the complexity in a world that wishes ideas were simple.

In the park by my secondary school, there was a wall. Being close to a school it was a magnet for graffiti. Alongside “Stacey M woz ere” and “RT 4 SJ”, for a while it also read “Pakis Fuck Off”. The nearby corner store was almost universally referred to as ‘the Paki shop’. I think its owners were Turkish.

Being the relatively well brought up offspring of left-wing middle class parents, I knew I didn’t approve of racist language. In safe enough circles, I’d even say so. But being the relatively well brought up offspring of left-wing middle class parents, I also knew that free speech was deeply important. By the age of 15, I’d picked up the famous line wrongly attributed to Voltaire: “I hate what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it!” I reeled it out on a few occasions. I felt pretty good about myself.

A friend of mine is the son of first-generation South Asian immigrants. A couple of years ago, his father was threatened outside his house by a hammer-wielding thug. His crime? Being a ‘Paki’. Many South Asians in Britain have vivid and recent memories of being verbally denigrated, or even physically threatened and attacked. Dog excrement shoved through a letterbox with a note saying ‘Go Home’ is still not unheard of. If you are a member of a racial group whom the epithet ‘Paki’ singles out and targets, what does it mean to read ‘Pakis Fuck Off’ scrawled on a wall, or hear people refer to a corner shop as a ‘Paki Shop’?

Rather obviously it means something different to you than it does to me (a White Briton). Whilst I can disapprove of hateful language, and sympathise with those subjected to it, for me ‘Paki’ does not carry a profound message about my status and place in British society. But to those of South Asian descent it says: ‘You are not welcome here. You do not belong here. Neither do your children. You may think you are safe, but we are biding our time, and we will get you when we can. Remember the past. We have not forgotten. You should not either’.

That is the core of Jeremy Waldron’s simple but powerful case for legal restrictions on ‘hate speech’, particularly in its written form. It’s all very well invoking mantras about defending to the death the vile pronouncements of others when you’re the member of a secure majority group, but, for individuals who are members of minority groups for whom memories of marginalization, physical insecurity, and abuse are often recent, such clichés may be luxuries they cannot yet afford. For vile pronouncements can be much more than just vile pronouncements. They can be messages which carry an implicit threat, and which attack the equal standing of certain citizens within society, and in turn their dignity and standing – crucial goods everybody needs if their lives are to go well. This is more than symbolic. If an environment is polluted by hateful pronouncements, the individuals targeted cannot conduct their lives with the same level of confidence, security, and freedom that members of an ethnic majority enjoy. Hate speech’s impact is ultimately a dynamic interplay between the experienced reduced quality of life of a minority group and the undermining of their status as equal citizens entitled to the basic public goods of security and fair inclusion – goods which are central to societies like ours, where the recognition of status and dignity are prerequisites for psychological and social well-being. A state that allows hate speech, Waldron suggests, is complicit in the denial of meaningful equality to minority groups, and hence in making their lives unfairly worse off. No self-respecting liberal polity should accept this: restrictions on hate speech are not merely a legitimate but a necessary part of a well-ordered liberal democracy.

Crucial to Waldron’s case is his clarification that ‘hate speech’ is something of a misnomer. Firstly, he isn’t really interested in *hate*. Emphasizing hate implies that the law is primarily concerned with the intentions behind an act. Whilst that is the case with so-called ‘hate crimes’ (where discriminatory motivations are judged to underpin criminal actions), Waldron distances himself from that sort of thing. He is much more concerned with the *effect* that “hate speech” has: both its disfiguring of the shared social environment, and its impact upon the standing, security, and dignity of minority groups. Similarly, Waldron isn’t primarily interested in *speech* in terms of the verbal utterances, but rather a broader spectrum of communicative and symbolic acts, especially the published word, and acts of expression that would be candidates for First Amendment protection in the United States. Anti-Semitic leaflets distributed around a Jewish neighbourhood; racist messages daubed on the side of a mosque; vitriolic blog posts spreading lies about an immigrant community; a burning cross outside a black family’s home – these sorts of concerted attempts to send an intimidating message to members of minority groups are what Waldron contends the law should rightly prohibit, if it is to meaningfully uphold the dignity and security of all citizens as equals. Spoken racist words can certainly harm, and their effect can be long lasting, but Waldron’s net is cast much wider.

Waldron’s case is self-consciously part of a specifically American debate over free speech. It is targeted in particular against those who claim, with varying degrees of sophistication, that restricting hate speech violates First Amendment rights to free expression, and hence cannot be permitted for that reason. Waldron deftly exposes the weaknesses of such arguments, in both their crude and more sophisticated forms. Whilst this is a book for and about American free speech debates, Waldron – who, though originally from New Zealand, now spends much of his working life as Oxford’s Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory – presses the point that America is extremely unusual in not imposing restrictions on hate speech. Drawing on examples of successful hate speech laws in the UK, Denmark, New Zealand, and Canada, he wants his American audience to question whether the absolutist privileging of First Amendment rights for bigots over the right not to be subjected to hate speech for minority groups is actually something to be proud of. An expert in contemporary political theory as well as jurisprudence, Waldron’s is a formidable voice.

But for philosophers of a less legalistic bent, what may be more interesting than the specific debate Waldron is engaged in is what his position indicates about other, more neglected, areas of liberal political philosophy. Reflections from a peculiarly British perspective may help here. Not unreasonably, Waldron focuses almost exclusively upon the situation of minority groups who need to be protected from the pernicious impact of hate speech. In an American context this seems appropriate: in that country’s

PAUL  
SAGAR  
VILE  
PRONOUNCEMENTS

A REVIEW OF  
*THE HARM IN  
HATE SPEECH*

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present state of affairs it appears overwhelmingly to be minority groups who need protection from the effects of hate speech, not bigots whose aim is to intimidate and threaten. This is also often the case in Britain. But laws have a habit of operating differently in practice to how they may originally be justified or intended. An example: in November 2010 Emdadur Choudhury, a British Muslim, was arrested under Section 5 of the Public Order Act for burning oversized poppies as part of what he described as a political protest (he was a member of a group called 'Muslims Against Crusades'), and later fined £50. The UK Public Order Act is cited by Waldron as a well-functioning law with provisions against hate speech, upheld in Britain to the benefit of vulnerable minorities without excessively detrimental effects on free speech or the exchange of ideas. Yet Waldron's justification for hate speech laws cannot work in this particular case. A Muslim man burning a poppy on Remembrance Sunday cannot reasonably be said to be threatening the security and dignity of the white majority offended by such an action, however hateful and offensive it may be.

Waldron insists that hate crime laws are not designed to protect people from *offence*, but from *harm*. On paper his argument (roughly: attacks on people's opinions are different from attacks on their standing *as people*) is very plausible. In practice that line will be difficult to maintain. Choudhury was arrested not because his act of 'hate speech' threatened the dignity or security of others, but because it offended the widespread sensibilities of the white British majority. For this majority, the poppy has recently come to emblemize a sense of national pride, and, through the influence of the political right, come to be synonymous with support for the UK's involvement in the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. The impact of a law's enforcement may thus go much wider than a few arrested individuals in legitimating a current of opinion. Many (myself included) used to wear the poppy as a symbol of non-partisan solidarity with, and appreciation for, the millions of dead who fought – often against their will – in causes less or more noble over the past 100 years. But increasingly the poppy has become a symbol of unthinking and uncritical support for present political and military causes. Arresting people for burning poppies – surely a political act, not 'hate speech' directed at vulnerable minorities – is not just symptomatic of, but arguably accelerating, a wider trend against the questioning of the co-option of a once non-partisan symbol for dubious political ends.

This is not actually an argument against Waldron. His response to this sort of consideration is that in practice hate speech laws will inevitably have costs. No law operates perfectly, and all laws can be misapplied. The task for legislators is to weigh up the likely detriments and benefits of imposing a law or not, including its potential misuse, and to act accordingly. Britain's Public Order Act risks being misapplied, in turn contributing to a climate of restricting open debate on some specific issue or issues. But this is an acceptable price to pay insofar as important protections are thereby afforded to vulnerable minority groups. The right of South Asians to be protected from racist leafleting in Bolton, or of London Jews to be protected from having pig's heads left outside a synagogue, matter too. Ultimately, their interests seem to Waldron – and, for what it's worth, to me – to win out when balancing the costs society must choose whether or not to incur.

There is an important philosophical point being established by Waldron here: that not only are there costs in applying certain laws and not others, but part of the purpose of applying laws is precisely to regulate contestation between opposing groups. In politics, it is usually the case that some can only win if others lose, whilst winners will usually also pay some costs. Waldron eschews the temptation to present his position as wholly free of unwanted side-effects. In particular, he does not deny that hate speech restrictions are restrictions on free speech. A standard move in this area by *bien pensant* liberals is to claim that racist or bigoted speech isn't entitled to consideration under the remit of free speech protection because it is morally disqualified from such protection by its very nature (usually a piece of peculiarly American reasoning, resulting from over-exposure to First Amendment discourse, and which Waldron is well-placed to correct). Waldron rightly rejects that view. Banning hate speech is a restriction on free speech – but a justified one, the price we pay for the social and moral good of dignity and security for minorities. This is jurisprudence for real politics, to be commended accordingly. Nonetheless, if we're thinking about who the losers in political struggle are, Waldron's archetypal hate speaker seems an oversimplified character. Waldron is clear that he is less interested in words spoken in haste and anger than in the calculated dissemination of efforts to intimidate and undermine the dignity and security of vulnerable people, especially through the printed word. It is not racists occasionally "letting off steam" that are his target,

but those who set about, with purpose and conviction, to undermine the security and dignity of members of a minority group. All very well, and I am in agreement that such individuals should be stopped. But are they best thought of simply as malicious racists, homophobes, bigots, etc., and considered only as such? My own limited experience of racists is that they typically believe *themselves* to be the oppressed minority. (The psychology of racism is an oscillation between resentment and self-pity, and in more advanced cases full-blown Nietzschean *ressentiment* – which is one reason Nietzsche himself couldn't abide Anti-Semites.) Usually, the racist's belief in the victimhood of the ethnic group he or she belongs to is factual nonsense. And from my position of economic security, as a middle class white male academic, surrounded by opportunities and like-minded friends, it is usually obviously so. But from the perspective of (for example) an unemployed white working class thirty-something man in a former mill town, things will seem very different. It may not actually be the case that South Asian immigrants have taken this person's job, or that their mosques are disfiguring 'his' putatively Christian neighbourhood. But it sure feels like it to him. Leafleting on behalf of the British National Party, or taking part in an English Defence League rally, may seem like entirely rational and reasonable responses from this person's perspective. When the law intervenes to prevent what he thinks is his exercising of free speech, the friends and family of our disgruntled racist – sharing much of his perspective – are likely to agree in perceiving state intervention not as the upholding of equal dignity and respect, but as the further marginalization of them as the 'truly' victimized social group: 'betrayed by their own country', as the BNP likes to put it.

I am not suggesting that, because racism seems justified to the racist, the law should therefore allow racist behaviour, including hate speech targeting vulnerable ethnic groups. The rights of minorities to be protected from racism over-ride the rights of racists to act out their racism (likewise for cases of gender and sexuality discrimination, etc.). The point is rather that Waldron – perhaps due to the way his argument is constructed, but perhaps due to something deeper – begins to replicate the insider/outsider dichotomy of political conflict that underpins much of the attitude of those who engage in the sort of hate speech he rightly condemns. After all, the argument runs so much more smoothly when hate speakers are an undifferentiated group of guilty parties whom we must control so as to protect others whom we deem not just innocent but worthy of our moral support. That way we have to do so much less soul-searching about why some people would want to engage in hate speech, and why they might get support and sympathy from their peers. This is not to say that Waldron is somehow on a par with those who engage in hate speech – far from it. It is simply to notice how politics naturally moves into bifurcations of those we support and those we condemn; of how tempting – because so easy and helpful – it is to turn outsiders into faceless others, so unlike us that we don't need to think about how things might look to them, or would look to us if we walked long enough in their shoes. Why does politics have this tendency? What does it mean for how we can hope to do it less badly? Will this tendency go away if we come up with better moral principles, or should the legislative process embed an awareness of the tendency for a friend-enemy compartmentalizing at its heart? These questions receive surprisingly little attention in contemporary political philosophy. But if we are serious about a jurisprudence for real politics, that is not a good state of affairs in which to be.

I said above that Waldron believes hate speech restrictions are essential if society is to be 'well-ordered'. This is a technical term, taken from the work of John Rawls. A 'well-ordered society' for Rawls is an idealized abstraction: a society whose basic structure is regulated (and known to be regulated) by certain principles of justice, and inhabited by people who take the idea of justice seriously. Rawls wanted to know whether such a society could exist as a stable entity under conditions of religious and philosophical diversity. Waldron takes this idea specifically in the direction of a non-idealized, non-abstract society, i.e. the example of modern America as it actually is. His suggestion is that America cannot at present be considered 'well-ordered' because the coercive power of the state is not being properly deployed to promote ends such as fairness and meaningful equality with regards to the impact of certain kinds of speech.

But we need to put much more pressure on the idea of a non-idealised, non-abstract, yet nonetheless well-ordered society in the American case. Waldron is predominantly concerned with the position of minority groups targeted by hate speech. But if we're seeking a role for state power in redressing injustices against racial minorities, why is it hate speech, of all things, that we should be so concerned about? Let us at this point recall the actual context of modern American race relations – and

here it is worth shouldering some detail to gain an appreciation of the full extremity of the situation.

In his *Punishment and Inequality in America*, Bruce Western analyses the rates of incarceration for black male high-school drop-outs in the United States by comparing this to other institutions that typically shape the life-path of ordinary people. For young uneducated black men, prison is more likely to be a feature of their life-formation than membership of a labour union, being in regular employment, or joining the military. Due to the fact that incarceration drastically reduces a person's future employability and ability to form and maintain long-standing relationships, it tends to define future prospects, often by locking young men into ongoing cycles of criminality. And because the men who are locked up are often fathers and partners, the impact of prison reverberates through black communities, further entrenching economic and social inequality, cementing the status of poor blacks as an American underclass.

Blacks do not commit more crime than whites in America – but they are far more likely to be arrested, charged, prosecuted and convicted to prison terms. Most black men serving time have committed non-violent crimes, usually drug-related (which they do not commit at a higher rate than whites, but are far more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for). The lived experience of the American coercive state apparatus for poor black Americans is as a system of racially-based injustice. Although the experience of the prison system is not as severe as for blacks, it is still considerably worse than for whites. Due to the disenfranchising effects of incarceration, Michelle Alexander has described the rise of mass incarceration as leading to a “new Jim Crow”, legitimated by the war on drugs and pushed off the political agenda by the criminal guilt of its victims.

The issue goes deeper. Since the 1980s, the American prison system has boomed. In 1980, 10.7% of black male college dropouts were incarcerated. In 2000 it was 32.4%. (The rates for whites were 2.1% and 6.7% respectively.) The growth has not abated in the past 13 years, with 2.3 million Americans currently imprisoned. This has resulted in a massive government-subsidized, and deeply inefficient, growth industry. American towns vie for contracts to build new prisons, which bring jobs in the form of construction, maintenance, and prison guarding. Ted Conover, a journalist who spent a year working undercover in New York's notorious Sing Sing maximum security prison, notes that in upstate New York the most likely course of employment for poorly educated white men is to work as corrections officers overseeing a population of inmates who are mainly poor, uneducated blacks from New York City. As the American Prison system expands, billions of dollars are poured into providing work

for (mostly) white Americans to lock up (mostly) poor blacks. Alongside the New Jim Crow, we might perhaps talk of Slavery 2.0. Without hyperbole, the American state apparatus can be described as operating a massive industry of racially-based oppression. That is how many American citizens of colour experience it on a daily basis, and in a nation which rid itself of race-based slavery only 150 years ago. Talk of America as being even remotely ‘well ordered’ in non-ideal and non-abstract terms with regards to race appears to border upon the preposterous.

Of course, Waldron has not written a book about the American prison system. He might justifiably reply that he is focusing on another, smaller injustice, which he feels capable of effectively addressing. The plight of America's poor blacks is real, but in the meantime there is nothing wrong with protecting Jews in Skokie, Illinois from Nazi parades, or Muslims in New York from Islamophobia. Just because all of present society isn't well-ordered, it doesn't follow that we shouldn't strive to make some of it more so.

There is much to be said for that answer. But it is not enough. Liberalism's critics claim that worrying about hate speech in the context of what the American state really is exposes the vacuous self-satisfaction of liberalism: its preoccupation with petty issues conducted at a level of irrelevant intellectual refinement, whilst ignoring (and perhaps thereby legitimating) massive underlying injustices. That answer goes too far. In particular, it neglects that many liberals are motivated by a vivid awareness of the horrors perpetrated by all of liberalism's historical rivals, and of the mountains of corpses produced by the last century's disastrous experiments in wishful thinking. But it contains an important kernel of truth, which liberals should not ignore if they are to reflect honestly on what they believe. The American free speech debate is a big deal for current political theorists. But why is it that liberal philosophers are so attracted – obsessed, even – with refined and self-involved questions about speech (even on Waldron's appropriately expansive conception), whilst largely ignoring the wider context of societies that perpetrate enormous racially-based injustices, which have little to do with speech or individual actions at all? If Americans are serious about a non-abstract, non-ideal society governed by a jurisprudence for real politics in matters of race, they will have to face up to the fact that their present society is extremely *badly*-ordered. And until that fact becomes a widely accepted starting point for liberal philosophical analysis, liberal philosophers should ask themselves: why is that we continue to insist on starting somewhere else – somewhere infinitely more hopeful and optimistic, and hence extremely far away – and what does that tell us about ourselves, and what we think we are doing?

PETER  
WALSH

BORDERLINE  
ARGUMENTS

A REVIEW OF  
*THE BRITISH DREAM:  
SUCCESSSES AND  
FAILURES OF POST-  
WAR IMMIGRATION*

BY DAVID GOODHART

ATLANTIC, 2013

These days, we are everywhere confronted with the consequences of immigration. As a process, it has had a profound impact upon Britain's demography, politics, and culture; as an issue, it pervades public discourse. With an estimated seventy per cent of the British public advocating a significant reduction in migration to the country, while net migration still far exceeds the government's target of below one hundred thousand per year, the issue of immigration is more pressing now than perhaps ever before in our nation's history. But with the immigration debate characterised less by reasoned argument than ignorance and xenophobia – the front page of a recent national daily reads: ‘BRITAIN MUST BAN MIGRANTS’ – it is therefore little wonder that only modest progress has been made in the development of collective answers to some of the issue's most elementary questions.

Has immigration to Britain caused more harm than good? Does more diversity mean less solidarity? Do Britain's immigrant and ethnic minority groups live ‘parallel lives’, apart from one another, geographically, socially, and culturally? Perhaps migrant inflows should be reduced, or stopped altogether. Would doing so be ethical, or should our national borders be opened to all comers? What, after all, can be the moral significance of birthplace, or nationality, attributes for which we cannot be held responsible, but that nevertheless determine our access to so much (or so little) of the world and its opportunities? In *The British Dream*, David Goodhart, former editor of Prospect magazine, and now head of the think tank *Demos*, provides answers to all of these questions. The result is an ambitious but ultimately incoherent work, variable in the quality of its argumentation, inconsistent in its analysis of empirical evidence, and with conclusions often outrunning the facts.

We turn first to the moral question: is it right to restrict international migration? Goodhart is perceptive to tackle this problem at the outset; his case for more stringent immigration controls will need a strong ethical basis to be persuasive.

Let us test the moral foundation. Goodhart's argument is premised on what seems like an obvious moral truth: that, in general, it is legitimate for a citizen to have a stronger moral obligation to a fellow citizen than to a non-citizen, and it is on this basis that a collection of citizens (a nation) is justified in denying non-citizens access to their national territory. But is this just? How forceful is Goodhart's contention that, *ceteris paribus*, a Briton can legitimately owe a stronger allegiance to persons from Birmingham than

persons from Bangladesh? Just what kind of moral weight should we give to a prospective migrant's nationality?

There are those, like the late philosopher Michael Dummett, who argue that having a particular birthplace cannot have any moral significance, and therefore should not bring with it unearned rewards. He is, in Goodhart's terms, a rare and radical species of thinker known as a 'post-nationalist', someone who believes that nationality ought not to have a significant bearing upon a person's opportunities. Why, after all, should an individual's life chances be determined so significantly and permanently for a personal attribute, nationality, for which they can take no responsibility? The conclusion of the post-nationalist is thus that it is not ethical for nations to exclude potential migrants on the basis of the (largely arbitrary) criterion of nationality. The argument might seem compelling, but Goodhart offers a challenge.

Developing his own principled argument against free international migration, Goodhart asks: "Why should a London bus driver get paid ten times more than a Karachi one for performing an easier version of the same task?" For Goodhart, part of the answer is that the London bus driver is "benefiting from hundreds of years of economic and technological development which has made Britain a much richer country than Pakistan – it is part of his or her national inheritance." Is this answer convincing? Not at all. In fact, it contains only an explanation of why the London bus driver receives more pay than his Pakistani equivalent, but provides few clues as to why this arrangement ought to be so. In any case, the principle of 'national inheritance' does not bear moral scrutiny. If our nationality somehow entitles us to the consequences of our nation's historical achievements (and also, presumably, its failings), which may be the result of hundreds of years of development, then is it equally true that the world's most deprived individuals are equally deserving of their own national inheritance, even where this amounts to desperate poverty and civil war? And what if the disparities in development between a rich country and a poor country were brought about, at least in part, by the rich country colonising the poor one? Would national inheritance then be justified?

Goodhart's principled justification for national borders continues with his observation that nations are not just collections of atomised individuals with no particular bonds between each other. Instead, nations have particular histories, and as such can be thought of as "cross-generational contracts between generations". What might be the ethical substance of such cross-generational contracts? Unfortunately, Goodhart does not develop this argument further, leaving the reader to wonder why a cross-generational contract between generations ought to exert some kind of moral force. Goodhart's principled defence of the right of nations to exclude therefore remains considerably underdeveloped. But Goodhart switches strategy, developing instead a pragmatic defence of a bordered world. Here, however, he is only marginally more persuasive. His argument is utilitarian. A world without immigration restrictions would cause more harm than good, bringing about net injury to both rich and poor countries, whilst benefiting only a minority of individuals: the migrants themselves. How does immigration harm wealthier countries? Because they become overly dependent on importing certain kinds of labour, argues Goodhart, which then reduces the incentive to improve the training or the work ethic for the hard-to-employ native citizens. This is at least superficially plausible, but without supporting evidence or argument cannot be interpreted as anything more than armchair speculation. And what about the poorer immigrant-sending countries? Goodhart says these cannot afford to lose their brightest, most ambitious, and expensively educated people. This is more plausible, but remember: the purpose of this argument is to justify the right of nations to exclude would-be migrants, but it is doubtful that any justification for immigration controls could rest on such an uncertain claim. This is not to say that a convincing argument – either principled, or consequentialist – cannot be made for restricting international migration; only that, to its detriment, *The British Dream* does not contain one.

From Goodhart's unsatisfactory ethics on the right of nations to exclude, we turn to questions of value: has Britain's immigration done more harm than good? Has increased diversity brought decreased solidarity, and forms of segregation? Goodhart's response is clear: in recent years, Britain has had far too much immigration, resulting in significant social injury. Two problems are of particular concern. The first of these is economic. Britain's immigration has not, in general, paid its way, and worse, low-skilled migrants have taken jobs from Britain's young, white working class, leaving them languishing on benefits. This argument might seem plausible, and appears to be accepted as fact by a number of commentators and politicians. And yet, there is almost no evidence to support

it. The second problem, says Goodhart, is social. The failure of some immigrants to integrate, either socially – through appropriate mixing at the level of the neighbourhood – or politically – by identifying with Britain, and acting in accordance with its national ethos – has caused a decline in social solidarity, both locally and nationally. This argument might seem more convincing. It reflects, after all, the 'story of our times'. But again, Goodhart's conclusions exceed the evidence.

First, the economics. Goodhart provides a fair summary of the academic consensus regarding the effect of immigration upon Britain's economy. Post-war immigration appears to have had only a small effect upon employment, wages, and per capita GDP growth for the resident population. Moreover, Goodhart's contention that the arrival of high numbers of low-skilled migrants has caused working-class whites to face greater competition in the labour market, driving down wages, is borne out by the evidence. However, what Goodhart neglects to mention is that most mainstream academic economists understand this effect to be small compared to that of other factors, such as technological change, and minimum wage legislation."

What about Goodhart's central claim that 'a disproportionate number of new jobs seem to have been going to recent immigrants, rather than British workers'? Here, he commits the same error of reasoning as the newspaper editor that writes, 'THEY'VE STOLEN ALL OUR JOBS' (Daily Star). This error is the so-called 'lump of labour fallacy': the false idea that the demand for labour in an economy is fixed. Even economists sometimes make this slip, and its presence here would be unremarkable if not for the fact that Goodhart himself elucidates this very fallacy only a page later, where he explains that immigrants do not just compete with White British workers for jobs, but also create demand for labour through the incomes they spend, the taxes they pay, and more directly, through the jobs they create as employers. Such facts make it difficult, if not impossible, to speak of migrants 'displacing' British citizens from the labour market. And yet, the same fallacious reasoning returns in the argument. As Goodhart says:

To have millions of long-standing residents sitting at home on benefit while poorer foreigners come in and take the jobs they should be doing makes no sense for the country as a whole; it creates a kind of 'Saudi Arabianisation' of the labour market.

Goodhart's problem is that he seems unable to escape the logic of the zero-sum game, the idea that because some people (i.e., immigrants) get more of something (in this instance, jobs), other people (i.e., 'natives') must get less. Complex economies have never functioned as zero-sum games in this way; the amount of labour required by a community is never static, and is influenced by a wide range of interrelating factors, including technological developments, the skills and training of the labour force, variations in prices, and so on. This makes the impact of any one factor upon labour demand (such as immigration), difficult, if not impossible, to calculate, and, more importantly, easy to overstate.

We turn now to Goodhart's analysis of the social problems of mass immigration, which may be summarised as problems of integration, of both a social and political nature. *The British Dream* is littered with references to 'ethnic enclaves', 'ghettos', and 'parallel lives', but does the available evidence support Goodhart's portrait of a Britain segregated along ethnic lines? Let us focus on Goodhart's central claim of residential segregation, and in particular, the existence of 'little Pakistans' and 'little Somalias', which he claims surround many of our big cities.

The extraordinarily detailed 2011 census data reveal a number of candidates for 'little Pakistans': of the 8,570 wards in England and Wales (the average ward has a population of around six and a half thousand), nine have populations where at least fifty per cent of respondents identified themselves as Pakistani. In terms of the claim about 'little Somalias' Goodhart is misleading. There is only a single ward in England and Wales whose population is more than five per cent Somali (Lawrence Hill, Bristol), and only fifteen wards (less than one in five hundred) have populations of which at least two per cent identify as Somali. We may therefore conclude that the 'little Somalias' must be very little indeed, existing perhaps at the level of a few streets, or small neighbourhoods, which would be too small to be picked up by ward analyses. By comparison, in the US (to which Goodhart makes a number of ill-judged comparisons), we find Detroit, home to around 700,000 people, of whom over eighty per cent is African American (in a country whose Black or African American population comprises no more than fifteen per cent of the total).

In the light of the critique thus far, one may be forgiven for

supposing that David Goodhart's book has almost nothing to recommend it. But that would be misguided. It is certainly true that the quality of Goodhart's philosophical, economic and sociological analyses, leaving much space for refinement, are rather fatal for those parts of the book that lean so heavily upon them. (Goodhart never does present a convincing case for the failure of immigrant and ethnic minority groups to identify with Britain and act in accordance with its ethos.) However, not all in Goodhart's book is ethically or empirically oriented. The bulk of its middle third is a critical post-war history of British immigration, and it is of comparatively higher quality than his contemporary social analysis. Generally accurate, and with a clear overarching structure, it is a fair and compelling narrative. Goodhart's history takes clear inspiration from that of Randall Hansen (which can be found in *Citizenship and Immigration in Postwar Britain*). And although Goodhart's account is less scholarly (and with many more factual errors), it is also breezier, and leavened with ethnographic detail. His story is one of laissez-faire multiculturalism, and it is, in the main, one told in a sensitive and persuasive style.

Goodhart is never more persuasive than in the book's penultimate chapter. His exploration of the national question – of what it should mean to be British – is well-judged, nuanced, and for a book that focuses more upon the 'failures' than the 'successes', curiously optimistic. "A na-

tional identity," says Goodhart, "has both a very particular aspect rooted in the customs, language, texture and reference points of everyday life, and a more universal 'citizenship' aspect derived from the political rules and procedures of liberal democracy [...] it is the first that carries most of the emotional charge." His belief is that a national idiom remains the best way to think about large-scale co-operation.' His invitation is to the cultivation of "moderate national feeling", the nurturing of a sense that Britain is 'our' country. And perhaps, on this issue, he has a point.

On integration, the majority of Goodhart's prescriptions are sensible enough, though they are not exactly original. It is a pity that Goodhart's later arguments rely so strongly upon his prior, flawed analysis, leading to an uneven and frustrating read. Goodhart has shown himself to be an effective writer of history, but it is his misunderstanding of contemporary economic and social research – and its supporting evidence – that is the downfall of this book.

The central problem for Goodhart is this: for his thesis to succeed, the blame for the economic and social problems he identifies must fall squarely upon immigration, or immigration policy, when in fact these are unlikely to be the main causal factor, or even any kind of significant one. As such, it is a thesis that borders on the incoherent.

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A few years ago, I shared a platform at a conference in Italy with the American investigative journalist Carl Bernstein, famed for his reporting of the Watergate scandal, which eventually led to the resignation of President Nixon in 1974. I was surprised at how much we agreed about the modern media. What struck me most, however, was his description of the Watergate scandal as both one of the greatest stories of all time and, he added, "a disaster for journalism".

Why was it a disaster? Anyone who has seen how Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford portray Bernstein and his fellow journalist Bob Woodward in the 1976 film *All the President's Men* will know that the pair were obsessive about facts and determined to go that extra distance to check. By contrast, there are reporters today for whom an investigation means simply making two phone calls not one, or it means resorting to the dubious and illegal practices of which we have heard so much recently. Watergate was the best of journalism because it slowly and systematically uncovered a terrible truth that the most powerful man in the world wanted hidden. However, Watergate also made journalists feel that the only real story is one that brings people down, the mightier the better.

Watergate's hold over the journalistic psyche is such that any scandal must have a gate. At least with former Tory chief whip Andrew Mitchell there was a real gate (the Downing Street gates at which the altercation with police took place), which is why it should not have been called 'plebgate' but plebgategate. We have had many gates in recent years, most now forgotten. Anyone remember Drapergate? More recently, Betsygate was something to do with Iain Duncan Smith's wife; Camillagate was about her phone calls to Prince Charles; Sachsgate was the one that Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross climbed over; Bigotgate was about Gordon Brown and a microphone.

Great journalism requires time, something Woodward and Bernstein were given at *The Washington Post*. The best exposés would require journalists to go weeks and months without a byline. The editor Harry Evans had a team of *Sunday Times* reporters working for eight months before exposing Kim Philby's spying for the KGB in 1967. He also invested great efforts to investigate and publicise the plight of hundreds of British children who suffered birth defects due to their mothers taking the drug Thalidomide. Editors must trust that it will be worth the wait, requiring a degree of patience possessed by few editors today. Instead there is much more space to fill, with less time and fewer people to do it.

Yet when the *Leveson Report* on the culture, practice, and ethics of the press was published last year, Evans' Thalidomide and Bernstein's Watergate investigations frequently came up as the kind of stories a new regulatory system would allegedly thwart. This is not true of course, but it served as a reminder of how few great stories our recent self-styled seekers after truth have uncovered during the years of Rupert Murdoch and Paul Dacre. Look back through the winners of the 'scoop of the year' awards of recent years. Admittedly MPs expenses, cricket corruption, and The Times' recent investigations of tax avoidance, though ignoring various media moguls, were genuinely big stories. But also on the list we have the affairs of David Beckham, John Prescott, Sven, and Ulrika (I played a minor part in this, as I introduced them to each other). Today's newspapers lack the patience to invest in the kind of investigations that made Harry Evans famous. The gate has to be erected too quickly. Ironically, the one investigation that bucked the trend was that of *The Guardian* into phone-hacking, despite all media, police, and political desire for it to go away.

There was much absurd self-serving bilge in the press' response to the modest changes proposed by Leveson, overwhelmingly backed by the public and MPs, for a system which, once established, would give politicians no say at all. Comparisons were made with Zimbabwe, Iran, China, North Korea, and the Russia not just of Putin but Stalin. There were staggering misrepresentations of what the Leveson report was proposing: that it would end press freedom, allow politicians to decide what you read, that investigative stories like MP's

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DEMOCRACY:  
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expenses could never happen again, that its primary aim was to protect politicians and celebrities. These were all lies. Rather it is about protecting people without power, wealth or fame who can have their lives destroyed by inhumane, cruel, and illegal journalistic activity. The politicians have bent over backwards to accommodate what genuine concerns can be found amid the propaganda and, dare I say, spin coming from the press. The fact that the public have seen through it all makes me optimistic.

The press has rightly campaigned for regulation of banks, pension funds, MPs, doctors, lawyers, on and on we go. Yet newspapers have a lower trust rating than any of these other groups. A recent *Transparency International* report, not widely reported, showed that 69% of British people viewed the media as the most corrupt of 12 institutions surveyed, up from 39% three years ago. Nonetheless only newspapers feel that they should be considered exempt and allowed to design their own regulation, despite so much evidence of their untrustworthiness to do so. Just ask yourself what those same owners and editors would have to say if any other walk of life had been exposed for committing so much wrongdoing, given rise to so much public disgust, and then still made a claim to be capable of a self-regulatory system. They would have insulted, hounded, and vilified them.

What Leveson proposed and what the Royal Charter suggests does not even establish regulation of the press at all: it proposes a recognising body to certify that any self-regulator created is independent; independent of press - so they cannot control it or water it down; and independent of politicians so that a future government cannot make it more draconian. It proposes that the new body has an arbitration procedure faster and more open than the disgraced, institutionally corrupt Press Complaints Commission, and cheaper and more accessible than the law. It proposes the new body enforces the PCC editors' code of practice, which promises accuracy and respect for privacy.

I am pleased the politicians have thus far held reasonably firm - with a few wobbles and a bit of political opportunism by Michael Gove and Boris Johnson. It is almost a year since Leveson reported. Time to get it done. In doing so, politicians will be standing up for the public interest not the vested interest of people they know can give them a hard time. Here is what I think will eventually happen: Paul Dacre and Guy Black (the most media-poodlish person ever to run the PCC) will push their luck and overplay their hand on their rival plan, The Independent Press Standards Organisation. The politicians, public, and the victims of media abuse will lose patience, and so will those papers less wrapped up in the Dacre-Black Lie Machine. Enough papers will then set up a self-regulator to meet Royal Charter standards. Other newspapers will join because the costs of staying out - paying both sides of a libel case - will be so high. The system will settle down, and we will all look back with utter bemusement at the warnings of an end to civilisation as we know it, and contempt at their machinations.

Once this debate is settled, journalism can start to look at how it rebuilds its reputation. This is something that can only be done by the next generation, the kind of twenty and thirty somethings that run Facebook and Twitter. It could be, of course, that the new media will simply create new oligarchs, less interested in good journalism - which costs money - than in the financial power that owning the platforms gives them. That has to be watched very closely, to avoid the new platforms further killing good journalism rather than saving it and investing in it. Let's see how Amazon founder Richard Bezos handles running *The Washington Post*. Let's see if the sense develops that the Facebook Twitter revolution is really only about the flotation billions, or creating a more democratic media. Let's be wary too of the danger of a new rich-poor divide, which further weakens journalism as a central pillar of democracy - on the one side free news, on the other 'proper' journalism, reserved for those willing to pay for it.

The thing to be clear about is that journalism isn't dying, and that is a good thing. The web has forced all forms of media and politics to adapt. These new systems can be more democratic even if at times they seem anarchic, and they offer the opportunity for smaller groups to pioneer a journalism less influenced by corporate interests. Of course the media corporations are doing all they can to build online audiences for their journalistic content, and quite right too, but the people they once regarded as a tame audience are proving harder to corral. Political and business elites will always fight hard for themselves. But there is at least a

chance that, in the next generation, media ownership and control will be, to coin a New Labour phrase, for the many not the few.

The new technologies empower a growing army of citizen journalists, bloggers, readers, and commenters to construct a more pluralistic debate about matters of public interest. A monopolistic industrial model of journalism where the agenda was formulated by journalist elites is shifting towards a networked model. New delivery systems are also changing news gathering. Take the death of Ian Tomlinson at the London G20 protests. The story began as a piece of sceptical reporting by Paul Lewis at *The Guardian*, but, realising it was weak, he used Twitter to reach a wider audience. In response people sent their own digital evidence of Tomlinson's assault by a policeman to Paul, crucial in the prosecutions that followed. And when Parliament was pushed into publishing the expenses claims of MPs, the Guardian, unable to cope with the deluge, posted 460,000 documents on their website and within a couple of days a virtual newsroom of 23,000 'reporters' had ploughed through them, flagging up interesting facts or lines. So the future of journalism could be more collaborative. The key decisions are still being taken in newsrooms and editorial meetings, but the role of outside individuals has grown. That is grounds for optimism too.

So what does this all mean for politicians? They will always need to be wary about journalism. But the fact that media brands have less control is a good thing for viewers and readers, and the fact that politicians cannot control the agenda in quite the way they could, even in my time, is no bad thing either.

I am often asked - was Malcolm Tucker based on me? To which I say 'what - a swearsy Scottish spin doctor trying to maintain strategic cohesion among ministers, and make sure the government agenda is set across the media?' Fuck yeah! Yet the new media landscape and its relentless pressures actually mean that politicians should focus more on strategy, less on the day to day, minute to minute. Angela Merkel is technically not a great communicator, if judged by Clinton's charisma, Obama's rhetoric, Blair's delivery of a message, and Thatcher's sense of drama. But say Merkel's name and you know who and what she is. That is effective strategic communication over time. Too many respond to this chaotic anarchic new media landscape by being tactical. The right approach is to focus ever more sharply on strategy, make the weather rather than just respond to the squalls.

Journalism has been defined recently by its own scandals, and at times a moral depravity in which all that matters is the story, true or false, no matter how it is got. The profession has to regain its place as a recognised and respected source of inquiry, a mechanism of accountability, and a watchdog for protecting the public interest. It will take time. But I think, provided a new generation comes through that does have moral codes and understand the mistakes of this fading generation, then it can.

The relationship between state and media will never be perfect, and nor should it. But I continue to see grounds for optimism. This is because change is being driven by people that are more media savvy and fed up with what they get served up. There will eventually be a new and better system of regulation, serving the public not press or politics. The Murdoch-Dacre generation is fading out, and a new generation is eroding their power and influence, democratising our media in the process. The force of the media age, and above all the deadline-destroying 24 hour news channels and the border-destroying Internet, have brought changes which are difficult for the old politicians and journalists to handle. Nonetheless, however painfully, both are beginning to adapt. This will happen best if there is clear understanding of the different jobs they do, and mutual respect for that difference. That is what was eroded when 'spin' became a catch all term of abuse for all communication. It is time that a bit of mutual respect and understanding of differing responsibilities returned. The press should see that the proposed new system of regulation is not the menace they claim, and recognise that amid the threats of technological change are huge opportunities too. And if politicians can be more not less strategic, focused on long term challenges and ignoring the day to day noise, this would improve public debate more quickly than they might imagine.

ARABELLA  
MILLBANK

RESTORE  
THE  
SONG-STOCK

A REVIEW OF  
*NIGHT OFFICE*

BY SIMON JARVIS

ENITHARMON PRESS, 2013

There can be no partial engagement in the challenging vigil Simon Jarvis has set for his reader in *Night Office*, an extraordinary 7,000 lines which is the first to appear in a projected five volumes. Here the tone is sometimes exhaustingly “monomaniac and monochrome” as the poet himself confesses. A man sits wakeful in a bedroom for an eight-hour night, writing continuously by an *ottava rima* which moves through a myriad pitches recording all that can be recovered of his inner thought and experience. This cell-like containment is so complete that the verse can only develop from the minutest external stimulæ provided by the barely-open window and the sounds of the night.

The limits are extreme; despite the eight-line tetrameter stanzas of a form known from its inception for its use in epic, the strictly narrative ‘events’ of the real frame of the poem are sparse indeed. Snow falls and turns to rain, the headlights of cars pass, a car-alarm sounds, bells chime the hours, the poet turns a figure of Christ to face the street. Colour is rare, even the recurrent figure of a mystic rose associated with passion and incarnation is a pale grey variety, the ‘Aschermittwoch, 1955’. The east-facing priest standing at the chill edge of the men for whom he offers is metaphorized as the emperor penguin, shuffling to the edge of the colony to take the blast of the cold. From the white snow against the night we blossom and blossom but almost exclusively in greyscale: snow against night, a chequered chessboard, photography, the page, and words themselves. The limits are extreme in a quite opposite sense; the poem’s “rich yet monochrome design” delineates the deepest buried contours of the soul’s experience and knowledge, renarrating at times swathes of salvation history, taking us from incarnation to second coming, and in spite of this never—strictly—leaving the prompts of the room just as it does not exceed the limits of its form.

Jarvis’ epigraph is taken from an interview with the Catholic phenomenologist Michel Henry. Speaking of his time as a member of the *maquis*, the rural guerilla bands of the French Resistance, Henry describes these strictures of the secret and the clandestinité of his experience as those by which the true essence of life began to reveal itself. The dedication of the book is to “the shade of” the Russian *émigré* poet V. F. (Vladislav Felitsianovich) Khodasevich, whose deliberate classicism, anachronistic alongside Russian modernism, was equally a refusal of the Soviet regime. These figures of exploratory, transformative, self-imposed ‘exile’ are clearly correspondence points for Jarvis. The framework of *Night Office* is also an exploration of Khodasevich’s *Balada* in which the poet, confined to the artificial day of an electrically-lit room, begins to enounce a transporting verse until finally with the gift of a “heavy lyre” he is transmuted in being and space until “On the smooth black cliffs/Orpheus plants his feet”. Of course this is Orpheus of the underworld, given the power to go down to and even to recall the dead.

These limits signify no reduction to the unitary, the narrow or the individual. *Night Office* is a liturgical text in many senses, but one that identifies itself as both enunciated and enunciative. A certain ‘death of the author’ is announced in the first stanza: “Every last person in this book is dead. Including me/I’m speaking to you through my author/he through me”. The poet weaves within a sacred tradition, speaking through the many voices of the dead. The given deposit holds living spirits refusing a neutral vacuum of self-experience. This is of course what the very prosody of the poem must already tell us: the eight-line stanzas of six alternating rhymed lines of tetrameter, tightened by a couplet, hark back to Byron’s *Don Juan* in the English tradition and eventually to Boccaccio, Ariosto, and, of course, to Tasso. This is then a new inhabitation of an ancient, epic, and narrative form to a surprising end: to enact a rite, a lyrical devotional address, an intense concentration of lived religious experience, and an often bitter descant on the dark side of modern politics, economics, and society. It is also enunciative, as lyric and prayer, a poem which moreover, like a liturgical text and rubric, invites its performance, the participating worshipper without whom the verse cannot live, unless we “read/and resurrect each print-sepulchred creed”.

Like Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*—which its insistent metrics and its vigil of prayer and memorialization echo—this is a great theological poem. Its holiness is never of the merely comforting or the dully didactic character those skeptical of Jarvis’ credal verse might unthinkingly suspect. Rather here is an eye constantly losing sight of the horizon of faith to which it aims, and yet never abandoning its worship, which becomes a very substance of life, connatural—like the involuntary cross the hands make as a gesture of protection “and thus in public secretly confess”. Doubt is forbidden its simplistically negative sense, as so much in our ideas of the negative is confounded by this verse experiment. From the outset the condition of absence is framed as continuous with that of belief, as a necessary part of the need to return to the God from which all distance is measured. Here, in the night, we are certainly among things of the dark: we are ‘situated’ within salvation history after the Ascension, renarrated in the mysterious environment of a station platform in some totalitarian state from which a figure, an X, is leaving by train. The disciples themselves were the first bereaved, the first to doubt and deny. A fear of perfectly lawless law, historical and current, haunts Jarvis’ poem alongside a disgust for the meaningless exchange to which capitalism reduces value. In a Bulgakov-like scene Jarvis identifies the twelve with the artists and poets of Bolshevik Russia. Liturgy’s discipline carries the poet through all these moments, and here it is *Night Office* as duty, *officium*, *leitourgia* in its Greek sense of due service: to the departed, to God, to society, to oneself, all projected onto the duty of an artist to his art, a poet to his form.

At the launch of *Night Office*, modestly held in a Methodist Church in the middle of London’s ‘bad city’, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, current Master of Magdalene and a poet in his own right, was united in conversation with Simon Jarvis, Gorley Putt Professor of Poetry and Poetics here at Cambridge. Jarvis and Williams concurred in identifying an affinity in the plight of poetry and the Church, both of which are having their status reduced to the most limited sense of repositories of memory and tradition, ‘ye olde’ institutions to be dealt with by English Heritage. Jarvis appears at times to see the calling of poetry to correspond strongly to that of priest and liturgy; “Restore the song-stock; fund the mystagog!” he cries, analogising and overlapping the liturgical tradition and the poetical. He speaks of poetic calling in priestly language: “dons the ephod”, the breastplate-vestment of the Old Testament priest or oracle, to enunciate an effectual language. Moving, as a priest’s voice does, amongst ancient and pre-inhabited meaning, Jarvis presents it freshly and anew. The calling to stand, like the emperor penguin, at the edge of the cold is also to be, as the poet is at the close “embellished on the lip of day”, closest to the very dawn itself as he looks into the east. Jarvis revoices tenets in some extraordinary ways, reminding us that he believes poetry is “no alibi for weak theology”. These can be very dark. Extraordinary sections

in this wintry, Adventine poem cover much of the traditional ground of the Four Last Things, taking the poet down to hell and into Judgment. At one point this vigil is referred to the orthodox *mesonyktikon*, where the night office is particularly that of eschatologically awaiting wakefulness. Its *troparion* of the Bridegroom is taken up to paint these lucubrations as those of the faithful virgin. The possibility of properly negative, absolute judgment or damnation haunts, and is not refused, by the poem:

at which this sorry this this & this & this  
meet you yourself as your beloved's right  
clear irreversible refusal, set  
into that helpless falling out of love  
with no past, future, forward, back, above

There are also explicit reimaginings of the Incarnation, Visitation, Ascension, Pentecost, Last Judgment—but, we note, not quite Crucifixion. Here the very limits of the poem are its great gift, as the most sacred and mysterious is birthed from the most mundane. The baby's cry, fashioned first from the sound of the insistent alarm-peal of the car-alarm gains fuller treatment near the close. In some relation to George Eliot's "roar which lies on the other side of silence", the vast humanity of this one unanswerable appeal is the strongest account of Christ's call into charity for Jarvis. In its infant-pain we encounter the necessary relationship between incarnation and passion, entirely anew.

There is much exploration here, as we might expect in a poem set in black and white, of negation. Forever—almost interminably—Jarvis returns to the paradox of the deletion of instantiation: each time the poet works a word or line there is some deletion of meaning in its full aspect. The poem opens with the vivid image of Joycean falling snow against the dark. These flakes stand here for both the souls and their obliteration, both words and their negation. The poet's primal matter is this word-lay, upon which he puts tracks on a never empty, always already deleted page, 'the blanked words field':

the blanked word's field  
calls for that harrow by which it is seeded  
with cuts, abrasions, till some furrow yield  
that seen leaf which had otherwise receded  
quite from the world.

This is a complex, negatively-expressed, account of all *poesis*, one used elsewhere for the Church's building up "ruins of ruins". At the same time Jarvis also prises apart the whole notion of a *via negativa*. There is of course an actual absence of the 'secret name'—that of Jesus, Christ, God—to which all verse refers as its one true judge, and yet may not contain. Yet despite acknowledging something of the apophatic, naming

When Robert Neer says that napalm is American, indeed, organises an entire "biography" of the weapon around this connection, he means more than that napalm was an American invention as, say, the atom bomb was. Perhaps the atom bomb, having been invented by the United States and used in war by them alone, remains theirs in some significant, ineradicable sense; but its history is also the history of the Soviet Union, of China, of India, of Pakistan, Israel, Britain, France: its logic, once the global logic of the Cold War, the new illogic of rogue theocracies and isolated necrocracies. What Neer means to say is that napalm's history is America's much more exclusively and extensively. America did not simply invent napalm and go on to use more of it than anybody else; rather, the very contours of their respective histories are shared. Moreover, the connection between them has become cultural and commonplace, not only through the Vietnam War, but also through innumerable songs, films, books, pop-cultural references — even a brand of beauty products. The association is so strong that few would ever think of Argentina (the Falklands), or Nigeria (the Biafra War), or Greece (its civil war), when they hear the word "napalm"; yet these countries, and many more, used it. "I love the smell of napalm in the morning" — who would have said these words but an American, the aptly named Colonel Kilgore? Created in World War II, consolidated in Korea, consummated most spectacularly in Vietnam, the napalm-America connection is immediate and indelible. Over thirty years, napalm pledged its allegiance by falling from the sky in the hundreds of thousands of tons; it "has burned more people, across more of the earth's surface and over a longer period of time, in the name of the United States than in that of any other country."

Napalm's biography is ordered as a descending cycle of three stages, *Hero: Soldier: Patria*. We begin, after a short prologue, on Independence Day 1942, on Harvard's flooded football field. Although napalm is now so reviled it can't even be used to dispose of slaughtered livestock at home (and yet, rebranded and remixed as the Mark 77 Firebomb, it can still be used to dispose of unslaughtered Iraqis), foremost in the mind of one particular man on that July morning is its immense potential as an all-purpose wonder-weapon. Louis Fieser, Harvard's Sheldon Emery Professor of Organic Chemistry, has rigged up a 70lb prototype bomb on an island in the lake, the idea of a gel-based incendiary having come to him while investigating mysterious explosions at a DuPont paint factory. The bomb is detonated: napalm passes its first test with *flying col...* — I mean, passes

of the not, Jarvis' continuous return to the register in nature and culture of its deepest truth finally allows for real recovery by his interest in the inverse.

Jarvis has already written, although not published, what sounds like a point of both counterbalance and correspondence to this volume, to be called *Jerusalem Deleted*. As outward as this book is inward, this Jarvis describes as a pilgrimage across some post-disaster England of the future. Already in *Night Office* we have inklings of directions such a vision might take. Even the book's cover image, 'Chicago Landscape no. 190', is itself a microcosm of this. Vast paired columns we assume to support a flyover-to-be stand in the desert of an undifferentiated midwest, a prophetic image of a construction that is not yet ruined.

In such a sessionary, sombre, even arid poem—a "tundra" as Jarvis himself describes its boundless landscape—engagement sometimes seems to become a mode more akin to survival or traverse, with the mind or soul lacking or inadequate to such intensity. And yet this is something the form's own quality both allows and validates. As with the experience of being worked through by a liturgical rite, it is not always the mind, but sometimes only the senses which are engaged: in the counterpoised rhythm of a line, in the repetition of a rhyme. In this immensely long internal monologue, breaking through to prayer, we are relied upon to find 'duty' in our task as reader, an *officium* which we are assured corresponds in its faithfulness to that of our author's as we await beauty's breaking-through.

With this expectation of the day, this is a poem we can legitimately hope to end even if, caught in the beauty of its melancholia, we might join in Jarvis' epithalamion to night:

Day, break from breaking: I am buried sweet  
right in the lap of darkness [...]

It is nonetheless Hopkins' 'Gods Grandeur' and his "morning at the brown brink eastward" which is murmuring round the edges of Jarvis' deletions as the poem draws towards dawn and the positive. As surely as the eschaton, or here rather more a kind of spell-breaking verse departure, already setting its counterpoise and question against the devotion to verse, the day does come.

# CHARLES CORNISH - DALE "STEINBECK'S SUPER BALLS"

A REVIEW OF  
*NAPALM: AN AMERICAN  
BIOGRAPHY*

BY ROBERT M. NEER

HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
PRESS, 2013

its first test spectacularly.

Napalm, which is essentially gelled petrol, does exactly what “the best incendiaries do”, Neer tells us: “ignite easily, burn hot, and stay close to their targets.” And it’s among the very best of a very bad bunch. Exploding into great clumps of gel, it burns at well in excess of 1000°C, for anything up to ten minutes. This molten gel is nearly impossible to extinguish, and sticks to almost any surface: to skin, with horrifying effects, burning through muscle to bone (only white phosphorus, with its homely nickname “Willie Pete”, has worse effects, burning even through bone); to other surfaces — say, the wood-and-paper buildings of Tokyo — with equally horrifying effects, causing rapidly spreading fires and releasing massive volumes of toxic carbon monoxide (on this basis some would later call for napalm to be banned as a chemical, not an incendiary, weapon). The original napalm was a mixture of naphthenic acid, from crude oil, and palmitic acid, from coconut oil: *na*-palm. Napalm-B or “Super Napalm”, which was developed later during the Korean War, is in fact a misnomer: it is a mixture of benzene, gasoline and polystyrene, with an initiating agent (usually white phosphorus), and so contains neither *na*- nor *-palm* — not that you’d be able to tell.

The research that had led to Fieser’s success, and that would follow, was conducted under the auspices of the incipient military-industrial complex, and led by the National Defense Research Committee under Vannevar Bush (who co-founded Raytheon, now a manufacturer of drones, among other things). Months of testing and development took place: a delivery system was created, the chemical mix perfected. Napalm was to see its first combat use in Sicily, in August 1943. Once commanders couldn’t get enough of it, nor could the troops — in flamethrowers, “Satan” flamethrower-tanks and bombs. Like its ancestors Greek Fire and naphtha, napalm is so effective because it is as terrifying as destructive: enemies are just as likely to surrender or flee at the mere prospect of its being used as to fight on and risk being roasted alive.

And when the Americans came to need terror the most, when the goal in the later stages of the Pacific campaign was to escape the hellish attrition of island-hopping and break the Japanese will to resist, a whole ocean of napalm was behind them. On the night of March 9, 1945 the firebombing of cities on the Japanese mainland began. Tokyo was the first target. In a single hour, 690, 000 pounds of napalm were dropped on the city. The ensuing firestorm was biblical in its ferocity, creating huge thermal updrafts which lifted the smell of burning flesh and the screams of the dying and wounded to the bombers flying low, at 5,000 feet. 87, 793 Japanese died; 40, 918 were wounded; 267, 171 buildings were destroyed; a million were left homeless. “Whatever the justification,” remembered one GI, “we’d become savages too.” By the war’s end, 42% of Japan’s industrial area had been razed and 330, 000 civilians had been killed. “The Bomb got the press, but napalm did the work.”

But it was in the skies over Vietnam that napalm’s descent from “No.1 weapon in Korea” (in the words of a 1950 *New York Herald Tribune* headline) to the obloquy of indiscriminate child-killer really began. In the intervening twenty years after World War II, napalm had been further perfected and used to devastating effect in the Korean War; distributed to American clients in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East; used by the declining colonial powers — Britain, France, Portugal — against their colonies; and, when those colonies became former colonies, used by them themselves. Yet nothing, not even the pitiless burning of Tokyo or Pyongyang, could compare to what was about to be unleashed. Between 1963 and 1973, as part of its aerial bombardment of Indochina — *8 million tons of bombs* — America dropped 388, 000 tons of napalm. It would be immortalised by the Pulitzer-winning photo “The Terror of War”, taken in 1972 during the Battle of Trang Bang, in which children, including the girl Kim Phúc, flee naked and covered in napalm flee from their burning village. In those ten years, in which unknown numbers were killed and mutilated by napalm, a vast and diffuse network of local, national and international activists, journalists, intellectuals, academics, napalm victims, doctors, humanitarian organisations, and representatives from most of the world’s countries, including the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries, club together against the United States, the Vietnam War, and napalm’s part in it. Public letters of protest were written by eminent intellectuals; napalm’s appalling effects were shown in full-colour articles in American magazines; protests were held at American universities, and outside the premises of corporations involved in napalm manufacture; objections and resolutions were raised at the UN; international conferences on incendiary weapons were organised: and America’s claims of military necessity were repeatedly queried and ultimately quashed — all of which combined, in the aftermath of America’s defeat, to prepare the

way for 1979’s UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, whose Protocol III made the use of incendiary weapons against civilian populations a war crime. Napalm remains legal, and the US agreed to Protocol III (with certain exemptions which call into question its validity) only four years ago; Obama signed it into effect, with zero fanfare, on his first day in office.

The cultural and symbolic associations of napalm occupy the final segment of the book, together with a history of the legal effort to regulate incendiary weapons, from the first Geneva Convention of 1863 to Protocol III and beyond. Symbols, of course, rarely have a single meaning, and if during Vietnam and in the following decades the dominant meaning was that “napalm was cruel, lamentably American and a metaphor for defeat in Vietnam”, it was not the only one: presumably nobody other than John Mayer himself was injured by Jessica Simpson’s onslaught of “sexual napalm”, nor was anybody harmed by the use of Napalm Orange hair dye or Avant’s Napalm™ dietary supplement, a “unique and ‘explosive’ mixture of ingredients that is sure to help you make quick work of the enemy fat cells dug in deep on the battlefield of your body”. Perhaps Neer exaggerates in calling napalm “the weapon that dare not speak its name” (it continues to be used, most recently in Syria, or so it is alleged), but hardly. In the US napalm as “napalm” is too controversial even to be transported and disposed of; remaining supplies must rot where they sit.

Its disgrace secure, never to be used as it once was, napalm is without chance of redemption. But not the most famous of its victims, the aforementioned Kim Phúc, whose inspirational story book-ends napalm’s and lends the biography perhaps the comforting resolution of a morality tale it would not otherwise have had (and which, perhaps, we shouldn’t allow it, especially in light of the recent nerve gas attack in Syria which may have left hundreds of children injured or dead). After extensive surgery to repair the damage caused by the weapon, Kim emigrated to Canada, where she is now a UN ambassador, having founded an organisation to help child victims of war. “Faith and forgiveness”, she says, “are much more powerful than napalm could ever be.”

Elegantly written and meticulously researched, Neer’s book is full of those incidental details and fascinating digressions which, when handled properly, greatly enhance any biography, however unconventional. We learn how researchers, looking to construct perfect replicas of Japanese villages for napalm-testing, scoured the Pacific US and Hawaii requisitioning straw tatami mats from Japanese-American homes and temples; how one Dr Lytle Adams planned to create a kamikaze fleet of napalm-bats against the Japanese, a plan which failed only when its funding was suddenly cut, without explanation, a year before the war’s end; how, during Vietnam, the writer John Steinbeck, a great napalm enthusiast and an inveterate toady, wrote to Robert McNamara’s aide to suggest the production of “Steinbeck super-balls”, baseball-like napalm grenades whose use would be made all the more effective because, in his words, “there isn’t an American over 13 who can’t peg a baseball from infield to home plate with accuracy.” The main protagonists are described in telling, sometimes darkly humorous, detail. Of Curtis Emerson LeMay, the fearsome amoralist and orchestrator of the napalm-death of Japanese cities, we learn that as a child he “hunted sparrows with a BB gun and sold them to an elderly neighbour with a hungry cat at five cents a bird.” As Theodor Adorno once wondered whether there was a direct line from the slingshot to the atom bomb, so are we left wondering if there is another from the BB gun to the napalm bomb.

The sense that the development and deployment of a weapon, as well as its final (near-) defeat, are subject as much to grand designs of strategy as to expediency and the contingencies of personal character — not to mention changing culture, demographics, and so many other factors — is conveyed powerfully and convincingly. Beside Neer’s skill in writing the book, we surely have its central conceit, a “biography” of an individual weapon, to thank for this. It is a welcome anthropomorphism, because objects, as any anthropologist will tell you, have characters and histories of their own, acting as well as being acted upon. Essentially, Neer does for napalm what Timothy Mitchell does for oil, and through it global politics and democracy, in his recent book *Carbon Democracy*. Like Mitchell, Neer has shown us a complex and provocative way of thinking about the embroilment of objects in history. The flow of oil: democracy. The smell of napalm: America’s (and so the world’s) recent history. Just follow your nose — if you can bear the stink.

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