

cross currents in culture ●

# variant

number 33 winter 2008 free

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and existing institutions.

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The  
test of  
democracy  
is  
freedom of  
criticism

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# Comment

## Variant banned!

The Summer issue of *Variant* mapped the breakneck privatisation that resulted in the creation of Culture and Sport Glasgow (CSG). It also detailed the business interests of the board members of the twin companies which took over the management of culture and sport from Glasgow City Council. 'The New Bohemia' by Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt did not set out to be particularly controversial. Rather, in analysing how consolidated private interests now operate, it was pursuing the basic principle of good journalism – investigation. CSG's immediate response was to threaten *Variant* with legal action, accusing the article of supplying "inaccuracies and potentially defamatory statements". Perhaps most worryingly, CSG removed the edition from the cultural venues it now controls. CSG had not in fact put the article to any legal scrutiny and, as a subsequent list of their grievances showed, the objections were largely trivial and easily rebutted by evidence available in the public domain. This effort to regulate *Variant's* content came from CSG's PR officer, James Doherty, and leaned heavily on his rejection of previous newspaper articles as reliable source material. Taken together with CSG's banning of *Variant*, this attack on journalism is especially worrying as Doherty is currently President of the National Union of Journalists. (Please see online for a fuller account. *Variant* also has three unacknowledged Freedom of Information requests with CSG, casting doubt on its commitment to public accountability.)

Significantly, however, none of CSG's objections related to the main thrust of the article, namely, the harnessing of the city's culture to tourism and regeneration agendas and the intrusion of private interests into what was previously a public sector domain.

The fact that this new private company seems not to prize freedom of expression very highly and acted quickly to stamp out freedom of communication *should* set alarm bells ringing amongst the city's creative communities. Intra-institutional press and marketing departments operated to hold a political line through various control techniques, only one of which was censorship. CSG's disproportionate reaction to criticism seems designed to distract from, and suppress, questions about the basic premises on which culture is being privatised and the restrictions inherent within that process.

One point raised in 'The New Bohemia' is particularly pertinent given recent developments in Scotland, namely the relationship between the local manoeuvrings of CSG and the cultural reappraisals being undertaken at a national level. Most significant here is the proposed creation of Creative Scotland, a merger of the public bodies, the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, into a private company.

When Jack McConnell was First Minister of Scotland, 'Culture' was made a priority. His wife, Bridget McConnell, then at Glasgow City Council, is now head of CSG. A Cultural Commission was launched in 2004 to undertake a "thorough" review of cultural provision over a one-year period, paving the way for its radical overhaul as part of "a generational opportunity – to look seriously and maturely at our culture and decide the framework for its support in the future."

It was widely reported at the time of the Cultural Commission that Bridget McConnell wished to exert some influence over the process, with fears being expressed that the Commission was a thinly veiled bid to axe the Scottish Arts Council.

In September 2008, the SNP-led Scottish Government announced that it would be following the recommendations of the Labour-led Commission to set up Creative Scotland, a private company limited by guarantee, as a replacement for the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, to pursue a "creative industries" agenda.

## Creative Scotland : Shake 'n' Bake

If Creative Scotland represents the victory of private managerialism over culture, with CSG as its corporate precedent, it is worth recalling that the Cultural Commission grew out of the National Cultural Strategy, published in 2000, which placed the creative industries centre stage. Former Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport, Frank McAveety, took up this theme in the Cultural Policy Statement which launched the Commission. This considered "how to use public spend to lever growth in the cultural and creative industries", whilst framing creativity in entrepreneurial terms aimed at giving Scotland a "competitive edge".

Predating the Cultural Commission by four years, a Joint Implementation Group had been set up with the National Cultural Strategy to realise its strategic objectives, with James Boyle attending the inaugural meeting in his capacity as Chair of the Scottish Arts Council. The Group was later informed of a letter, dated 18 December 2002, from Bridget McConnell, proposing a national review of local government cultural and leisure services. Mike Watson, Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport at that time, set up separate meetings with representatives of the creative industries and at its last meeting the Group was asked to consider a paper arising from this forum: "In particular,

## Why is the Scottish Government ploughing ahead with an already rejected privatisation of culture in Scotland: Creative Scotland?

comments were invited on the proposition for an agency 'Creative Scotland', combing [sic] a number of responsibilities currently residing with a number of different agencies." That the creation of the hybrid Creative Scotland was mooted in January 2003, well in advance of the Cultural Commission, makes a mockery of the subsequent consultancy which cost the Scottish taxpayer £487,000 and robbed the arts communities of the valuable time they took to respond. Like so many consultative efforts, the basic terms were highly questionable, and the outcome a betrayal of the public.

## Disinvestment : Scotland PLC syndrome

Addressing the AGM of the Scottish Artists' Union in September 2008, MP and SNP Culture spokesperson, Pete Wishart, argued there was "consultation fatigue" and the need to move on from "sterile structural debate" to justify the subsequent lack of public discussion surrounding the rush to form Creative Scotland following its initial parliamentary rejection. But the Bill to form Creative Scotland didn't fail because of politics, but because the Scottish Government could not answer basic questions about the cost, function and purpose of the new body. Evidently, there is continued uncertainty about the powers, status and responsibilities of Creative Scotland. However, the Government seems determined to escape the sort of critical scrutiny that led to the

Bill being previously rejected. The formation of Creative Scotland is now being smuggled through as part of the Public Services Reform Bill, itself a disinvestment in public services set to cut the number of public bodies by 25% by 2011.

Culture Minister, Linda Fabiani, recently insisted of Creative Scotland: "We all want to get this up and running." After all the froth about cultural entitlements and rights, it is seemingly just a question of who pays the estimated privatisation costs of £7m to form Creative Scotland and the rest will take care of itself. In truth, this apparent urgency conceals a major ideological fault line between public and private provision in Scotland. And it is likely the £7m projected transition costs will pale into insignificance compared to the inevitable cost of running an organisation on a business model with staff recruited on a competitive market, rather than public service, basis.

This is a significant moment in arts organising in Scotland, marking a fundamental shift from public investment, towards the outright economic instrumentalisation of Culture by lashing it to an explicit agenda of neoliberal reform. The Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB) model of the Scottish Arts Council was always problematic, as frequently documented in the pages of *Variant*. But it is the whole ethos of turning provision away from a public body to set up a limited company and what this portends that needs to be questioned. In rewriting the very idea of public funding for the arts just what formal procedures for the assessment of Private Public Partnerships have there been? What independent research has been carried out and what guarantees are there that private provision will be cheaper than the existing model of public procurement for the same level of outcomes, not to mention more democratically accountable to its community base? At a time when the effects of marketisation could not be more discredited, what we are witnessing is a renewed wave of neoliberal restructuring with no real opposition of any substance from any quarter. The Scottish media is complicit in its silence.

Although we are told that the company "will [also] be given a 'statutory' function", this is probably mainly to ensure the retention of Lottery Fund distribution. Rhetoric aside, a company has obligations to deliver according to its memorandum of association, nothing else. What we have been told is that the company will be created, its board and CEO appointed and that it will then be left to determine its own functions. It will not be constituted as a charitable body. Alex Salmond, interviewed in *Total Politics* magazine, recently stated: "One of the reasons Scotland didn't take to Lady Thatcher was because of that [not having a strong social conscience]. We didn't mind the economic side so much. But we didn't like the social side at all." Rather than addressing these issues directly, which means above all a declaration of commitment to the public funding of the arts, they are simply being swept under the carpet. Is it because Salmond fears a backlash against the PLC syndrome? Just why is the Scottish Government ploughing ahead with an already rejected privatisation of contemporary culture in Scotland?

## Creative Industries : Assault on Culture

Details remain hazy, but what we've been told so far is that Creative Scotland will receive the £50m grant in aid of the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen. The Scottish Government announced an "additional" £5m in June for an Innovation Fund to support Creative Scotland over its first two years – a figure matching inflation. An estimated £100,000 currently provided by Scottish Enterprise to the Cultural Enterprise Office would also transfer to Creative Scotland as would its enterprise role.

Fabiani has said: "If formed, Creative Scotland

will add to the range of funding sources available to artists and creative practitioners. As well as grants, it will develop a wider portfolio of funding methods including loans and investments. ... Creative Scotland will offer specialised advice and information services for creative enterprises”.

In fact, rather than “consultation fatigue”, there has been significant activity behind the scenes to define Creative Scotland’s function, not least in the activities of the Creative Industries Working Group – a body comprised almost entirely of NDPB enterprise agencies – and a “Think Tank” facilitated by John Knell, Strategic Advisor to the Creative Scotland Transition Project.

Knell is the “lead investigator on a new £80k research project funded by NESTA [National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts] exploring interdisciplinary innovation”. Knell, joining Demos’s Charles Leadbeater, also wrote a treatise for Arts Council England’s ‘The 21st century programme’ on “organisational development”, “intended to influence [ACE] thinking and to help develop new practice.” Coincidentally, Knell was an “expert speaker” invited to contribute to the ‘Scotland: Creative Nation, Cultural Summit’ in February 2008, a three-day affair on the development of Creative Scotland. Leadbeater made an appearance in March 2008 at Culture & Sport Glasgow’s ‘Aye Write!’ festival to plug his new book ‘We-Think: the Power of Mass Creativity’, and appeared again as a keynote lecturer at Engage Scotland’s flatteringly titled ‘What do We-Think?’ conference in September. The reformers of Arts Council England have certainly been preparing the ground in Scotland!

But what is clear is that the Highlands and Islands Enterprise model of business support for creative enterprises, and collaborations with NESTA, are explicitly promoted. (NESTA was “set up with Lottery funding to help people turn bright ideas into products, services or techniques with social and commercial benefit”, and advocates its retention of patent rights for intellectual property resulting from publicly funded work and the wider exploitation of IPR.) In fact, NESTA’s definition of creative economy is lifted wholesale. The approach to culture, as might be expected, is one of “integrating cultural policy and economic concerns” and of fostering “a culture of informed risk”. Unambiguously: “Public support must therefore aim to increase levels of creative economy activity, in terms of enterprise and business model formation, and work at all times to ensure that an increased rate of creative ideation in Scotland leads to a tangible increase in the creative economy’s contribution to Scotland’s economic success.”

Rather than funding cultural producers, it seems determined to spawn a committee of vultures to service “creatives”. Producers will be the object for exploitation, leading to more of the vacuous training and development agendas artists are already familiar with. We have just discovered that the Scottish Arts Council has been tasked with exploring the replacement of artists’ grants with loans – a good job the Scottish financial sector is in sufficiently rude health! The Creative Scotland Taskforce’s Ray Macfarlane – Senior Director of Corporate Banking at Bank of Scotland before HBOS was rescued by Lloyds-TSB – may now have more time on her hands to advise. You would have to be naïve, reckless, or set to make a killing out of the additional financialisation of public services to contemplate throwing cultural provision, wholesale, to market precarity right now, given its thoroughly discredited and toxic state.

But then ‘The New Bohemia’ article warned of worrying similarities emerging between Glasgow’s Trongate 103 “cultural quarter” development and the demise of the Lottery-funded Lux Centre in London. It now comes to light that additional £1,500 service charges for each tenant have magically appeared for the upkeep of “communal” spaces; these charges may

well be bankrupting for some, especially when compounded by the fact that VAT is for the first time being introduced on rents, to say nothing of the five years lease time-bomb. As *Mute* magazine said of Lux, this too looks set to be another “instance of public money subsidising private gain in which the alibi of service rapidly succumbs to mismanagement and congenital unviability”.

Arts & Business (who court “creative partnerships between business and the arts”) lost a third of its grant in the last round of Arts Council England cuts, but didn’t want this to be seen as a “vote of no-confidence in business”. In Scotland, corporate welfare is getting a much softer ride. Arts & Business is inviting “organisations who deliver arts activity to make a pitch for sponsorship at a Dragons’ Den-style event”. The business sponsors (at £7,500 a time) and presumably judges, are Elphinstone, of Leith gentrification; ScottishPower, who just increased gas prices by a massive 34%; and Scottish Widows, who were recently accused of miss-selling pensions. “Three successful organisations will receive £15,000 each towards arts projects which help to divert young people (10-19 year olds) from becoming involved with crime and anti-social behaviour.” Arts & Business is in receipt of public funding of £600,000 over two years from the Proceeds of Crime initiative where “seized money and goods from crime are invested in community projects aimed at alleviating the effects of crime”. Arts & Business is explicit: “Engaging with the arts is a proven way for business to promote their services and goods.”

On the rescue takeover of HBOS by Lloyds-TSB, the *Guardian* reported that:

“Edinburgh’s arts scene also faces a period of unexpected austerity. Both HBOS and Lloyds-TSB – a bank itself created by the merger of Lloyds with another Scottish financial institution, the Trustee Savings Bank – are ‘essential players’ in sponsoring the city’s international festival, theatre and art galleries. The fear is that Lloyds-Halifax will slash its arts funding in parallel with its branches. ‘The festival will be concerned because the contribution from both banks is significant’, said one senior figure in Edinburgh’s arts scene.”

If the “arms-length principle” is maintained, as claimed, then what guarantees are there that Creative Scotland will support artists’ organisations that do not subscribe to the financialisation of culture? A private company is far less able to fully represent the public interest and properly protect our human rights in the cultural field.

“Sterile structural debates” are anything but sterile – they are about holding the Scottish Government to account.

## Financial Mania & Systemic Risk

For the past decade and a half we have seen an unprecedented financialisation of the economy resulting from deregulation and neoliberalisation, and the spread of privatisation to previously unaffected areas. The increasing hegemony of this myopic economic outlook poses the single greatest threat to free expression and to liberal society today. These are the systemic factors which are poised to bear down upon free speech and meaningful cultural communication.

Corporations are legally mandated to do just one thing: make money. Creative Scotland, if allowed to go ahead, would mean the infiltration of our very speech and thought by the economic – that is, economically determined values and judgments about worth and appropriateness. But we are told by SNP Culture spokesman, Pete Wishart, that there is no alternative to the financial modelling of culture.

One would hope that the failed orthodoxy of the market as god is over, as flagrantly demonstrated by the ongoing financial global meltdown. It is evidently massively unstable, and it has come unstuck in a way that represents a woeful failure of institutional politics. The collapse of finance capital is not a blip – not when the most capitalist US administration ever decides to nationalise the two largest financial institutions the world has ever known. It is a significant warning.

It is time to stop corporate privilege, deregulation and privatisation of public services and to reflect on the kind of society we have become, and on the kind of society we want to be. It is time to dispel the myth that there is no alternative to this grossly unfair economic model. As the wheels come off the capitalist bandwagon, what further evidence is needed?



# Labour History Resurgent?

## Terry Brotherstone

**Live Working or Die Fighting:  
how the working class went global**

Paul Mason, Vintage paperback, London, 2008

A paperback edition of Paul Mason's 'Live Working or Die Fighting: how the working class went global' is most welcome. More accessibly than anything else I know, it offers a way forward for labour historians still largely locked in an agenda established in the 1960s – when E. P. Thompson inspired a generation with his 'The Making of the English Working Class' and his call for "History from Below". When Mason's book was first published in 2007, *The Guardian* plugged it narrowly as, "required reading for the Seattle brigade". It is that, but the book also deserves serious attention from those who think they already know all that matters about labour history. By a journalist rather than by a professional historian, it is both readable and timely. The fact that the author was, and is, a BBC *Newsnight* economics commentator perhaps limits his ability to draw the theoretical and political conclusions his work points to. But that needn't stop others from doing so.

When the book first appeared, Mason was interviewed by former sociology professor, Laurie Taylor, for Radio 4's *Thinking Allowed* programme.

A cacophony of recorded noise introduced the show: the sound of protesting textile workers in Bangladesh, explained Taylor – the sort of sound we can expect to hear more frequently as workers in newly industrialising areas of the world organise to fight for their rights. Could it be, Taylor asked, that Asia, Latin America and Africa in the 21st century might become like 19th century Europe, with workers developing a similar trade union movement? This question, a critical one, was prompted by the form of Mason's book.

It has eleven main chapters, all of which begin with one of the author's early 21st century journalistic encounters with workers in different corners of

the world. Each of these accounts is juxtaposed with a well-researched retelling of an episode from the history of the European or American workers' movement. The situation of Chinese sweatshop workers in 2003 leads into an account of the 1819 Peterloo massacre (at St Peter's Fields, Manchester, four years after the battle of Waterloo). Then Indian textile workers in 2005 introduce the story of the 1831 Lyon silk workers' revolt. The third chapter time-travels from Nigerian slum-dwellers in 2005 back to the Paris Commune; and the fourth translates the reader from the struggle of Iraqi oil workers in 2006 to episodes in the US labour-movement history of the 1870s and 1880s. Interviews with Canary Wharf immigrant cleaners, organising for trade-union recognition in 2004, head up an account of the heyday of international syndicalism; and Indian car workers Mason encountered a year later are paired with the emergent Chinese workers' movement of the 1920s. The author then turns to Latin America, which he visited at various times between 2003 and 2006, giving an account of the Bolivian neighbourhood risings and comparing them to the events in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. Finally, the experiences of the Argentine working class prompt an account of movements for workers control in Italy, France and the USA in the interwar years.

Taylor began by asking Mason which of his recent encounters he most vividly remembered. Mason replied:

"[In 2004] I was sitting in ... a hotel room in China for

an unauthorised meeting with some factory workers who were represented by a labour lawyer. That's as near as you get to being represented by anybody. When they walked in ... every single one of them was missing a limb ... One of them, out of the six, had a prosthesis – everybody else couldn't afford one – and they told me the story of how they'd been injured by really crazy, avoidable accidents. And then [they were] immediately sacked because the practice in the sweatshop sector of the Shenzhen industrial sector ... is not to take out insurance for the workers... [Yet] it struck me that these guys were part of probably the most decisive social force in the 21st century – that's the Chinese, and latterly the Indian, workforces – a billion strong and making history in many senses, economically, culturally even, but not yet politically."

But what of more positive experiences of organisation rather than of impotence in the face of maltreatment? Mason responded:

"The developing world is awash with examples of workers organising both in the slums they live in and in the factories they work in... [But] very few of the struggles among the newly formed workforces of China, India, Latin America and Africa has reached the level yet of some of the historical symbolic acts that I write about [in 'Live Working and Die Fighting'] – Peterloo, the Lyon uprising of 1831. We're not quite there yet, but the reason I've written the book is I'm absolutely certain that something will happen and I don't want people to be as shocked as they were when, in 1831, the Lyon silk-workers seized the city. It provoked the first Europe-wide panic about class."

Taylor's second guest on the programme was a research fellow from Sussex University's Institute of Development Studies (an academic field less popular today than it was in the 1960s when 'development' – then based on the idea that the miscalled Third World would follow the 'model' of the already-industrialised world – was all the rage). Was there perhaps a 'top-down' answer, which would offset the need for the disruptive 'bottom-up' struggles Mason seems to be predicting? And could the independent study which the developmentalist had been involved in (a study which produced the 2006 Ethical Trading Initiative's 'Ethical Trading Report') point the way? Already one could hear – knocking metaphorically at the studio door – those figures so beloved of troubleshooting liberal academics, 'progressive' employers (versed in the jargon of 'partnership') who see commercial advantage in 'their' workers feeling content and properly represented. Sure enough these shining knights soon entered the discussion, with Mason joining in by recounting a debate he had chaired in which one such multinational employer called for trade unions to become global so that he would have a representative 'interlocutor' to mediate his relations with an international workforce.

The BBC discussion was a sign of new times, in which the fashion for a sociology that declared the "end of class", and sustained the nonsense that "there is no alternative" to neo-liberal, global capitalism, is fading, or certainly losing credibility; and it is a tribute to Mason's book that it has brought this into the open. But there is also an echo of a more radical discourse in his work. In 1892, when Frederick Engels agreed to a reissue of his 'The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844', he wrote a new preface recognising that times had hugely changed over the intervening 50 years, but defending the relevance of his book on the grounds of his approach to what was often called 'The Social Question'. And he observed that the response of the middle classes to the threat of social upheaval had changed too; that one-time 'abomination of abominations', socialism, "has not only become respectable, but has actually donned evening dress and lounges lazily on drawing-room *causeuses* [French 'love seats' or mini-sofas]. This shows the incurable fickleness of that terrible despot of 'society', middle-class public opinion,

and once more justifies the contempt in which we socialists of a past generation always held public opinion."

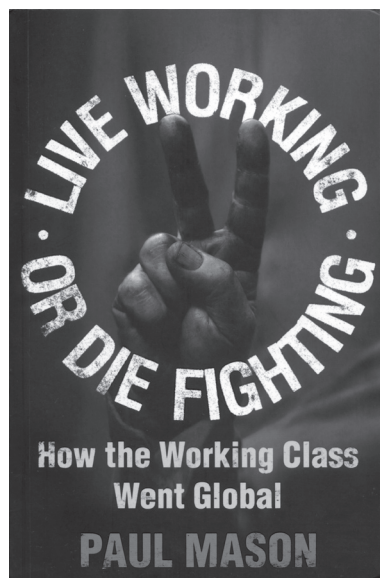
As a symptom of something real beneath the surface of 'public opinion', Engels wrote, serious socialists should pay attention to these changes, but, he argued:

"What I consider far more important than this momentary fashion among bourgeois circles of affecting a mild dilution of Socialism, and even more than the actual progress Socialism has made in England generally ... is the revival of the East End of London. The immense haunt of misery is no longer the stagnant pool it was six years ago. It has shaken off its torpor of despair, has returned to life, and it has become the home of what is called the 'New Unionism'..."

One of Mason's chapters deals with the 'New Unionism', the organisation of the unemployed in trade unions in Britain in the 1890s, which led to major class struggles and, early in the 20th century, the foundation of the Labour Party, a radical step in its day and one that was to ensure that a form of class politics – albeit a pale reflection of the reality of the class struggle – was to prevail in Britain's parliamentary politics until the 1970s or 1980s. Mason brings out – as Engels who died in 1895 could not have done – the way in which the new phase of capitalism emerging at the end of the 19th century found its opposite in the internationalisation of the labour movement. For Mason, the London dock strike of 1889 – introduced with his account of how, in 2004, the immigrant Canary Wharf cleaners knew nothing of the Wapping printers' strike of 1986, far less the history of Tom Mann and "the dockers' tanner", and how powerful they found even a smattering of that knowledge – is only part of a much wider story.

The chapter moves on to France: Victor Griffuelhes and the radical Paris shoemakers, Aristide Briand and Fernand Pelloutier's 'Revolution Through General Strike' and the formation of the 'Confédération Générale des Ouvriers'. It visits the 'Red City' of porcelain-producing Limoges, where the violent events of 1905 were triggered by workers in an American-owned factory standing up against managers who thought they had inherited the *droit de cuissage* (the right to get between the legs) from feudal times. It covers the syndicalist movement in pre-World War I France, before moving to contemporaneous actions in Latin America, and on to Big Bill Haywood and the Industrial Workers of the World in the USA. Thence to Tom Mann's career in Australia and the strike, and battles, at the Broken Hill mines in 1908-09; to the Europe-wide unrest that began in Barcelona in 1909 and lasted until the eve of World War I; and to the Wobblies (IWW) 'Bread and Roses' strike in the textile mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912.

If it was the onset of this great movement in Britain that made talk of 'socialism' fashionable amongst the late-19th century middle classes (a 'socialism' that would act as a means of social *control* rather than 'bottom-up' universal liberation), in the Britain of the 1990s it was recognition that rampant neo-liberalism was endangering social stability that gave rise to another middle-class fad, this time echoed vociferously in key sections of the tabloid press. 'New Labour' thinking created the conversational buzz that contextualised a politics designed to rescue red-in-tooth-and-claw Thatcherism from its own implosion. 'Public opinion' found its latest fad to keep the dinner parties alive and consumerist luxury on the go. The term 'Socialism', emptied of its theoretical content by decades of bureaucratic welfarism, was now discounted; but the oxymoronic idea of a socially responsible capitalism (in which 'ethical business' has a central prominence) took its place.





But the link between Mason's book and Engels' preface goes beyond mere comparison. Theoretically speaking, Mason is no Engels, nor would he claim to be. But, in the socially explosive 1840s, when writing about the condition of the working class from his base in Manchester, Engels personally got to know the conditions at work and at home of the class he was writing about. Mason – taking advantage of his international journalistic remit – has visited, spoken to, and in a limited way perhaps, got to know workers all over the world in their homes and workplaces. By pursuing this method, he points the way to the sort of deeper empirical work that is needed as the basis for theorising the *agency* that can make “another world possible”. This may be of little interest to those concerned only with the excitement of simply *asserting* (often, to be sure, in courageous and creative ways) that ‘possibility’, far less to others locked into the rhetoric and forms of organisation of the 1960s and 1970s that centred on that long-tried and universally unproductive concept of “building the (revolutionary) party”. But Mason's work – and once again perhaps that of Engels – will be read more carefully by everyone who understands that there is empirical groundwork to be done to establish the nature of the (global) working class as it is *now*.

It was Engels who played a key part in assisting Marx to show how the working class is the creation and victim of capital, but is also capital's structural antagonist – an antagonist that can only assert and defend its own humanity by struggling against and ultimately overthrowing its oppressor. Further, they showed, for the first time in the history of class struggle, the interests of the oppressed class coincided with the needs of humanity as a whole to transcend the exploitation of class by class and create the conditions for the co-operative commonwealth (or ‘communism’ as properly understood). But simply to state that today is to reduce theory to dogma, a barrier to real human progress rather than an enabler of it. What does it mean in practice in the early 21st century, after all the defeats, false starts and disillusionments of the decades since this theorisation of agency was first understood in the 1840s? ‘Live Working or Die Fighting’ is the work of an individual (one constrained by the codes of the BBC, by whom he presumably wants to remain employed), Mason could hardly be expected to answer that question alone. To do so, must be both a *collective* task, and a *political* task, not one merely confined to journalistic description and commentary. ‘Live Working or Die Fighting’ gives an inkling of at least one aspect of what has to be done.

Mason's particular declared objective is to address the loss of historical knowledge that is taking place because of the sense (the illusion) that, in the very exceptional period from the 1940s to the 1980s, the Western labour movement had

accomplished the goals it was fighting for in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: the Canary Wharf workers need to know about Wapping and about the ‘New Unionism’, but they don't. Now that the storms are gathering over globalised capitalism – and it becomes clearer than ever that, if there really

is “no alternative”, then there is no human future in view at all – it is surely for those who recognise that we have entered a quite new period to find ways to accomplish in a 21st century way the task Engels set out on in the 1840s, and Mason hints at over a century and a half later.

To recognise the reality of the period – what the Marxist political theorist István Mészáros has defined as the *structural*, the truly *historic*, crisis not just of 19th and 20th century industrial capitalism, but of the much longer-lasting capital system itself – is to see that the forms of political organisation apparently appropriate to the 20th century, modelled on an often limited understanding of the 1917 Russian Revolution, are now entirely inappropriate. The protests of the “Seattle brigade” show that the will to fight remains, but perhaps not the theoretical perspectives to take the fight beyond protest. ‘Live Working or Die Fighting’ is not a programmatic statement for new forms of socialist organisation that can meet the needs of the emerging global working-class movement he writes about, but it is certainly relevant to those who want to participate in creating them.

Mason himself contextualises his book, explains how he came to want to write it, in an instructive and moving way; his conclusion is highly personal and the book's inspirational logic is thereby clarified. His father was a truck driver at a Lancashire electrical engineering factory by day, who played in a dance band by night. He was a trade unionist conscious that some of the separately-organised machine workers made twice the wages he did, and probably voted Tory. By the time he fathered Paul in 1960, he had bought their home – the first in his family to do so – but it had an outside toilet. Paul lived with his parents in this working-class community until he was 18, meeting no one who was not a trade unionist. He was used to Labour winning every election in the area. He lived through many industrial actions, including two miners' strikes, the second of which brought down a Tory government, but never saw a political demonstration or the waving of a red flag. The demands he was aware of were for decent working conditions, pensions, health care and sports facilities. Recounted memories of the Depression of the 1930s told him more about the meaning of history than any textbook or film, and formed the background to the demand articulated in various ways in the community for “socialism through evolution”.

This labour movement as it existed from 1945 to 1989, Mason argues, was very different from the one his book describes that stretched from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to World War II. The unions, allied with the employers and the nation states in the 1940s war against fascism, were rewarded, more or less effectively, with welfarism and an implicit social contract in which they

played a key role. The industrial democracy that had been built as an instrument of class struggle, with national variations, in the interwar years, for the most part continued only as a “parallel lifestyle, separate from but not opposed to that of the upper classes”, and even this eventually withered away, except perhaps in a few areas such as “the Welsh valleys ... the Tuscan hill towns [and] the Buenos Aires docks”.

By the time Mason's father died in 1986, the threat of mass unemployment had returned and governments were responding to shop-floor militancy by abandoning consensus, freeing capital to seek cheap labour transnationally, and – in the symbolic case of the air traffic controllers in Reagan's America – chaining trade unionists hand and foot. In Britain the last battle for “progress and evolution” was fought by the miners and lost in 1985. By the 1990s, neo-liberal policies were being pursued in the post-Stalinist states and even by governments that continued to call themselves ‘Communist’ in China and Vietnam.

In this self-conscious (but modestly presented) ‘life-story’ so much is encapsulated; it is a small-scale, very personal (but also typical) account of the sea-change in social opportunities and political attitudes that reflect, in an ‘advanced’ country, the underlying shifts in the tectonic plates of the capital system that have been at work since (say) the early 1970s. Such stories matter, particularly if they can be told in a way that – as Mason succeeds in doing – relates them to the much wider history of labour from which they have come. And even more do they matter if they can sharpen our minds in developing the theory necessary for us to understand the reality of the point in history that humanity has arrived at, in order to develop the thinking and forms of organisation that will enable the emergent ‘global’ working class to take ‘global’ society (in Mészáros's words) “beyond capital”.

Mason himself ends on a rather different and more romantic note. In his chapter on the Paris Commune he writes a good deal about Louise Michel, the poor poet-schoolmistress from bohemian Montmartre who, a prosecuting lawyer claimed, “from her lectern in her spare moments ... professed doctrines of free thought, and made her young pupils sing poems she had written, among which was a song entitled ‘The Avengers’.” He returns to her in conclusion, recounting a vision he imagined when covering the violently attacked protests at the 2005 G8 summit in Scotland. Against riot police got up like robocops were ranged, amongst many others, Latin American musicians, and dancers clad as fairies – symbolising the human rhythms to which the future must move and the touch of utopian magic that movement needs.

What Mason claims he saw in his mind's eye was “the young Louise Michel dancing to a samba band in a field outside the Gleneagles summit: her face ... painted and ... wearing pink fairy wings.” “She still,” he concludes, “has a lot to learn.” But the real value of his book is that it tells all of us with ears to hear and minds open to new thinking: “So have we all!” If ‘labour history’, so optimistically embraced by a generation of E. P. Thompson-inspired postgraduate students in the 1960s as a way to fight the class struggle from the archives, is to be rescued from the strangling embrace of the academy and the uncertain insights of postmodernism, it could do worse than to start with this book. And political activists too might take it as a set of signposts, not to all they need to know, but to one important area of essential knowledge.

# The Clyde Gateway: A New Urban Frontier

Neil Gray

“Not only does ‘urban regeneration’ represent the next wave of gentrification, planned and financed on an unprecedented scale, but the victory of this language in anesthetizing our critical understanding of gentrification in Europe represents a considerable ideological victory for neo-liberal visions of the city.”  
*Neil Smith<sup>1</sup>*

“The Clyde is now one of the largest and most visionary renewal projects being undertaken in Europe. I believe that this is only the beginning of this tartan tiger’s awakening.”  
*Stephen Purcell, Glasgow City Council leader<sup>2</sup>*

Glasgow’s urban regeneration converges most symbolically around the £5.6 billion Clyde Waterfront project to transform 13 miles of the Clyde river corridor into an “...internationally competitive ‘central belt’ for business, employment, living and tourism.”<sup>3</sup> The Clyde Gateway project, an ancillary development situated in the east of the city, is deemed a vital part of this broader long term project to re-brand and transform Glasgow’s image from that of recalcitrant ‘Red Clydeside’ into that of consumerist ‘Glasgow: Scotland with Style’. The scale of the Clyde Gateway project – which includes the site for the 2014 Commonwealth Games – is enormous: Stewart Maxwell, the minister for Communities and Sport, recently described the development as: “The biggest regeneration programme in Scotland.”<sup>4</sup>

City boosters have been quick to point to poverty, deprivation and dereliction in the east of Glasgow to legitimise large-scale regeneration. They argue that the Clyde Gateway initiative will ensure the provision of jobs and housing, the remediation and reclamation of contaminated land, and bring wider benefits to the local and national economy. Above all, they argue that the project is essential to ensure Glasgow’s ‘edge’ in the competitive global economy. Yet, the over-arching reality is that urban regeneration has for some time been writ large as a global urban strategy of gentrification and capitalist accumulation. The disjuncture between the triumphal neo-liberal *ideology* of the city – of successful self-regulating markets achieving optimally balanced economic growth – and the everyday reality of uneven development, intensifying inequality, and generalized social insecurity is ever increasing.

These contradictions are routinely obscured by

the language of regeneration which “sugarcoats”<sup>5</sup> the class content of gentrification, disavowing the displacement and economic instrumentalism behind the spatial reconfigurations of capital. The underhand discourse of regeneration is further augmented by discursive regimes which systematically stigmatize areas targeted for renewal, providing a crucial neo-liberal alibi for creative destruction of the urban environment. The Clyde Gateway area – with its tracts of derelict land and deeply impoverished population – lends itself most profitably to a ‘discourse of decline’ which makes renewal and regeneration appear both natural and irresistible.

## Gentrification And The New Urban Frontier

Neil Smith has argued that Frederick Turner’s influential essay *The significance of the frontier in American history* (1893) has crucial import for those challenging contemporary strategies of urban gentrification. For Turner, the western frontier was envisioned as “the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization.” The ‘wilderness’ of the west was seen to be breached by “lines of civilizations growing ever more numerous”, its penetration part and parcel of a colonial attempt to make “liveable space out of an unruly and uncooperative nature.”<sup>6</sup> Ultimately for Turner, the frontier expansion of the ‘Wild West’ defined the uniqueness of the American character; each wave westward in the conquest of people and nature contributed to new enclosures of land and space and was seen as part of a wider mission to civilize unruly human nature<sup>7</sup>.

In the latter part of the American 20th century, Smith contends, Turner’s imagery of wilderness and the frontier has been applied “less to the plains, mountains and forests of the West [...] and more to cities back East.”<sup>8</sup> In the modern reconfiguration of frontier lines, parts of major US cities were increasingly demarcated as “urban wilderness.” Urban theorists of the 1950s and ‘60s propagated discourses of “blight”, “decline” and “social malaise” and inner-city areas were negatively stereotyped as “slums”, “ghettos” and worse: “urban jungles.” By the 1960s, the ‘discourse of decline’ in the city – exacerbated by the impact of de-industrialisation and a concomitant middle-class ‘white flight’ from increasingly ethnic inner-city areas – was

symbolically yoked to the inner-city slum. In the 1970’s however, these narratives of decay were challenged by boosterist discourses of an urban renaissance through property development and gentrification. And by the 1980s these entrepreneurial discourses had intensified: the “urban jungle” would be put to the sword by a new breed of urban hero.

The appeal to frontier imagery and vocabulary was mercilessly plundered during the Reagan era: “urban pioneers”, “urban homesteaders” and “urban cowboys” were the new “folk heroes of the urban frontier”, while modern discourses of blight and decay represented

urban working-class populations in the targeted areas as “less than social” and the frontier area as “not yet socially inhabited.”<sup>9</sup> For Smith, the important conclusion to be drawn from frontier discourses is that they attempt to “rationalise and legitimate a process of conquest, whether in the eighteenth and nineteenth century American West, or in the late-twentieth-century inner city.”<sup>10</sup> The “highly resonant imagery” of the frontier, epitomized in the past by the Hollywood western, works precisely because it manages to capture a complex series of aspirations “bound up with economic progress and historical destiny, rugged individualism and the romance of danger, national optimism, race and class superiority”<sup>11</sup>.

Yet, as Smith argues, if Hollywood’s ‘dream factory’ were really to capture the most significant events in the West, its films would have to reconcile themselves to the ‘land grabs’ of the property and real estate markets. Turner’s frontier line was extended less by individual pioneers, homesteaders and rugged individualists, and more by “banks, railways, the state and other collective sources of capital.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the scripting of gentrification as a ‘new urban frontier’ continues to encapsulate a host of accumulated symbolic meanings drawn from the colonial domestication of the ‘Wild West’, including “the social differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the historical difference between past and future, and the economic difference between existing market and profitable opportunity.”<sup>13</sup>

## Blight as Neoliberal Alibi

Economic expansion in the present era rarely takes place via *absolute* geographical expansion; instead, it involves internal differentiation of already developed spaces. Rachel Weber argues that discourses of ‘blight’ and ‘decay’ are mobilised as neo-liberal alibis to stigmatise places targeted for ‘renewal’. The state’s willingness to subject its property and land base to market rule, and its desire to control and disperse native populations, accounts for the zeal with which it stigmatizes certain people and certain places. For Weber, regeneration policies, backed by negative discursive regimes, can be seen as little more than “property speculation and public giveaways to guide the pace and place of the speculative activity.”<sup>14</sup>

In order to make the built environment more “flexible and responsive”<sup>15</sup> to the capitalist demand for liquidity, local states routinely provide financial inducements to reduce the risks and costs of development for capital. Local governments are then compelled to juggle the political imperative of ‘managing’ potentially recalcitrant local populations, with the financial imperative of maintaining or creating the conditions for profitable capitalist investment. This balancing act – between accumulation and legitimation – is in part achieved by place-specific discourses of blight and decay which act as a “convenient incantation”, and justification, for the devaluation and disposal of *unprofitable* properties and land. Here, a discourse of decline functions to create a convergence of thinking “around such critical issues as the economic life of buildings, the priority given to different components of value, the sources of devaluation, and interrelationships between buildings and neighbourhoods.”<sup>16</sup>

The idea of blight metaphorically adopts associations from plant pathology and medicine to conflate descriptions of areas and people with death and decay. Between 1949 and 1965 one



million people from US cities – predominantly low-income – were evicted from their homes in the name of eliminating blight. Blight provided a quasi-scientific basis for the use and abuse of redevelopment powers to legitimise projects that were *already planned*. Weber cites L.Friedman who argued that finding blight in the American inner-city merely meant “defining a neighbourhood that cannot effectively fight back, but which is either an eyesore or is well-located for some particular construction project that important interests wish to build.”<sup>17</sup> Unsurprisingly, ‘indicators’ of blight typically conflated the race and class of the residents in the areas targeted for demolition with the condition of the buildings themselves. In the Chicago Plan Commission of 1942 for instance, one of the three indicators of blight included “percentage of Negroes.”<sup>18</sup>

### Eastwards Ho!

“The impression at once felt is one of intrusion. No nautical explorer ever fell among savages who looked with greater wonder at his approach.”  
*‘Shadow’ on the Bridgewater, 1858*<sup>19</sup>

“From the late 60’s onwards, Glasgow became a jungle into which the media fearlessly ventured to portray the wild animals.”  
*Sean Damer, 1990*<sup>20</sup>

Glasgow has never had trouble attracting a negative image. Perhaps the most lurid example is Alexander McArthur’s and H.Kingsley Long’s best-selling novel ‘No Mean City’ (1935), ‘the classic novel of the Glasgow slum underworld’. The book represents the zenith of that curious admixture of ‘authenticity’ (provided by McArthur, an unemployed baker from the Gorbals) and sensationalist pseudo-scientific journalism (provided by Long, a London journalist) which has dogged descriptions of the urban poor ever since the bourgeoisie first perceived the poor as threat to health and economy in the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> The recent by-election in Glasgow East provoked what was merely the latest bout of stereotyping, demonisation and class hatred.

AA Gill of the *Sunday Times* declared Glasgow East “the hardest, poorest place in Britain”, while Shettleston, he argues, “makes the rough margins of Liverpool look like the Chelsea Flower Show.” Prior to the Glasgow East by-election, the noxious Gill visited the area to register his distaste for the local population: “The people do not look good here. Often it is difficult to tell men from women, old men from older men [...] the locals have the blotchy pallor of cave-dwelling consumptives.”<sup>22</sup> For Melanie Reid of *The Times*, Glasgow East “wears the weary, pinched look of someone who has nothing in life and expects even less.”<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Ben Macintyre, her colleague from *The Times*, described Easterhouse as “a ghetto”, ringed by some of “the saddest statistics in Britain”<sup>24</sup>. Simon Heffer of *The Daily Telegraph* called Glasgow East a “hell-hole” of a constituency, unable to even ensure “the normal social structures of the civilised world”, while Reid again, called Glasgow East a “social disaster” where the “law of the jungle” rules.<sup>25</sup>

Propping up these hateful tirades is an assumed link between the poverty and dereliction of the area and ‘welfare dependency’. Ian Duncan Smith’s influential right-wing think tank, The Centre for Social Justice, was birthed after a previous Smith visit to Glasgow East, and David Cameron has acknowledged the pivotal role the Center has played in shaping Tory policy on social justice.<sup>26</sup> Obfuscating the well established link between poverty, de-industrialisation and privatization, Smith instead lays the blame firmly on the welfare system: “For too long, people have been allowed to languish, trapped in a dependency culture that held low expectations of those living there and made no demands of them either.” For Smith, the solution is simple: “The system must help people

[...] to get the ‘work habit’.”<sup>27</sup>

In this context, the press diatribes take on a familiar welfare-baiting pattern.

According to Simon Heffer, Glasgow East is supposedly serviced by “epic amounts of public money”: poverty in the area merely proves “how utterly poisonous that sort of thing is.”<sup>28</sup> For Fraser Nelson of *The Spectator*, the “welfare ghettos” of Glasgow East – a supposed “no-go-zone” in an “invisible” country that cost “billions to achieve” – are Gordon Brown’s dirty little secret, “a hideous, costly social experiment gone wrong.”<sup>29</sup>

No one is suggesting that Glasgow East is a picture of social harmony, or that it’s setting is ideal. There are no official figures for life expectancy in Glasgow, but Fraser Nelson’s figures, in research compiled for the *Scotsman* newspaper, are generally accepted, even if his right wing views are not.<sup>30</sup> According to Nelson’s figures, the male life expectancy rate in Calton is a barely believable 53.9, in Dalmarnock 58, and in Bridgeton 61.4.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, government figures for 2006, claim the percentage of people living within 0-500 meters of any derelict site in Shettleston was a staggering 79.1% – in nearby Calton, the figure rises to 99.4%.<sup>32</sup> The concern here, however, is how a discourse of decline is mobilized to create a discursive regime that ignores the deeper economic and structural problems in the area, while providing a neo-liberal alibi for gentrification, ‘sugar-coated’ through the necessarily more circumspect discourse of ‘regeneration’.

### The Clyde Gateway Initiative

“We’re doing all of this to improve opportunities for local people.”

*Keith Pender*<sup>33</sup>

“This initiative is all about people – it’s about getting people in this part of the country back into the workforce and enhancing their confidence and ambition.”

*Steven Purcell*<sup>34</sup>

The Clyde Gateway Initiative can be seen as part of Glasgow’s wider Clyde Corridor regeneration strategy, but stands alone with its own Urban Regeneration Company (URC). The project, which describes its task as tackling “the physical and economic decline of a large part of the East End of Glasgow and South Lanarkshire,”<sup>35</sup> is a partnership between Glasgow City Council, South Lanarkshire Council, Scottish Enterprise National, Scottish Enterprise Glasgow, Scottish Enterprise Lanarkshire, and Communities Scotland. The URC claims that over the next twenty years it will help create 21,000 new jobs; 10,000 new housing units; and a population increase of 20,000 in the designated area. The project also includes the construction of infrastructure and buildings for the Commonwealth Games, due to arrive in 2014. The main areas affected will be Shawfield, Rutherglen, Bridgeton, Dalmarnock, and Parkhead.

Urban regeneration in the Clyde Gateway area is typically cast as a self-evident response to dereliction and decay: “The need for such an initiative is evident from the concentration of economic, social and physical deprivation found in the area. It suffers from high levels of unemployment and low levels of economic activity; from social deprivation and poor health; and, from a concentration of derelict and contaminated land that blights the physical environment.”<sup>36</sup> Here, urban decline is presented as an inevitable process of impersonal, quasi-natural forces “as if the social has been removed from an entirely technical matter.”<sup>37</sup> Yet, as Neil Smith has pointed out, the



physical deterioration and economic devalorisation of inner-city areas are “a strictly logical, ‘rational’ outcome of the operation of the land and housing markets”<sup>38</sup>. The deterioration and abandonment of the built environment are the result of identifiable private and public investment decisions, and are therefore far from neutral or natural. Buildings are abandoned or left to blight not because they are unusable but “...because they cannot be used profitably”<sup>39</sup>. By promoting a narrow convergence of thinking around the causes of blight, businesses and governments are free to absolve themselves of collective responsibility for previous failures. With history duly disavowed, government is once again free to present business as an urban saviour. For Ian Manson, head of the Clyde Gateway URC, the market has all the solutions to the Clyde Gateway area: “Business is central to us. We want to attract developers and businesses to think about setting up here, though the market, not us, will decide what is appropriate.”<sup>40</sup>

### Back To The Workhouse

“What we want to do is give people the chance to get back into the labour market, that’s my understanding of a successful growing economy.”

*Ian Manson, Clyde Gateway URC*<sup>41</sup>

“We have got to find ways of getting more people into the labour force and if we are spending money it should be on getting people back to work. There is no way we can prosper where you have this number of people sitting around.”

*Richard Cairns, Glasgow Chamber of Commerce*<sup>42</sup>

“There is no nonsense so gross that it cannot be justified by the creation of jobs.”

*George Monbiot*<sup>43</sup>

What the market wants of course is profit. As such, the most persistent problem faced by capital and state has always been the production and management of the population in the most profitable way. Much of the legitimacy for the Clyde Gateway project rests on its promise to create 21,000 new jobs in the development area. Ian Manson, the head of the Clyde Gateway URC, says he wants to bring the “wow” factor into the Clyde Gateway regeneration plans and make it “the first regeneration project to truly deliver opportunities for local people”<sup>44</sup>[my italics]. While it is somewhat refreshing to hear a major developer being so forthright about previous regeneration failures, it still begs the question: what is so different about this project?

The Clyde Gateway website offers some extremely speculative language in terms of job opportunities for local people. While “no one is promising” a return to manufacturing, the URC will “work hard to try and attract” a new manufacturing plant, and “efforts will be made” to achieve the target of 21,000 jobs. Meanwhile, “Every effort is going to be made” to equip and train local residents to “grab” emerging job opportunities, and “many of them” will be targeted at local residents. However, they state, employment positions for local people are “impossible to quantify.” Regarding the new business and sports organisations to be located alongside the new sports venues, Clyde Gateway



has said it will be playing its part in “trying to ensure” that many of these new jobs will go to local people.<sup>45</sup>

Many locals, however, would have good reason to be deeply sceptical of job claims for the area. The much vaunted Glasgow East Area Renewal (GEAR) promised a comprehensive regeneration in 1976 but failed to make any significant inroad into local unemployment.<sup>46</sup> Apart from temporary construction work, the target for job creation is primarily in the service industries: offices, leisure and recreation activities, hotels and tourism, retail, financial services.<sup>47</sup> The nature of these jobs (assuming they transpire) for those without the ‘cultural capital’ to exploit the higher end of the industry is well documented. In 1990, Sean Damer could already state without contention “it hardly needs repeating that in the 1990’s these jobs are the worst paid, least unionised, most seasonal jobs, with the longest hours and poorest conditions of health and safety.”<sup>48</sup> Employment conditions have only become more precarious as neo-liberalism has tightened its grip.

While regeneration projects are marshaled as panaceas to fight social polarization, they typically tend to increase social polarisation through price rises, the workings of the property market, the restructuring of the labour market, the displacement of low-income housing, and the re-allocation of public budgets to satisfy the perceived needs of capital.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, while inflated job claims are routinely used to justify major regeneration and investment projects, the reliability of these ‘promises’ are rarely evaluated. In 2002, a survey by engineering consultants Ove Arup calculated that the 2012 London Olympic Games would lead to 3,000 new jobs. Yet, by 2007 – under enormous pressure to justify massive over-expenditure on the Games – London’s Employment and Skills Taskforce and the London Development Agency (LDA) boldly claimed the Olympics would create 50,000 new jobs.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, the London Citizen’s group persuaded the mayor of London and Seb Coe to publicly sign an ‘ethical contract’ which would give Games workers a ‘living wage’. To date, no living wage has been included in any of the contracts allocated.<sup>51</sup>

The not so hidden discourse behind the ‘regeneration’ of the Clyde Gateway is a punitive ‘welfare to workfare’ strategy. The Scottish Government index for multiple deprivation in the Shettleston Constituency gives figures for 2005 which claim that 34.9% percent of the population are ‘income deprived’, with 30.1% ‘employment deprived.’<sup>52</sup> The publication in July of the welfare reform green paper by Labour’s Work and Pensions secretary James Purnell potentially signals “the most radical shake-up of the welfare system since the second world war.”<sup>53</sup> The right wing tenor of Purnell’s paper can be gauged by the comments of the Tory shadow work and pensions secretary, Chris Grayling, who claimed that the plans were a “straight lift” from those put forward by his party. However, he said, “Since these are Conservative proposals we will certainly support them.”<sup>54</sup> Given

this cross-party consensus on the matter, we can expect to see the Green Paper, or a similar version, sanctioned by Westminster before too long.

The proposals may require lone parents to take part in training for a return to work, even before their children are of school age. Also included is a target of getting one million people off incapacity benefit by 2015 (by 2013 incapacity benefit will be replaced by a new benefit, employment support allowance, which will be harder to qualify for). Those unemployed for more than a year would have to do four weeks’ community work – after two years they would be compelled to do ‘community work’ full time. Meanwhile, ‘drug addicts’ will have to ‘declare their addiction’ and embark on treatment to become eligible for benefits.<sup>55</sup>

### The Commonwealth Games

“The Games offer our country a chance to advertise to a global audience of over 1 billion people. Glasgow is an incredible city and Scotland is an unforgettable country. The more people who get the chance to see this the more we can grow in the future.”

*Glasgow 2014, Ltd*<sup>56</sup>

“All of the city, the surrounding region and across Scotland stands to benefit from the Games – but none more so than the Clyde Gateway communities.”

*Clyde Gateway URC*<sup>57</sup>

There’s nothing like a mega-event to divert attention from deeper structural issues. The Clyde Gateway Initiative was given a major boost when, on Friday 9th November 2007, the General Assembly of the Commonwealth Games Federation voted for Glasgow as the host city for the 2014 Games. The Games – to be held within the Clyde Gateway project area – will take place over 12 days from 23 July to 3 August, with an estimated £350 million of public money going towards the construction of a new indoor sports arena and a velodrome. Glasgow 2014 Ltd, which is comprised of the Scottish Government, Glasgow City Council, and the Commonwealth Games Council for Scotland, will oversee the management of the event.

The Games promoters have been keen to impress the importance of a Games ‘Legacy’ in the Clyde Gateway area. Sports organisations and other businesses will be housed in new office developments alongside the new sports venues, with boosters emphasising that the Commonwealth Games Village – constructed as a ‘global showcase’ for athletes’ quarters – will be ‘retro-fitted’ after the event to provide 1,500 houses for sale and for rent. The Glasgow 2014 website declares that “the village will be a lasting legacy for Glasgow [...] The power of sport to enhance lives will never be better demonstrated,”<sup>58</sup> while City Council Leader, Stephen Purcell, claims that the village will be one of “the greatest providers of opportunities” before and after 2014: “...a flagship for the regeneration of Glasgow’s East End and a visible reminder of the legacy of the Games.”<sup>59</sup> Glasgow City Council will subsidise the Village site for developers by making the site available at

*nil cost* in order to reduce the developers initial borrowing requirements – the appointed development partner will enter into a profit sharing arrangement with the Council at the end of the project.<sup>60</sup> Yet, of the 1,500 houses, 1,200 will be for sale, with only 300 houses (or 20%) available for affordable socially rented housing.<sup>61</sup>

Given the extent of the poverty in the area, it is highly unlikely that the 54% of the local population which already lives in socially rented housing will be able to afford to buy a home at the Village. More likely, the ‘showcase’ homes will be targeted at some of the 20,000 people that the Clyde Gateway URC hopes to attract

to the area over the next 25 years. Swyngedou *et al* have shown that an “explicit goal” of large-scale regeneration projects is to “revalue prime urban land”; increase profitable rent extraction; and *increase the local tax base* through a “socio-spatial and economic reorganisation of space.”<sup>62</sup> Scottish Government statistics for Shettleston in 2007 show that the percentage of dwellings in the low council tax bands A to C is 87.06%, with only 1.19% in the higher bands F to H. As Rachel Weber and others have noted, “space is more malleable and potentially more profitable to investors when it is empty,”<sup>63</sup> with local government readying enormous amounts of ‘derelict’ land for developers (through publicly subsidized remediation) profit levels are potentially robust for developers aiming at the ‘higher’ end of the market. Gentrification, we should not forget, is the leading edge of a much larger endeavour: “the class remake of the central urban landscape.”<sup>64</sup>

### Public Pain Private Gain

“As far as I am concerned, business is Santa Claus, but there is still a passive attitude that sees it as a necessary evil rather than something that is fundamentally good.”

*Richard Cairns, Glasgow Chamber of Commerce*<sup>65</sup>

“We are aware the Government wants to grow Scotland’s economy and to do that, it needs to bring all the land back into economic use.”

*Ian Manson*<sup>66</sup>

Large-scale urban development projects are without exception state-led and state-financed. The well-documented pattern of socialization of cost and risk by the state, and privatization of possible benefits for developers and capital is typical of the formula.<sup>67</sup> This summer, the Scottish Government approved £62 million to the Clyde Gateway URC for the period between 2008 and 2011. Other local government partners have provided land holdings and staff resources to the project, meaning that over £100 million of public money has so far been committed. Typically, the URC has responsibility for expensive and unprofitable physical development such as land acquisition, land remediation, and infrastructure provision.<sup>68</sup> Assuming the burden of financial risk, the development strategy is based upon ‘pump-priming’ investment from the public sector to facilitate private finance initiative.<sup>69</sup>

It is argued that public investment over the first ten years will pave the way for up to £1.5 billion in private development over the next twenty five years,<sup>70</sup> yet the speculative and risky nature of urban regeneration ventures is easily exposed to market volatility. The current economic climate does not bode well for either short or long-term forecasting. A recent report for *Scotland on Sunday* shows that concerns are already growing over Glasgow City Council’s ability to raise their portion of the costs for the Commonwealth Games through the disposal of public assets. The full cost of the Games will be met by the public purse. Around 80% of the total cost will be met by the Scottish Government, with Glasgow City Council due to provide the rest. City Council leader, Stephen Purcell, as recorded in the *Evening Times*, has previously maintained that the council would sell ‘surplus property and land’ to meet the costs of hosting the event, while a council spokesman said that land and property worth “hundreds of millions of pounds” was available for sale.<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, according to *Scotland on Sunday*, the council wants to ‘transfer’ “56 ‘surplus sites’” to a new joint venture by the end of the current financial year.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, ‘commercial property experts’ warn that it is unlikely the properties, which include several former schools, will achieve anywhere near the expected sum in the current climate. One source said, “Companies that tend to get involved with these joint venture projects rely on banks and debt financing, and that’s incredibly hard to get your hands on these days.”<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile, David Bell, director of the public sector group at CB Richard Ellis, warned that regeneration projects are the first to be discarded during economic



downturns due to the higher risks involved: “They are now really quite peripheral in this market.”<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, Glasgow City Council’s previous willingness to subject its property portfolio to the market has cost the public dear. In Dalmarnock – the site chosen for the Commonwealth Games village – land was sold for a combined total of £45,000 in 1988-89. Yet, earlier this year, the council was forced – under pressure to complete the Games infrastructure – to buy back the land with £5.5 million of public money.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, as part of the Vacant and Derelict Land Fund Programme, the Scottish Government recently provided the Council with funding for remedial treatment of the Dalmarnock site, to “make it more attractive to developers.”<sup>76</sup>

Glasgow City Council’s investment programme is weighted heavily towards development and regeneration services, with 35% of the total budget going towards the Clyde Gateway project, the regeneration of the River Clyde, the M74 completion project, and sports infrastructure including the National Indoor Sports Arena for the Commonwealth Games. The local state, employers and developers routinely claim inflated multiplier effects for these schemes, yet consistently fail to account for negative effects such as major disposals of public assets. Crucially, 42.3% of funding for regeneration investment in 2007-8 came from *asset sales* such as council land and buildings. This represents a major privatization of space. A closer evaluation of the hidden public costs, creative accounting, and lack of transparency associated with regeneration projects in Glasgow, is critical if we don’t want to drown in the bombast of city boosters.

## The M74: Heading In The Wrong Direction

The M74 northern extension, a five-mile, six-lane motorway on the southside of the Clyde river provides a cautionary tale of likely outcomes for the Clyde Gateway project. The road’s link to the initiative has been emphasised repeatedly by key catalyst agencies. In the Glasgow and Clyde Valley Structure Plan, the motorway is described as a “key component”<sup>77</sup> of infrastructure for the Clyde Gateway Initiative. Meanwhile, Scottish Enterprise claimed that the M74 was a “vital prerequisite”<sup>78</sup> of the Clyde Gateway Initiative, and that their funding for the initiative would not be forthcoming if the road did not proceed. Moreover, the Clyde Gateway business plan clearly states the importance of the M74 to their infrastructure plans, including the East End Regeneration Route which is dependent on the M74 completion: “The extension to the M74 and the East End Regeneration Route will make Clyde Gateway one of the most accessible urban centres in Scotland.”<sup>79</sup>

In opposition to the plans, Jam74 (a coalition of community, environmental and sustainable transport groups) successfully called for an independent public enquiry to determine whether the road would go ahead. During the 2003-04 enquiry the developers mobilized typical discourses of blight and massively inflated jobs claims to argue for the road’s approval. They claimed that the M74 extension would lead to the “reduction of [...] vacant, derelict and contaminated land” and “unlock the potential for economic development and regeneration of vacant and under-used sites” by making the key sites “more attractive to the private sector.”<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile, increasingly exaggerated claims regarding job growth have been banded about since a figure of between 2,900 and 4,000 jobs was first mooted in 1994. By 1998, Scottish Enterprise quoted a figure of between 6,000-6,700. In 2001, Glasgow City Council claimed 12,000 new jobs. By September 2001, Glasgow Chamber of Commerce claimed there was the opportunity to secure and safeguard 44,000 jobs as a result of the new road.<sup>81</sup> By the time of the enquiry, the job claims were largely based on the Simmonds report, commissioned by the Trunks Road Authority (TRA); and the EKOS report, commissioned by Scottish Enterprise. The Simmonds report claimed that job gains could be as much as 20,000 by

2030, while the EKOS report estimated 25,000 new jobs by 2030.

Disputing these hyperbolic claims, the public enquiry reporters, after taking evidence from the Jam74 case, found that the reclamation of derelict and contaminated land along the proposed route “could be undertaken at any time.” In their view, the M74 was “not a prerequisite” for such activity. Moreover, the jobs claims were described as “aspirational and uncertain.” The “most optimistic conclusion” that could be taken from the “highly suspect” Simmonds and EKOS reports was that 20,000 jobs might be drawn to the area – but that this would entail a “redistribution” of jobs “at the expense of other parts of Scotland.” At the most, 5,000 jobs might be genuinely new jobs, but even this figure should be treated with “considerable caution.” The report concluded by advising against “an unreasonable degree of confidence in employment forecasts which have not been shown to be robust.”<sup>82</sup>

Finally, the summary of the report unequivocally stated that the M74 extension would have “very serious undesirable results.” The road would cause “community severance; would be of little use to the local population who have low levels of car ownership; and would have an adverse effect on the environment of the local communities without providing local benefits.” On this basis, taking all the evidence into account, the reporters recommended that the M74 extension proposal “should not be authorized, and that the various orders should not be confirmed.” Despite these recommendations, Jack McConnell, then First Minister of the Scottish Executive, made a sham of transparent democratic procedure by stating that the road would be authorized – regardless of the public enquiry’s findings. To add insult to injury, the M74 northern extension is now “Britain’s most expensive road” according to a report by the *Evening Times*. In the same report Audit Scotland revealed that the cost of the motorway had spiraled to £692m from £245m in 2001.<sup>83</sup> While boosters for the Clyde Gateway Initiative routinely claim that the M74 extension, alongside the £69 million East End Regeneration route, are the infrastructural backbone of the initiative, the enormous public costs of these roads fails to appear on the Clyde Gateway balance sheet.

## The Entrepreneurial City

“The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.”  
*Walter Benjamin*<sup>84</sup>

“The Labour Party is presiding over a policy that has effectively abandoned the city to speculators and hustlers.”

*Sean Damer, 1990*<sup>85</sup>

As Walter Benjamin once pointed out, we do not exist in homogenous, empty time. By the 1990s, gentrification had already become, “a crucial urban strategy for city governments in consort with private capital in cities around the world.”<sup>86</sup> Glasgow’s ‘regeneration’ plans take place within a global neo-liberal context, a context that has been subject to a good deal of critical analysis. In 1989, the most renowned exponent of critical urban geography, David Harvey, seminally charted the paradigmatic shift from a ‘managerial’ Keynesian mode of urban government – associated with redistribution, and the provision of services and amenities to local populations – to an ‘entrepreneurial’ market-led mode of governance, firmly pre-occupied with facilitating economic growth for capital.<sup>87</sup>

The context for this shift was the transition to what Harvey cautiously characterized as



a ‘post-fordist’ economy (this transition was hegemonic rather than absolute), manifested by de-industrialisation, the declining power of the nation-state, and accelerated international capital flows. Inter-city competition for fleet-footed global capital has increased commensurately, with city governments ever more *coerced* into the role of *active state partners* to facilitate capitalist accumulation in the city. The entrepreneurial city, according to Harvey, is typified by three broad assertions. First, the privileging of public-private partnerships, in which local government powers, and funds, are mobilized primarily to attract private capital. Second, and perhaps most importantly, this public-private partnership is characterized by a *socialization of risk and costs by the public sector*, and a *privatization of potential benefits for the private sector*. Third, the local state tends to concentrate on the image-based construction of place – in the form of city branding, place marketing, and the production of urban spectacle – rather than the amelioration of structural conditions in the territory where that place is located.<sup>88</sup>

The key issue for the entrepreneurial city is the provision of a “good business climate”. In an accelerating race to the bottom, cities, subject to the “external coercive power” of inter-city competition, offer increasingly benevolent measures, including substantial packages of financial aid and assistance, as lures for investment capital. Unsurprisingly, these activities have only accentuated the geographical mobility and flexibility of multinational capital, forcing urban governments more than ever into the logic and discipline of uneven capitalist development. The consequence of all this is a dull, corporate uniformity to all cities, and the increased use of the spectacular production of ‘bread and circuses’ to mask the often brutal social polarizations of the city under neo-liberal hegemony.<sup>89</sup>

While official dogma represents regeneration as a legitimate instrument to assuage social polarization, this can never hold true in a neo-liberal context typified by an absence of regulatory standards and income redistribution levels at the national level. Even at the level of a vastly diminished social democracy, without genuine socially targeted mechanisms of redistribution, regeneration amounts to little more than “a flow of capital from the public sector to the private sector via the built environment.”<sup>90</sup> At this early stage of development in the Clyde Gateway project, the minimum task of critical enquiry must be, at least, to expose the contradictions between the surface sheen of regeneration plans and the cruel realities of those excluded, silenced, and stigmatized in order to pursue them. As Neil Smith has pointed out, the forces of *productive capital* embrace gentrification, which serves up inner city land and property on a platter. A more fundamental challenge to gentrification, one which is not just limited to what Hardt and Negri called the “disjunctive synthesis”<sup>91</sup> of representative democracy, will have to question the tacit consensus behind the ownership and management of productive forces, not merely its distribution in the form of banal service jobs, useless commodities, and sub-standard housing.

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# Forget Habermas?

Robert Porter

## After Habermas:

### New Perspectives on the Public Sphere

Edited by Nick Crossley & John Michael Roberts, Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

In 'After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere', Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts have edited a collection of essays which both directly and indirectly respond to Habermas's thinking on the public sphere. This intervention adds to a literature that has grown significantly in the English-speaking world since the early 1990s following the translation of Habermas's hugely influential 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere'.<sup>1</sup> Crossley and Roberts suggest that the aim of the collection is one "of deepening and extending the Habermasian project by way of both an engagement with Habermas and, more particularly, a consideration of other theories and frameworks which afford us different ways of problematizing and exploring the public sphere."<sup>2</sup> So the 'After Habermas' of the title is meant in two senses: it "follows him to a point but then also seeks to break new ground *beyond* his work."<sup>3</sup> Of course, it is important to acknowledge and understand that this hermeneutic gesture or strategy of both following Habermas and supposedly breaking new ground in interrogating the concept of the public sphere is rather compromised and limited in its scope precisely because the discussion tends to be policed and circumscribed in accordance with broadly Habermasian intuitions. That is to say, although Habermas's work and Habermasian intuitions are problematized here and there, the broad intuitive feel of this collection is one of sympathetic critique, of entering into a 'dialogue' with Habermas, of praising rather than burying him. Let us turn, then, more specifically to the chapters of the volume to see what form this 'dialogue' with Habermas takes.

In the first three chapters, Michael Gardiner, Ken Hirschkop and John Michael Roberts each use the work of figures from the Bakhtin Circle in developing their conception of the public sphere. Gardiner draws explicitly on Bakhtin in order to question Habermas's formalism or abstract rationalism. What we have here is the familiar criticism that Habermas anchors his concept of the public sphere in a form of language-use or discursive argumentation that is idealized or formally abstracted from the embodied everyday contexts in which real dialogue takes place, and where the reproduction of social life and social-political power is operationalized. From Gardiner's Bakhtinian perspective, the point to underline is that creative dialogical reflection is located not in the norms or validity-claims presupposed in Habermas's idealized notion of 'communicative action', but in 'mundane' or 'ordinary' speech.

Now, rather than seeing Bakhtin as a fleshy and material corrective to the abstract and formalistic

excesses of Habermasian rationalism, Hirschkop wants to create the impression that they can complement and reciprocally inform one another. Hirschkop argues that analysis of how Habermas's concept of the public sphere has evolved clearly shows that it now embodies the kind of 'non-institutionalized' and 'expressive spontaneity' that is characteristic of Bakhtinian dialogue; that Bakhtin's concept of dialogical reflexivity can flesh out further developing tendencies in Habermas's own thinking on the nature of the dialogical exchanges needed to create a vital, imaginative and critical public sphere.

In chapter three, Roberts utilises the dialogical theory of the Bakhtin Circle to engage in a critique not of Habermas, but of John Stuart Mill, in particular, his theory of free speech, and the liberal bourgeois public sphere it implicitly rationalizes. That is to say, by drawing on the dialogical theory of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov, Roberts argues that Mill's defence of free speech is, in truth, highly restrictive and skewed towards reproducing and legitimating a liberal bourgeois state concerned to silence and marginalise the majority of citizens who are supposedly less practiced in cultivating what Mill called the 'higher pleasures'. In chapter four, Nick Crossley montages or cross-cuts Habermas's work with that of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, suggesting that the latter pursues or realises more effectively the form of critical theory that Habermas himself promised in 'Knowledge and Human Interests', where the function of 'critical theory' is to robustly engage in a demystification of the various ideologies that sustain and reproduce public institutions.

The final three chapters of the book focus less on critically negotiating, supplementing or challenging Habermasian theory and more on actually trying to use Habermas in different contexts or social formations. These chapters, I would suggest, are more interesting and 'critical' precisely because they tend to use and abuse Habermas for specific purposes, rather than getting hung-up on critiquing him, exposing blind-spots, or problematising his assumptions in light of alternative frameworks. I particularly liked Gemma Edwards's chapter in this respect. She uses and critically problematizes Habermas's distinction between 'system and lifeworld' – and what he calls the 'colonization of the lifeworld' – in analysing the emergence of specific 'social movements' in actual social formations. Emphasising Habermas's connection with a tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory (both Marcuse and Axel Honneth figure in the chapter), Edwards quite deliberately and convincingly frames her analysis of specific 'social movements' against the historical backdrop of 'capitalist modernization' or 'capital-labour' antagonism (for example, I found her discussion of the British Firefighters dispute of 2002-3 particularly instructive).<sup>4</sup>

In the penultimate chapter, James Bohman raises the idea of the internet as a 'public sphere' or 'transnational democracy'. Building on the classically Habermasian and normative intuition that any workable political public sphere must connect to an ideal of 'democratic deliberation', he is concerned to interrogate what form this model of democratic deliberation would need to take in an internet age. What we seem to have on offer here is a kind of Kantian cosmopolitanism for the broadband generation, a global public sphere or type of 'publicity' or 'dialogue' (a 'public of publics' as Bohman calls it) that tends toward the universal or global; a 'transnational public



sphere' which he claims is the basis "for a realistic utopia of citizenship in a complexly interconnected world."<sup>5</sup> In the final chapter of the volume, Lisa McLaughlin provides an implicit critique of the kind of Kantian cosmopolitanism offered up by Bohman. Building on the insights of leftist-feminist critiques of the liberal-bourgeois public sphere, she shows how the normative ideal of a free and equal citizenry engaged in dialogical exchanges about matters of public importance is itself shot through with an exclusionary logic that is both 'gendered' and 'neo-liberal' in its orthodoxy and operations. Against this, she argues for the possibility of a feminist theory

of the public sphere critically sensitive to the 'political-economic' conditions in and through which it is shaped.

All in all, Crossley and Roberts have pulled together a collection which, in a sense, does exactly what it says on the tin. That is to say, the collection is 'After Habermas' in the sense that it "extends the Habermasian project by way of an engagement with Habermas" and by the way it engages "other theories and frameworks which afford us different ways of problematizing and exploring the public sphere." However, as I indicated earlier, the collection never departs radically from Habermas, instead tending to supplement his work through a broadly sympathetic critique. In a way, we should not be surprised by this, and this collection only further reinforces the extent of Habermas's influence in the English-speaking academic world of public sphere theory. If we assume that trying to think and critically interrogate the concept of the public sphere means we have to stand in Habermas's shadow, then Crossley and Roberts' 'dialogue' with Habermas can be judged an interesting and useful addition to the literature, and it is on those terms that the book should be judged. After all, the collection is not called 'Forget Habermas: Perspectives on the Public Sphere that have absolutely nothing to do with Habermasian theory'. I have to say, though, I'd be more excited at the prospect of reviewing such a collection...

## Notes

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2. N. Crossley & J.M. Roberts (eds), 'After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere' (Oxford, 2006), p.1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. The importance of emphasising the 'Frankfurt School' lineage in analysing the usefulness of Habermas's thinking is something that is often lost in contemporary debates and critical commentary on his work. This is particularly the case within the political studies (or in English-speaking 'political theory') where Habermas tends to be mobilized as a 'liberal', a thinker (comparable to John Rawls or Ronald Dworkin, for example) who seeks to answer the question of what justice demands in a modern, pluralistic, liberal society. While this kind of critical commentary is undoubtedly important, and while Habermas's recent work in political and legal theory clearly merits such commentary and exposition, it is also crucial that we do not lose sight of the fact that Habermas's particular brand of critical theory is still intuitively guided by a clear notion of ideology critique, and by a clear conception of the ideological that can be tracked back to the Frankfurt School. I develop this point further in Robert Porter, 'Ideology: Contemporary Social, Political and Cultural Theory' (Cardiff, 2006).
5. N. Crossley & J.M. Roberts (eds), 'After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere' (Oxford, 2006), p. 154.



# Urban Nightmares and Dystopias, or Places of Hope?

Gerry Mooney

## Estates: An Intimate History

Lynsey Hanley, Granta Books, 2007

## Urban Nightmares:

The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City  
Steve Macek, University of Minnesota Press, 2006

## Back to 'Workhouse Social Welfare'?

English Housing Minister Caroline Flint's suggestion in February 2008 that unemployed council and housing association tenants (collectively termed 'social housing' tenants) must gain employment or lose their homes was widely criticised<sup>1</sup>, or alternatively dismissed, as 'simply' an exercise in thinking 'outside the box', 'thinking the unthinkable' or 'blue skies thinking' – with reports also claiming that her Cabinet colleagues were keen to distance themselves from her. Flint's ideas were, nonetheless, only too indicative of a deep-seated way of thinking about poor and impoverished people that has an enduring legacy in the UK – and across much of the Western world. Her proposal to have council tenants sign 'commitment contracts' requiring them to seek work for the privilege of living in a council house smacks of successive generations of social welfare policy which, over the period of the past four hundred years or so – and certainly going back to the Elizabethan poor relief reforms – have sought to focus attention on those deemed to be 'deserving'.

On stating her position, Flint expressed some initial surprise that council tenants are more likely to be unemployed than other sections of the population and that poverty and unemployment have come to be associated largely, though by no means exclusively, with the council estate. More recently in July 2008, the Government in London launched the Youth Crime Action Plan for England and Wales which promises to further extend the targeting of 'anti-social' and 'problem' families and the parents of unruly children. Among the sanctions announced include possible eviction from council rented properties.

"The workless' council estate where 'benefit' and 'dependency' cultures endure, and in which crime and delinquency apparently flourish, has become a recurring story across swathes of television documentaries and dramas, popular fiction, travelogues and cinema<sup>2</sup>. But, more significantly, over the past decade the 'moral panic' that dominated the Tories' administrations has become increasingly central to New Labour's electoral and policy making rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> It is this which has provided the backdrop for Flint's assertions – and which helps to inform a range of more punitive government approaches to crime and indeed to increasing criminalisation.<sup>4</sup>

## Territorial Stigmatisation

Flint is but one in a long and growing line of politicians, policy-makers, journalists and commentators who indulge in the popular pastime of territorial stigmatisation:

"Over the last two decades the gap between these worst estates and the rest of the country has grown... It shames us as a nation, it wastes lives and we all have to pay the costs of dependency and social division."  
Tony Blair, 1998<sup>5</sup>

"The truth is that council housing is a living tomb. You dare not give up the house because you might never get another, but staying is to be trapped in a ghetto of both place and mind."

Will Hutton, 2007<sup>6</sup>

"...there are thousands of people across Britain eking out lives...marked by violence, educational underachievement, unemployment, sickness and disease.... At the heart of almost every thriving city in Britain lies a second city, hidden from visitors' eyes."  
Amelia Hill, 2003<sup>9</sup>

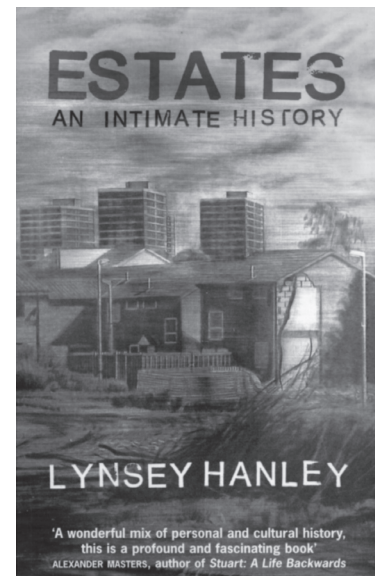
"Ghettos of the workless and the hopeless."  
Polly Toynbee, 1998<sup>10</sup>

In these brief extracts there is a shared view across the mainstream political spectrum of the council estate as a place of 'worklessness', 'benefit dependency'<sup>11</sup>, 'anti-social behaviour' and 'moral decline' – of hopelessness and despair. These are the kinds of locales increasingly identified by politicians and policy advisors as places where moral breakdown is translated into social breakdown.<sup>12</sup>

This is nothing less than an antipathy to working class cultures and to working class life, an antipathy which is in many respects not that dissimilar from the anti-working class hatred that is central to 'underclass' ideologies.<sup>13</sup> Such ideologies construct the impoverished poor as a group cut-off from 'normality', as the authors of their own misfortune, evidenced by claims about the disorganised, deviant and depraved lifestyles of those deemed to be part of such an underclass. Dress it up any way you wish, by all means use the term 'socially excluded' and there's no need to make reference to an 'underclass'. But there's no escaping that what we have in these brief comments is the continuing prevalence for a people and place stigmatisation that is shaped and influenced by decades of conservative thinking around poverty and disadvantage. In this approach structural factors such as class, racism and state oppression are completely neglected in favour of an attack and demonisation of public welfare as a major factor that underpins the reproduction of poverty, family dysfunctionality and which contributes to wider issues of law and order, community fragmentation and breakdown. We find ourselves in a position now, once again, of having to rebut such ideas and discourses, to reject victim blaming and individualist understandings wherever they emerge.

## 'Nightmares', 'Dystopias' and Moral Panics

While the spectre of the council estate plays an important symbolic role in such representations and discourses, the city or the 'urban' is an ever present backdrop. In other significant ways this also echoes a long history of anti-urban sentiment which together with anti-poor discourses have come to be entangled in different and complex ways to construct particular locales as dystopian and pathological. Steve Macek's *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City*, provides a detailed and comprehensive account of the ways in which a climate of fear and hostility to the city has been part of popular imaginings in the United States over the past two decades. In particular, he is concerned with the ways in which conservatives (including journalists in leading US newspapers) have been successful in constructing and representing "the nation's cities as violent and out of control, as populated by murderers, muggers, drug addicts and lowlifes, as places where the rules of normal, decent behaviour no longer apply".<sup>14</sup> Such sentiments have been further articulated, as emphasised, by a complicit mass media and by Hollywood to conjure up a vision of another America wherein "apocalyptic social



decay, wanton violence and depravity"<sup>15</sup> became the staples of rolling news reportage, newspaper story backdrops and popular films. Macek argues that the effects of such imagery was to shock suburban America, which he claims was still influenced by the 1950s and 1960s ideals and imagery of 'traditional American family values'. The ensuing culture of fear around urban decay and disorder that both reflected and fuelled a new wave of anti-urbanism was to find policy outcomes that have become all too apparent on both sides of the Atlantic, lending support and legitimacy to "an expanded police state coupled with a stripped-down welfare apparatus".<sup>16</sup>

'Urban Nightmares' is a very readable chronicle of the moral panic over the urban poor and marginalised which has come to be the dominant story of US urban life in recent times. All the familiar ingredients of an underclass ideology are to be found in this pervasive brew: moral breakdown, flawed lifestyles, dysfunctional families, violence and welfare dependency. Such ways of thinking were to find infamous expression in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, as part of a concerted effort by conservative politicians, city elites, property developers, and of course local law enforcement agencies, to blame explicit sections of New Orleans' impoverished residents for being contributors to 'their' own predicament.<sup>17</sup> Bubbling beneath the surface, race and the racial disparity of income was a key issue. However, as Macek argues, this was euphemized in different ways, for instance, 'the inner city' or even in the term, 'underclass':

"Such linguistic turns of phrase 'performed an important socio-psychological function for the white middle class in that it provides them with a series of code words that permit the expression of deeply felt anti-black and Latino sentiment with little self-consciousness or embarrassment'.<sup>18</sup>

In an evocatively entitled section which explores 'The Cinema of Suburban Paranoia', Macek neatly considers the important ways in which these visions of an urban nightmare influence mainstream US cinema. These sentiments are echoed in films such as *Batman* (1989), *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990), *Grand Canyon* (1991), *Judgement Night* (1993) and *Seven* (1995), among many others. Here, urban violence, gang warfare and the stock story of apocalyptic urban social breakdown provide the backdrop. But if the racialised discourse is couched in other terms, on the blogosphere, web, and in video home entertainment systems, such sentiments are rarely hidden but given much more of a voice. Many video games (the *Grand Theft Auto* series or

*Resident Evil* for example) rely on stereotypical imagery of the urban or Latino gangster, for instance. These forms of entertainment not only reflect but also serve to reproduce anti-urban visions of social breakdown, anarchy and violence.

## A Failure of American Liberalism?

The dominance of conservative and right-wing views circumscribing the city, disadvantage, and poverty, is accompanied for Macek by the collapse of US liberalism. In particular, the Clinton Presidency in the 1990s is held to be particularly culpable of surrendering to conservative ideologies, reflected in the 1994 'Crime Control Bill' and then in 1996 the 'Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act'. These two acts played to conservative-inspired fears of urban breakdown, dependency and worklessness. But the liberal surrender went beyond the Clinton administration, a 'victim-blaming discourse' gripped liberal thinking. This was reflected in a political and policy making panic around 'moral poverty' which in turn fed a language which spoke of 'criminogenic environments' and 'supercriminals' (or in the term favoured by right-wing criminologists: 'superpredators')<sup>19</sup> but which also deployed a range of 'biologically-derived' metaphors which worked to demonize teenage mothers and also unruly youth.

The emergence of something approaching a joint conservative-liberal consensus (reflected in the popularity of 'cultures of poverty' arguments, for example<sup>20</sup>) which was built on a particular story of urban chaos and disorder in the 'inner-city', contrasted with the assumed tranquillity and normality of suburban US life. All this reminds us of the close interconnections between the constructions of particular places and particular kinds of people and populations as problematic.

## Particular Kinds of People in Particular Kinds of Places

"Play word association with the term 'council estate'. Estates mean alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless petty stupidity, a kind of stir-craziness induced by chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the rigid bars of class and learned incuriosity."<sup>21</sup> "...you only have to say the word 'estates' for someone to infer a vast amount of meaning from it. It's a bruise in the form of a word: it hits the nerves that register shame, disgust, fear and, very occasionally, fierce pride."<sup>22</sup> Lynsey Hanley, *'Estates: An Intimate History'*

Council estates have long been vilified, likewise estate residents have rarely been viewed in positive terms: 'sink estates', 'problem estates', 'deprived' and 'depraved' estates. As in the USA, over the past decade or so there has been a growing consensus among right and left-of-centre politicians, policy-makers and political commentators around council estates. Take the following from 'leftish' journalist and commentator Will Hutton in the aftermath of several teenage murders in South London in February 2007:

"It is not British civilisation that ails, the extravagant charge made by David Cameron last week. It is British council estates. We made them. Now we need to unmake them, doing whatever it takes. Or else expect ever more of what we witnessed last week."<sup>23</sup>

'Unmaking' council estates is also about *remaking* council estate tenants – in a fantasy mould of the suburban middle classes – without of course the material intent to achieve such a radical makeover. The view of council estates espoused by the likes of Hutton offers the kind of sweeping generalisations that council tenants have become only too used to hearing. Stereotypes abound, mobilising a similar kind of language and discourse that Macek highlights in his account of the right-wing's demonisation of the US inner city. But as Lynsey Hanley reminds us in her part social history, part memoir of growing up on the outer Birmingham Wood estate, *'Estates: An Intimate History'*, it wasn't always quite like this. Leaving aside for the moment that there are council estates and then there are council estates, with different histories, diverse populations, contrasting levels of investment and differing stories of mismanagement, it is important that we hold on to the understanding that council estates

met an acute social need in inter-war and post-1945 Britain; a need that the private sector – then as much as now – is unable and unwilling to meet. Housing the poorest sections of the population was always a laudable aim – even if many of the pioneering generations of tenants in the higher quality council estates in inter-war Britain were hardly the poorest citizens. In the aftermath of World War II up to the 1970s, the public sector provided housing for almost half of the entire UK population, many living on the kinds of estates now the objects and subjects of middle-class sneering and vilification. Council estates were not always 'blots on the urban landscape'! Hanley shows that council estates in the 1950s and 1960s, while often falling short of policy making ideals, were far removed from the slum landlordism which characterised the private renting sectors. Cottage-style estates mushroomed, mimicking in various but rarely successful ways the ideals of the garden city movement of planned communities. But already in the 1950s 'concerns' were being voiced that council estates were characterised by monotonous architecture and, despite their initial wide social appeal, were increasingly single-class locales.

By the mid to late 1950s and reaching a peak in the 1960s and early 1970s, high-rise housing (together with a penchant among some construction firms and architects for 'deck-access' type housing, typified by Hulme in Manchester or Darnley in Glasgow) signalled the demise of council housing.

Under Thatcher and the Tories in the 1980s and 1990s, tenants' 'right to buy' the home they were living in served to deplete council housing stock, it also hastened the rise in property prices through encouraging market speculation. With remaining council housing stock concentrated in less well serviced areas with fewer employment opportunities, it also served to further isolate and stigmatize tenants, with remaining public sector provision seen as a residualised form of housing of the last resort for those who were not attractive propositions for market provision. This was closely followed in the late 1990s and 2000s by *en bloc* stock transfer of council housing ownership to privately registered landlords (some of them national companies), and the use of 'selective demolition' and compulsory purchase as a tool for further exploitation in the name of redevelopment. This represents the culmination of a long-term decline, underpinned by decades of a chronic lack of investment – indeed even disinvestment in council estates<sup>24</sup>. From their peak in the late 1970s housing nearly 50% of the population, by around 2004 this had declined to between 12% and 20% (although this is highly uneven geographically).

Hanley talks of two main public perceptions of the council estate: of a dream gone sour, where once a council house was a sign of a full stake in society, it is now a sign of stigma; and of a place to house those who will always be with us – the poor!

"You've got to put them somewhere, after all. Preferably somewhere a long way away from the rest of us; somewhere not very nice, so there is always that invisible stick to the backside, with the far-off prospect of escape to a better place as the tantalizing carrot."<sup>25</sup>

## A Wall in the Head?

"To be working-class in Britain is also to have a wall in the head, and, since council housing has come to mean housing for the working class (and the non-working class), that wall exists unbroken throughout every estate in the land."<sup>26</sup>

Lynsey Hanley, *'Estates: An Intimate History'*

At the core of Hanley's story is her description of the ways in which the monotony of the built environment, which characterises many of the council estates dotted around the UK, helps to create and reproduce what she terms a "wall in the head". Here we have the idea that council estate living is a state of mind, one typified by "invisible barriers" to self-improvement and knowledge – and to social mobility. Council estates supposedly work to "sap the spirit, suck out hope and ambition, and draw in apathy and nihilism."<sup>27</sup> This sense of exclusion from the wider world is vividly portrayed in Hanley's account of life on the Wood estate – and her 'escape' from it. Hanley



One of the Cutteslowe Walls: (left) standing, and (right) demolished.

is absolutely right to talk of a sense of exclusion and of alienation but she is on dangerous territory here – and territory that I fear she is not always successful in traversing. Hanley is well aware that council estates have diverse cultures and multiple histories: there is little sense here of the idea of 'the council tenant' as a monolithic grouping. While she avoids the patronising and moralising rhetoric, as well as the underclass-inspired thinking that flavours so much reportage of council estates. In talking of a 'wall in the head' or of council estate living as 'a state of mind' there is a tendency to indulge in a pop social-psychology of the kind that is increasingly common in social commentary and in policy-making discourses, such as 'positive thinking', that suggests all that council tenants need is the right attitude (being more aspirational!) and a more 'forward looking' frame of mind.

Council estate living can be tough – especially when living on low incomes and in acute material poverty – but to suggest that there is a council estate frame of mind (my words not hers) implies something that is not quite the norm; whatever that may be. As we have seen, language is an important part of the battle around poverty, inequality and social justice that can legitimise and exaggerate already prefigured prejudices. This means that we need to be continually alert to the ways in which it can be used to 'other' particular groups.

## Urban Apartheid UK Style

"Council estates are nothing to be scared of, unless you are frightened of inequality. They are a physical reminder that we live in a society that divides people up according to how much money they have to spend on shelter."<sup>28</sup>

Lynsey Hanley, *'Estates: An Intimate History'*

Hanley recounts the infamous story of Cutteslowe Walls. Cutteslowe was an area of Oxford where adjoining council and private estates were built in the early 1930s to accommodate the growing population of the town, then prospering on the expansion of the first generation of motor factories. These two estates were hardly distinguishable but the developer behind the private estate thought differently and without planning permission constructed in 1934 two walls (topped with metal spikes) across the main road, pavements and gardens between the two estates to completely isolate the council tenants. This illegal wall stayed put until the late 1950s.

This was nothing less than an exercise in class segregation – class apartheid. Hanley is well aware that Britain is a class divided society – even if her understanding of class is somewhat vague and undeveloped. In other places it reads almost as a Weberian notion of status – for Weber, as a third category distinct from 'class' and 'power', 'status' was understood in relation to 'respect' and 'prestige': status groups were hierarchically arrayed on the basis of distinctive lifestyles, consumption patterns, and modes of conduct or action, and therefore the inconsistency between someone's social status and economic class (status inconsistency) might have strong effects on people's behaviour. She is clear that Thatcherism in the form of 'right to buy', lack of investment, and the ensuing residualisation of council estates has contributed to the problems of concentrated low income, crime and other social problems. Her solutions entail the redesign of council housing, giving tenants a greater say in the day-to-day running of their estates and building 'community' in the estates – though critics of council estates frequently complain that they have too much community, but of the wrong kind! But Hanley also calls for a complete rethinking of council housing; seeing it as an "integral part" of the national housing stock which she claims will help to remove

the negative associations and views that it is “second class” housing.

To return to the idea of a workhouse social policy: As New Labour becomes increasingly more punitive around benefit entitlements, with recently announced plans<sup>29</sup> to introduce what amounts to community service punishments for those unable to find work after two years on benefit – community jobs, such as tidying parks, at a rate of £1.70 per hour! And with council tenants now being told by Caroline Flint that their tenancy may depend on them taking up paid employment, policing, regulating and disciplining poor people is increasingly the order of the day.

### Landscapes of Class

“...these entrenched quarters of misery have ‘made a name’ for themselves as repositories for all the urban ills of the age, places to be shunned, feared and deprecated. It matters little that the discourses of demonisation that have mushroomed about them often have only tenuous connections to the reality of everyday life in them. A pervading territorial stigma is firmly affixed upon the residents of such neighbourhoods of socioeconomic exile that adds its burden to the disrepute of poverty and the resurging prejudice against ethnic minorities and immigrants...”<sup>30</sup>

Loïc Wacquant, ‘Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium’

The “urban outcasts”<sup>31</sup> of the US inner city and UK council estate have become the stuff of parody, of ridicule but also of vicious class hatred. As such the class-basis of these discourses are somewhat neglected by both Macek and Hanley.

The construction and representation of particular places as problems does not happen in isolation from the wider class relations which permeate society and which underpin right-wing and conservative ways of thinking (as well as shaping some of the ‘left’ of centre discourses highlighted here).

The idea of the ‘ghetto poor’<sup>32</sup> or ‘slum poor’ has a long and pernicious history (for example in late nineteenth century middle class concerns with ‘the rookeries’ of London) and while the language might have changed – the sentiments and values which it carries are only too evident in the context of the neo-liberalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Such poor and disadvantaged groups are portrayed as recalcitrants, as in some ways less adaptable and ‘conservative’ in that they are unwilling to change to face new challenges.

The ways in which disadvantaged locales are constructed and represented often act as euphemisms for problem people. The use of such euphemisms reminds us again of the ways in which US liberals couched their embracing of conservative ‘blame the victim’ discourses in a range of coy terms. But hidden not so far beneath the surface is a pathological view of working class life. As Chris Haylett has forcefully argued:

“The issue then, is not so much the existence of working-class conditions (of hardship, exploitation and so on) as the particular ways in which they are problematised and the solutions attendant upon these ways of thinking. Put bluntly, where working-class identities and cultures and the processes through which they are constituted are not seen to warrant debate, target problems easily become targeted lives, little more than the adjuncts of rationalistic theory and policy-making. It would seem that this elision, practiced by politicians and theorists alike, is partly about a troubled approach to relationships between class and culture. Working-class cultures are positioned



at the apex of those troubles, as problematic, in need and usually ‘in receipt’ but not capable of giving or teaching anything of worth to dominant centres of value (public space, political institutions, middle-class ways of being).”<sup>33</sup>

At least Hanley holds on to the idea that council estates can be places that can offer hope and they can be places of resistance. Indeed, if council housing were the uniformly appalling places they are thought to be, why have many tenants fought and voted against council stock transfer? Council housing has played a significant historic role in meeting the housing needs of millions of people in the UK. What is needed now is a vast investment in remaking council housing, not its complete and utter destruction – but this is also tied to a wider commitment to re-establishing welfare and social need as a right, not a punishment! This, of course, would have to include the reintroduction of the basic democratic mechanisms of local government that have also been eroded. As Macek shows in the context of the contemporary United States, free market policies have failed. In the face of the celebration of the market by New Labour, such ‘solutions’ are also failing here in the UK.

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### Notes

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- See Charlie Johnstone and Gerry Mooney ‘Problem People, Problem Places? New Labour and Council Estates’ in Rowland Atkinson and Gesa Helms (eds) ‘Securing an Urban Renaissance’, Policy Press, 2007.
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# Public Service Denouncement

## Tom Jennings

Crime fiction has enjoyed something of a renaissance since the 1980s – aspiring to the status of serious literature as well as pulp populism, and embracing ambitions to critical social commentary from pungent perspectives outside of and in opposition to mainstream complacency. Many younger writers were inspired by neo-noir pioneers like James Lee Burke, Elmore Leonard and James Ellroy, who built on the genre's founding characteristics pitting independent 'working stiffs' and 'little guys' against the corporate corruption of the monstrous modern urban machine. However, these authors' somewhat old-fashioned, backward-looking sensibilities – partly, no doubt, due to their generational positioning – result in a pessimistic, ultimately even conservative, outlook concerning prospects for change. Beyond, that is, the temporary victories of cynically lovable rogues unmasking the amoral excesses of the rich and powerful – but which promise no enduring impact, either on the overarching societal structures and conditions which foster and shelter large-scale wrongdoing, or on the range of strategies employing variations of brutal and cunning self-seeking machismo shared by heroes and villains alike. These dispiriting trends are reinforced in the most popular latter-day descendants of private eyes in visualisations of urban chaos and crime at the cinema, where earlier shades of grey in classic film noir had mutated by the 1990s into lurid stylisation and the glamourisation of cartoonish violence – such as in films by John Dahl and Quentin Tarantino – with social and political context or nuance obliterated by technicolour nihilism and comic-book characterisation.

But there is another trajectory in recent noir fiction which starts from the empirically obvious proposition that the suffering associated with criminal violence falls disproportionately and routinely on the poor. Lower-class strata may be stigmatised and marginalised in terms of media portrayal as well as in achieving American dreams, yet constitute the bulk of the population – so that a point of view properly rooted within their milieux and lifeworlds may more accurately encapsulate the contours of present social ills. Alongside authors such as Walter Mosley and Michael Connelly (Los Angeles), Andrew Vachss and Richard Price (New York), and George Pelecanos (Washington DC), a prime exponent of this new wave is Dennis Lehane, whose Boston-based stories deal with urban impoverishment, gentrification, racism, organised crime and political and institutional corruption in such a way as to meditate on how ordinary people collectively understand and negotiate extremes of adversity – preferring vernacular verisimilitude in geographical and temporal specificity to the quirkily baroque, drifting grifting misfits elsewhere. Since this writer attracted widespread attention with Clint Eastwood's multiple Oscar-winning 2003 version of *Mystic River* (first published in 2001), several more of his books are now the source material for big-budget films whose producers expect equally impressive worldwide audiences. The next adaptation to reach the screen and fulfil the projection was *Gone, Baby, Gone* (directed by Ben Affleck, 2007; originally published in 1998), providing a convenient opportunity to evaluate any advances made by this revisionist hardboiled realism.

### In Loco Parentis

Based on the fourth book in Lehane's acclaimed Kenzie & Gennaro series, *Gone, Baby, Gone's* UK theatrical release was delayed in sensitivity to

the Madeleine McCann case – an association no doubt boosting box-office despite the two child abduction scenarios bearing scant resemblance. The salacious jostling of news-team vultures would be one common denominator – here descending on the depressed environs of Dorchester, South Boston, Massachusetts. Their typically hysterical saturation coverage highlights single-mother Helene McCready (a magnificent Amy Ryan) lamenting her disappeared four-year-old Amanda, shepherded by steely-eyed police with neighbours and family rallying supportively even in a prevailing mood of ominous pessimism. First-time director Ben Affleck (co-scriptwriter with Aaron Stockard) as well as the story's creator also hail from these mean streets, while thirty-something protagonist PIs Patrick Kenzie (Casey Affleck) and Angie Gennaro (Michelle Monaghan) have lived there all their lives. Passionate attachment to the blue-collar 'hood is reflected in the latter's preoccupations (e.g. Kenzie: "Things you can't choose ... make you who you are"), and in the camera's regular carefully naturalistic pans around inner-city blight, alighting on variously battered and beleaguered, resigned and/or residually energetic real residents – many of whom are also cast in supporting roles and minor caricatures complementing consistently fine acting by star-turns.

Despite high-minded pronouncements by Crimes Against Children Unit cop supremo Captain Jack Doyle – who years ago lost his own child to kidnapers – and ace detectives Remy Bressant and Nick Poole being assigned to the case (Morgan Freeman, Ed Harris and John Ashton respectively lending grizzled gravitas to proceedings), official inquiries quickly falter. Specialist skip-tracers hunting down debtors and errant spouses, the initially reluctant Kenzie and Gennaro are beseeched by Amanda's aunt Bea (Amy Madigan) and uncle Lionel (Titus Welliver) to join the investigation. After putting the word out on the street, local confidence in their discretion immediately yields leads – first, a recently-paroled child-molester may be in the area; then, the potential involvement of notorious gangster kingpin Cheese Olamon (Edi Gathegi) and missing drugs-money. Helene's own substance-abuse, chaotic self-centred behaviour and neglectful parenting compound suspicious unreliability, and her elusive boyfriend Skinny-Ray Likanski's (Sean Malone) sudden violent execution clinches the link. No longer patronised by the police for naïve amateurism, the investigators uncover the cash and Doyle brokers a highly unorthodox exchange for Amanda at a remote flooded quarry. Unfortunately the botched switch leaves Cheese shot dead, and she's believed drowned when a favourite doll is found floating in the treacherous waters. Doyle is sacked for culpable incompetence and retires in disgrace to the sticks; the little girl's funeral is held; crime-and-punishment pundits seek new shock-horror; and everyone sees tragic closure achieved.

Except for Kenzie, who still smells a rat – but a subsequent spiralling descent into the violent degradations of child abuse and addiction eventually reveals depths of duplicity at all levels even he'd never dreamed (surely also wrongfooting most viewers – *so anyone not wanting the suspense ruined should not read on*). When another local child disappears, Kenzie's old schoolfriend, now drug dealer, Bubba Rogowski (Boston rapper Slaine) confirms that cocaine addicts Leon and Roberta Trett (Mark Margolis and Trudi Goodman) are sheltering paedophile Corwin Earle (Matthew



The relentless message from media and politicians is to abandon the irredeemable poor, demonising any deviation from passively respectable defeatism.

Maher). Not waiting for backup, Kenzie, Bressant and Poole's shootout with the Tretts leaves the latter three dead, whereupon Kenzie finds the missing boy already murdered and kills Earle in cold blood. Soon afterwards, uniformed cop Devin (Michael Kenneth Williams) – another mate from back in the day – provides vital corroboration of the suspicions Kenzie has developed about Bressant who, disguised as a stick-up artist, desperately threatens to assassinate Kenzie and Titus to seal their silence. But a trigger-happy bartender gets him first and Titus confesses their collaboration in Amanda's disappearance. Putting it all together, Kenzie and Gennaro travel upstate and discover Amanda playing happily with Doyle's wife. However, refusing Gennaro's ultimatum to leave the child where she'll (assumedly) have a chance of a decent life, Kenzie reports the crime and Doyle is arrested. When the dust has settled, Kenzie visits the reunited mother and daughter. He finds Helene apparently cleaned-up, but preparing for a new date (courtesy of the local



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The innocent purity to be protected here is the lingering quasi-religious illusion that things might turn out right by trusting the benevolence of those in charge and believing their rationalisations.

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celebrity status afforded her by the media) and obligingly babysits, considering the situation thoughtfully as Amanda gazes mutely at the television ...

### Rule of Law

These plot twists in the last part of the film certainly serve to undermine our assumptions as cultivated so far – and Kenzie and Gennaro’s too, leaving them disagreeing over a final dilemma so fundamental as to terminate their professional and romantic relationship. Nevertheless, ultimate judgements and justifications concerning rights, wrongs and likely consequences remain suspended. Not only are heroic rescue, reassuring redemption, and cautionary tragedy refused, but the conservative grounds upon which viewers might expect such outcomes – from banal Hollywood crime-action pulp to the parallel (but no less fantasy-ridden) morbid tabloid shock-horror over current affairs – are comprehensively undercut. Such disquieting limbo was obviously deliberate, and scriptwriting decisions altering and cutting the source novel wholesale pass the buck to us even more starkly. But, when the crunch comes, the alternative courses of action are already so thoroughly tainted by association with webs of corruption, collusion, dishonesty and degeneracy that imagining integrity in any pat answer is out of the question. The story’s unusual strength, then, is to insist that apparently straightforward moral choices, posing isolated individual instances in simplistic good-versus-evil binaries, don’t stand scrutiny once their complex, ambivalent contexts and histories are laid bare. ‘Doing the right’ thing thus depends on what inevitably has to be ignored, assimilated, or denied.

The critical consensus concerning *Gone, Baby, Gone*, however, has been that the potential force of any such sophisticated philosophy is scuppered by the denouement’s implausibility. So deeming it unbelievable that the entire saga should constitute a conspiracy choreographed by Doyle in connivance with his lieutenants all the way down to Helene’s disapproving relatives; with varying material, malicious and purportedly altruistic interests and self-righteousnesses interweaving in spiriting the lass to ‘safety’ while her mam drank in the bar. The ensuing host of casualties, whether dead or bereft – un-mourned criminals, Bressant and Poole, sundry written-off lower-class dupes – are then blithely sacrificed, pawns for the patriarch’s peace of mind on relinquishing burdensome responsibility. But what really galls, one suspects – for those of conventional bent – is that out the window also go all pretensions of institutional credibility. Crucially, the scheme’s success hinged on acceptance at face value of the normal scripts, clichés and homilies of governance, public service and basic decency among higher- and lower-order model citizens obeying the law along with those charged with upholding it. Whereas not only does the arrogance of power lead the rogue detectives to assume they can get away with their scam, but we are invited to tacitly underwrite their belief that their actions are in the best interests of the child – which was supposed to be the official remit all along.

### Criminal Justice System

Now, this narrative device – of illegal activity by law-enforcement personnel seeing no other way to fulfil their sworn duty – can be interpreted not as a rare unfortunate exception, but rather a particularly vicious and vivid expression of business as usual. Such might be the response, for example, of those on the habitual sharp end of prejudicial insult, harassment and stitch-up from police officers and, for that matter, officialdom in general. In which case an overarching metaphor comes into focus – the police force standing for the entire institutional paraphernalia of government, including its purportedly benevolent arms – whose main function is to keep the lid on all the cans of worms threatening polite society. From this jaundiced perspective, at least, *Gone, Baby, Gone*’s

plot may not seem outrageous at all, resonating far beyond its particular setting to the War on Welfare everywhere. But in a South Boston rapidly decaying beyond reasonable hopes of salvation, Kenzie and Gennaro are cast as representative of a grass-roots, working-class sensibility, yet without the luxury of cynical fatalism if they are to nail the truth and do their job. And although the film loses the bulk of LeHane’s meticulous dialogue conveying the full convincing texture of conflicting attitudes in action, viewers are given several hints among the blood-red herrings that the protection of childhood innocence is a (perhaps *the*) primal pretext for other, guiltier, agendas.

So, encouraged to perceive Helene harshly through circumstantial implication, explicit condemnation, and the harsh glare of unforgiving attention, we never glimpse direct evidence of her actual everyday relationship with her daughter. We are expected to assume the worst. Kenzie, though, sees genuine grief (as opposed to self-pity) beneath her white-trash bravado – which inclines him to accept the mission – while Gennaro embraces advocacy for Amanda herself, regardless of the concerns of the adults. These combined criteria, without which the case would have gone decisively cold, specifically rebut any stereotypical dismissal of Helene. Contrariwise, Doyle’s parental fitness is unchallenged, despite his known trauma and willingness to wreck lives to heal it. Who is the child, to him, beyond a substitute salving private pain? Do his influence and affluence – displaced from urban hell to rustic idyll – guarantee saintly credentials in arrogating to himself godlike choice? Then shouldn’t all the suffering children be saved from the agony of the ghetto and the evils impoverishment produces? Even if the manner of its accomplishment adds to the oppression and injustice nourishing desperation in the first place, simultaneously precluding youthful renewal? While, irrespective of increments of positivity which might (arguably) transpire, serving the selfish desires and fantasies of those in positions to exploit the system to advantage? ... Anything for a happy ending?

No. The relentless message from media and politicians is to abandon the irredeemable poor, demonising any deviation from passively respectable defeatism. The innocent purity to be protected here, then, is the lingering quasi-religious illusion that things might turn out right by trusting the benevolence of those in charge and believing their rationalisations. Whereas, surely, if a single soul spared is the best to hope for, this betrays an utmost cynicism – the complete collapse of legitimacy of the status quo to match its guardians’ insincerity. But Kenzie won’t give up on his people (or himself), following simple ethics, fulfilling his promise – returning Amanda to her mother – when others see Greater Good accepting thoroughgoing corruption in a broken society. Even he suspects he chose wrong, in the final scene mournfully contemplating prospects, Helene again out on the razzle. Yet with no individual correct solution to a collective quandary, maintaining honesty, integrity and compassion and nourishing them around you may represent a pragmatic faith preferable to fairytale wish-fulfilment making token exceptions to busted-flush rules. Credit is due to *Gone, Baby, Gone*’s makers for going against the grain to render such thorny issues even conceivable on mainstream screens.

### To Protect and Serve

While acknowledging that it was no mean feat to adapt over five-hundred pages of original novel down to a script five-times shorter – yet still managing to effectively convey the spirit and overall ambivalence that the author intended – it is worth looking more closely at the heavy culling involved in the process of visualising Dennis LeHane’s scrupulously character- and dialogue-driven prose. In his writing, responses to, evaluations of, and wider ramifications pertaining to even the most harrowing experiences are contrived to flow naturally from the culturally and emotionally realistic perspectives of his

protagonists and their idiosyncrasies – rather than the arbitrary manipulation to serve externally-imposed stock motivations that Hollywood is notorious for. Most obviously in this respect, the blockbusting set-piece action scenes and the extremes of violence portrayed sit awkwardly with the unsentimentally direct depictions elsewhere of mundane everyday poverty and its smaller-scale, if no less corrosive, aggressions and menaces. In fact Lehane admits to imagining the kinetic, balletic characteristics of such sequences according to cinematic iconography, and the film treatment certainly obliges – although with a consistent concentration on the visceral and psychological suffering incurred, evoking horror rather than cartoon titillation. Nonetheless the slick revelation and negotiation of their ugly depths cannot conceal the fact that the pivotal confrontation at the quarry and storming of the paedophile's den, for example, are side issues both in terms of the specific narrative logic as well as the more abstract themes being developed.

True, there is a balanced, gradual progression of heightening danger, more immediate physical threat and raised stakes the further and deeper into the mire Kenzie and Gennaro stumble. But in the book's trajectory – although each blow dealt, injury sustained, and narrow escape accomplished wreaks indelible damage on bodies and psyches that is never trivialised – the objective qualities of these deadly situations are overshadowed by the shared struggle to interpret their significance in the light of limited, provisional understanding. So, not surprisingly, the very real evils of organised crime and the undoubted prevalence of child sexual abuse were considered prime candidates to account for Amanda's abduction. As favoured moral panics they also feature centrally in prevailing discourses justifying the whole panoply of legal powers whereby the state protects society via monitoring and intrusion. Whereas here these are manifestly unfit for purpose, dysfunctioning only as pretext and smokescreen, so that any regressive cathartic release after the usual suspects are disposed of dissipates rapidly as no payoff accrues. With the child still missing, only obstinate dissatisfaction with received wisdom, relentlessly seeking sense, eventually makes the difference. And this perverse persistence feeds on a constant interplay of repartee, interplay and synergy between Kenzie and Gennaro mulling over matters arising within their network of close friends, colleagues and acquaintances among criminals, cops and ordinary folk – an immersion which is precisely what the film's condensation abandons.

A world in flux to be deciphered by the hard graft of socially-situated knowledge instead hard-boils down to showcase showdowns in a static fantasy universe of heroic fallen angels and archetypal demons puppet-mastered by unseen fiendish hands. It resembles all those tiresomely mechanical detective thriller formats, onscreen and in the genre literature, which pander to disgusted fascination at the depths of human depravity while working overdrive to reassure us of our distance from it. But Lehane's version flirts with these conventions only to flout and transcend them, and Kenzie is no lone crusader for justice – despite the screenplay's best efforts. Most importantly, Gennaro's role is attenuated to the extent that she appears no more than a feminine accessory representing empathy, concern and support counterpointing Kenzie's masculine detachment and objectivity. Whereas practically the opposite is the case in the book, where he is intuitive and she more practical and organised, a better planner and indeed a better shot – she actually shoots Bressant, and saves Kenzie's bacon much more often than vice versa throughout the series. As a partnership of rough equals, their conflictual relationship is central to the investigation's progress, and their contrasting perspectives on relationships and family arising from their own wretched childhoods have left them both deeply flawed and of questionable moral stature in various different respects. Their

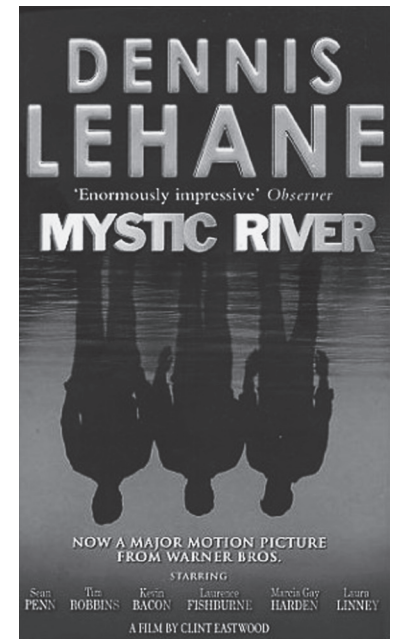
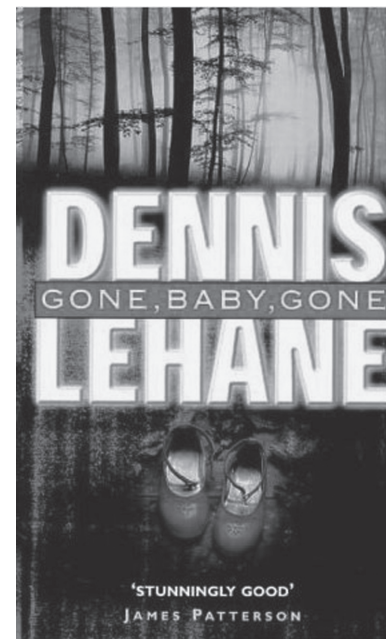
estrangement at the end then reflects the deeply personal resonances of the situation rather than dogma – and even this is accommodated in the subsequent instalment, *Prayers For Rain* (1999), by which time each sees the merits of the other's position.

Moreover Kenzie, Gennaro, Rogowski, and Cheese, along with other excised characters, were all childhood friends, schoolmates or neighbours with shared histories straddling all sides of the law. Bubba Rogowski is the couple's most steadfast friend and protector, not just an old acquaintance – a borderline-psychotic weapons-dealer and feared enforcer with extensive Mob connections rather than a local pusher. Devin (and his partner Oscar) are longstanding close friends too, and Homicide detectives (not patrolmen) into the bargain. They have been kept in the loop and in fact make the decision to arrest Doyle, who had not lost his own child at all; while Bressant was ex-Vice squad (where the rogue activities originated) and married to a former prostitute. Unable to have biological children or adopt legally, they had also stolen a child – with strong hints of an established pattern involving many parents deemed deserving or unfit. Thus, among countless elements lost from the plot, such details indicate that, for Lehane, the function of Kenzie and Gennaro's familiarity with their neighbourhood wasn't simply getting information from people who don't trust the authorities. More ambitiously, it was to develop all of the themes of the story from the bottom-up, within a working-class community split along all manner of fault-lines, where no one's hands are clean or consciences clear – our heroes being just as implicated in the degeneracy that they encounter and sometimes initiate as are the residents saturated with it, the police powerless to control it, and the traditional villains of the piece seeking to profit.

### Duty of Care

Despite Ben Affleck's laudable effort to translate the substance of its original subtlety and force into screen entertainment, then, *Gone, Baby, Gone*'s passage from the written word loses, to a significant extent, its characters' embedding in a collective search for meaning in relation to self, family and class in a concrete historical setting. Here, the worldviews of those who grew up poor in the 1970s and 1980s, when the economic, political and geographical profile of urban America twisted so drastically, inevitably involve particular inflections of disillusionment with grand narratives of democracy and freedom and broken promises of upward mobility and social inclusion. The moral landscapes, intellectual priorities, and practical choices of those of the younger generations who still pursue a better life without succumbing to the seductions of materialistic misanthropy can hardly be expected to show patience with the middle-class liberal pieties that have failed them so miserably. Instead they fall back on their own resources – such as they are – and manage in this story to penetrate opaque veils of deception and delusion, misdirection and malice. In the process the fascistic overtones are exposed of a contemporary cultural eugenics foisted on the weak by the strong in the name of a humanistic duty of care which no alternative means can be found to fulfil. Yet the critics deem this preposterous to the point of mendacity – so that one wonders which world they inhabit.

Without in any way minimising the dreadful anguish precipitated by a lost child, Lehane cultivates those associations of this iconic image which loom largest in today's deprived neighbourhoods – not least the shattered aspirations of parents for their offspring and the vain hopes of a bright future among the youth themselves. The careful accretion of biographical detail and the backstories of the protagonists situate these problematics squarely within their lived experience, modulating their ethics and conduct, so that they are fully part of a local scene which, on the other hand, the filmmakers can only objectify in sweeping anthropological survey. Here,



Affleck's self-effacing lead performance at least captures the author's intention to sidestep the tortured existential solipsism of the traditional private dick (along with his femme fatale's Oedipal supplement) as the driver of the narrative arc – even if the central role of Kenzie's extended elective family is also sadly sidelined in the filmic logic. But in fact plot structures are secondary in most Lehane novels, being tailored to wider organising metaphors and signifying chains connecting working-class adjustment to changing conditions – especially in *A Drink Before The War* (1994) treating racism, gang warfare, political corruption and child abuse and *Darkness, Take My Hand* (1996) with serial killers given succour by family, neighbourhood, criminal and municipal complicity, as well as in *Gone, Baby, Gone* and *Mystic River*.

However, while Eastwood's cinema version of the latter retains the quasi-Shakespearean symmetry of three characters representing disastrous facets of masculinity, the emphasis was shifted entirely by downgrading its grounding in the mutual deterioration of their socio-economic and psychological wellbeing – a comparable truncation to that observed with *Gone, Baby, Gone*. So it seems that mainstream US media remain unwilling or unable to countenance stories which properly respect the real misery neoliberal barbarism produces at home among its surplus populations, but also hint at the potential for “genuine solidarity and the pursuit of shared purpose in circumstances in which business as usual is decisively threatened”.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the opportunity to follow such lines of flight is increasingly exploited in new-school American crime writing, on screen the balance consistently tilts towards old-school staples of vicious impasse and hopeless tragedy – from, for example, Spike Lee's 1995 adaptation of Richard Price's *Clockers* (1992) through to HBO's much-heralded television soap opera *The Wire*, chronicling the small-time drug trade and its policing in Baltimore, Ohio (featuring scripts by Price, Pelecanos and Lehane, among others). Conversely, one cinematic exception to this recalcitrant rule is Ray Lawrence's remarkable *Jindabyne* (Australia, 2006). Here an attack on a child again radiates heart-wrenchingly throughout a community, with the murder whodunnit also irrelevant, yet the film closes optimistically as ordinary townfolk mobilise their sorrowful social fabric towards fellow-feeling and a fresh start.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it can be done – in the imagination as in real life – however much we are encouraged to disbelieve it.

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### Notes

1. See my 'Rose Coloured Spectacles', in *Variant*, No. 27
2. See my review for *Freedom* magazine, available at <http://libcom.org>

# Jagged Edges or Natural Flows

Philippa Hall

**Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order**  
James Ferguson, Duke University Press, 2006

**The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticisation and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho**  
James Ferguson, University Of Minnesota Press, 1994

Given that European colonialists in 19th century Africa considered their legitimate trade and Christianity constituted a civilising mission to reform savage, backward societies, there is an historical irony in the message of Jo Owen's recent book, *Tribal Business: Lessons in Business Survival and Success from the Ultimate Survivors* (2008). In this book, Maasai 'tribesmen' teach UK business leaders the basic principles of business survival, which boil down to the following maxims: 'don't get into a fair fight, you could lose'; 'take the lead'; and lastly that cornerstone of positive thinking, 'change or die'. That lessons in such predatory ruthlessness are sought by UK business tells us very little about the Maasai, but does say quite a bit about the extent to which a currently hostile environment exists within global capitalism. The Maasai are not only represented here as 'noble savages' who can survive Robinson Crusoe-like, they are also seen as fearsome warriors who adapt to maximise their opportunities in the face of rapacious competitors. For Owen, survival in business is equally precarious, as "since the FSTE 100 was created in 1984, 80% of companies listed have been taken over [...] any tribe that had only lasted 25 years would be said to have failed."

While Maasai 'tribesmen' teaching principles to UK entrepreneurs may appear a novelty, the idea that the workings of the free market are part of human nature, and have an elegant simplicity about them, unclouded by social mores and the trappings of civilisation, is part of neo-liberalism, along with entrepreneurialism and privatisation. Indeed, writers such as Ayittey (2005) have argued that capitalism is not a European invention, rather the market economy is indigenous to Africa and its authentic forms of production are rural, and include agriculture and the extraction of natural resources. In contrast, institutions and ideas such as 'the state', 'urban society', and 'socialism' are seen by Ayittey as western imports, and for this reason have not flourished in the African nation-state during the post-colonial era. The idea that there can be such a thing as a 'failed' tribe, or indeed a 'failed' state, shows that neo-liberal policy has a limited criteria of success and failure that only really encompasses profitability for the global market. There are, of course, echoes of this throughout the world wherever neo-liberal policies exist, such as the evaluation of 'failed' schools during education reforms in the UK.

In the light of these times, James Ferguson's books *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticisation and Democratic Power in Lesotho* (1994) and *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neo-Liberal World Order* (2006), trace the complex relation between rhetoric and policy within neo-liberalism. In fact, the first book assesses development policies within Lesotho since independence, asking to what extent poverty and development can be tackled within the framework of the nation-state given the impact of the regional economy of southern Africa on Lesotho. The second book extends the debate, arguing that development within the nation-state must be set within a globalised economy, where new ideas surround 'Africa' and 'its place in the world', for both Africans and westerners.

## Globalisation as 'convergence' or 'jagged edges'?

One of the strengths of Ferguson's work in *Global Shadows* is the insightful analysis of the much discussed, but often unclearly defined, processes of 'globalisation'. Many people argue that globalisation is an inevitable process of social and economic convergence and homogeneity, a single and shared economy into which all parts of the world will eventually become incorporated. While the current extent and the pace of the process of globalisation are debated, there is an underlying assumption that convergence is occurring. Globalisation is a process that is often described through metaphors of 'flow' and 'tide', words that convey both a natural inevitability and also the Canute-like futility of opposition. Yet, as Ferguson shows here, globalisation is a system of disconnection. Rather than joining places together in a unified whole, the globalised economy 'hops' between "enclaved points...excluding the spaces that lie between the points" (p47), globalisation is a 'globe-hopping' business not a process of total integration (p47). The example that Ferguson cites is Angola, a state in which oil production occurs largely off-shore and staffed mainly by foreign workers who are housed in private enclaves. Foreign oil companies are operating within the Angolan state, but have minimal contact with institutions and people in wider Angolan society. Indeed, as Global Witness reports, "the government has ring-fenced the oil sector against the inefficiencies of the rest of the economy and relations with the oil companies are generally good" (p201, in 1999:p5).

That such glowing reports of business opportunities can sit alongside the idea that African states are "synonymous with failure and poverty" (p5) suggest that globalisation has not brought convergence and homogeneity to the continent. In contrast, Africa's social and economic inequalities are widening; small numbers of people live in the enclaves formed by the globalised economy, while the majority live in its disregarded hinterland. Moreover, the whole African continent has become increasingly marginalized within the world economy in the last thirty years, as levels of capital investment have fallen. Rather than seeing Africa as an anomaly to the successes of globalisation elsewhere in the world, such as the Asian 'tiger' economies, Ferguson suggests that the economic marginalisation of large parts of Africa is not anomalous, but rather is intrinsic to the process by which a globalised economy is restructured.

Analysing the complexities of globalisation requires an overview that locates Africa's "place in the world" in order to see how Africa "functions in a wider categorical system and what this means for the way we understand an increasingly trans-national political order" (p5). During the post-colonial era, African social relations and institutions have largely been studied at a local level, using ethnographic research methods. However, *the intricate processes of globalisation* have eluded localised studies. In fact, it could be argued that this micro-focus for research impedes collective discussions among researchers about the economic and political issues that are common across Africa, and also obscures the significances of larger scale issues for Africans. The shades and nuances of meaning located in ethnographic studies of 'alternative modernities', in which globalisation appears in diverse localised forms, serve for Ferguson to depoliticise and obscure the



gulf of global inequality that has opened up between African countries and the west since the 1980s. This inequality has widened to the point that it has eclipsed the idea that African states can catch up with the West at a future point through 'development'. Instead, African states are considered to be of a qualitatively different order and are positioned separately and unequally in the globalised economy. For this reason, the nation-state can no longer be an autonomous economic entity in a global economy, and for African countries this undermines possibilities for the state to pursue development. Africa, as the underdeveloped entity, is necessary to legitimate unhindered or unstructured growth elsewhere.

## The simultaneous 'failure' of the nation-state and the 'success' of trade liberalisation

A common experience across African states, and obscured by localised study, is the impact of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) imposed throughout the continent by state governments as part of International Monetary Fund (IMF) reforms since the 1980s. Structural adjustment policy was presented by the IMF as the solution to the balance of payments crisis of the late 1970s, aiming to promote capital investment through currency devaluation and privatisation. SAPs were standardised policies that, on the face of it, appear to have failed to achieve many of their objectives; there has not been capital investment, the agriculture sector is still dwindling, and the manufacturing industry has been destroyed. However, there is no doubt that SAPs have opened up the economies to the market. Following Ferguson's earlier *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994), could the 'failure' of many aspects of SAPs be seen as a necessary stage in the overall policy of economic liberalisation? In a globalised economy that is shaped by IMF policy, 'Africa' is considered a region that has been ripe for investment: it is 'under-polluted' and has an 'unfair share' of unexploited natural resources relative to other areas of the world. Once marketisation is permitted in previously state-run sectors – such as telecommunications, banking, transport, and security forces – foreign investors appear, meaning that the 'failure' of SAPs can occur along with trade liberalisation.

## Elementary acts of theoretical and political clarification? Strategies for political action

Unusually for academic writing, both of Ferguson's books consider possible strategies for political action against widening inequalities within the nation-state and on a global scale. Both categories of the local and the nation-state are depoliticising, because wider social and economic

forces that exist beyond the boundaries of these units are excluded from the debate. According to Ferguson, rethinking these categories, “becomes an elementary act of theoretical and political clarification....as well as a way to strategically shape the struggles of subaltern peoples and social movements around the world” (2006:p109). However, moving from redefined categories to organisational strategies for political action is another task that proves more elusive.

Where Ferguson’s political strategies seem weak are in his hopes for an appeal to moral objections to neo-liberalism within the nation-state, and in his appeals to gain the support of the global media for marginalized subaltern groups. Yet neo-liberalism is bereft of ethics. As David Harvey points out, “neo-liberalism values market exchange as an ethic in itself” (2005:p3). While Summers has rejected criticism against moral void, saying that “moral reasons and social concerns, could be turned around and used more or less effectively against every Bank proposal for liberalisation” (The Economist 1992 in Ferguson 2006:p71). Ferguson suggests that the ‘insistent moralising’ about the production of wealth and its relation to social relations within African cultures may spark a critique of the value-free, ‘scientific capitalism’ of the neo-liberal agenda (p72), seeing evidence of this in the fact that there are food riots that resist SAP policies. However, in arguing this point Ferguson seems to create a dichotomy between the ‘natural’ order of IMF neo-liberalism and the moral order of African economies that overlook the actual negotiations and practices by which structural adjustment is imposed.

Neo-liberalism works in Africa in part because its policies are advantageous to the African elite. Ferguson at points overlooks the African class interests that impose policies and work with foreign investors to facilitate marketisation. Later on, in chapter eight he does, however, discuss the way the Angolan economy has been made attractive to foreign investors, noting that: “Angolan elites meanwhile have been nothing if not efficient in growing fabulously rich” (p201). Given the class divisions within African society it is unlikely that a ‘remoralisation’ of national debate prompted by African cultural values around the morality of wealth would restrain neo-liberal economy policy. On the contrary, just as successful trade liberalisation requires ‘failed’ states, so wealth accumulation may require ‘insistent moralising’ about the merits of the simple, unencumbered life of the village. Furthermore, as Ferguson notes, a ‘remoralisation’ of political debate at national level is unlikely to bring substantial change as economic policy is largely accountable to the IMF, so the ‘opinion’ of national citizens does not, and would not, constitute a political challenge.

A more promising strategy in the globalised neo-liberal economy is the development of a trans-national politics of resistance. Ferguson suggests that in the post-Cold War era ‘civil society’ is cast as a set of ‘grassroots’ institutions that exists ‘below’, but can contest, state power. This idea of civil society “obscures antidemocratic trans-national politics” (p107) for it takes political and economic freedoms to be maintained by a vigilant civil society against an ‘oppressive’ state. Yet in the globalised economy, both the state and civil society are shaped by the interventions of international agencies, whether this is the IMF shaping state policies or the impact of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) operating at ‘local’ grassroots level. In short, as long as the nation-state sets the parameters for political resistance, the extent and motives of international intervention remain uncontested. Certainly, organisational strategies for political resistance do need to reach beyond the state. However, the idea that “transnational power does not come through the state” (p106) underestimates the significant role played by the state in facilitating and sustaining the transnational political order.

### Local, canny grassroots operator?

Instead of resistance being based in the idea of grassroots struggle from below, Ferguson argues for struggles ‘across’ against the “hydra-headed transnational apparatus of banks, international agencies and market institutions through which

contemporary capitalist domination functions?” (p107). However, in ‘*Global Shadows*’, the ideas for trans-national forms of resistance seem to be limited to appeals to ‘world opinion’ to support marginalized peoples; a strategy which stands in contrast to the call for the co-ordination of labour union campaigns across the regional economy in ‘*The Anti-Politics Machine*’. In fact, rather surprisingly, Ferguson appears to have a lot of faith in the power of media campaigns to create a social movement ‘across’ national borders. An example, he suggests, is the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, whose leader, Subcomandante Marcos, has apparently gathered the support of celebrities and ‘apparently’ appeared in a Benetton fashion shoot, “in camouflage dress, with the glossy photo captioned: ‘You have to go to war. But what will you wear? Camouflage visual dynamic: light, photogenic...ideal for the soldier who goes from war to war and who doesn’t have time to change’” (p108). Ferguson sees this as a clever act of ‘media politics’ in which the old style revolutionary is remade, and “local, canny grassroots operators may trump the national ace with appeals to ‘world opinion’” (p111). Yet can a media campaign form a powerful act of resistance that reaches ‘across’ national borders?

The icons and images of ‘resistance’ movements are often incorporated, and neutralised, by fashion and advertising. Furthermore, the appeal to ‘world opinion’ is an extremely limited and unreliable form of political action that is likely to be shaped by the perceptions of the powerful, rather than the terms of the marginalized. Once ‘support’ of ‘world opinion’ is acquired, what next? The ‘political acumen’ of the media savvy Zapatista resistance strategy exists for Ferguson in the hope that “celebrity attention and world press coverage may well help to protect Chiapas communities against potential aggression” (p108). However, in recent times resistance groups that did have transnational ‘support’ from celebrities and heads of state, such as the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), still met with brutal oppression. What Ferguson’s analysis does not take into account is that neo-liberalism does not restrict the repressive power of the state. For Ferguson, Zapatista tactics show that “such rhetorical and organisational moves directly challenge state claims of vertical encompassment” (p111), meaning that state power and authority is undermined by the struggle that reaches ‘across’ different parts of the world. Yet, Ferguson’s hopes for the success of the Zapatista media campaign obscures the ways in which neo-liberalism sustains and recruits state power to exercise ‘vertical encompassment’ at certain points in time and in certain contexts. States are critical to the emerging global order; they are not an archaic political form. Rather, they are rapidly adapting, providing the infrastructure and the legal framework upon which market liberalisation depends. For example, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) works by drawing together nation-states to create a transnational order that facilitates capital investment.

### ‘Images of destabilisation’ or should the grassroots be ‘worldly, well-connected and opportunistic’?

Ferguson’s idea that the Zapatista campaign can work through the circulation of the “image of destabilisation through guerrilla warfare” (p108) limits the terms of the debate by starting with the idea that “capitalism is built to perceptions” (p108). Notwithstanding the theory of the spectacle, this also overlooks the fact that capitalism is built on labour and so under-estimates the significance of resistance through labour. Would it be a good idea to shape a grassroots politics that is “worldly, well-connected and opportunistic”? (p107) – something that sounds too much like the flexible practices of the transnational capitalism which it opposes. Basing resistance strategies on the management of ‘perceptions’ and ‘images’ seems an unstable basis on which to progress, not least as capital investors would require greater certainty and security of return from investment.

At the start of the book Ferguson appears to suggest that capital investment is shaped

by ‘perceptions’ rather than ‘objective data’. In the introduction, Ferguson quotes Bindha (1999) arguing that “negative perceptions of Africa are a major cause of under-investment” (Bindha *et al* 1999:p72), and concludes that it is ‘complex investor perceptions rather than objective data’ that informs investment policy (1999:p15). For Ferguson “such perceptions don’t just misunderstand social reality; they also shape it” (p7). However, by chapter eight, foreign investors had adapted to unstable economies and infrastructures. Here, he argues that a new ‘thin’ model of the nation-state is emerging, exemplified by Angola, in which foreign investment occurs despite an ‘inefficient’ and ‘corrupt’ government, and a decrepit infrastructure ruined by years of civil war. In fact, the inequalities that are brought by globalisation are fragmenting, rather than integrating, social relations. This process of fragmentation is both a consequence and a policy of globalisation, and it could inform political strategies. In the Niger Delta, oil companies have responded to protests by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) by relocating from the Delta region to set up offshore production and housing for foreign workers in Lagos. While the grassroots struggle ‘across’ may be debated, what of the responsibility of the state official to look ‘across’ and address policy in a critical and informed manner? Naomi Klein notes that if South Africans had studied the reforms in the Soviet Union, they would have seen that economic reforms could curtail the democratic sphere. Instead, they accepted the view of the trans-national advisors that no alternatives to free trade policy existed (2007:p217).

### Conclusion

Ferguson’s book is an insightful and original analysis of the complexities of the economic and social processes that are termed ‘globalisation’. In particular, the common idea of globalisation as a phenomena of ‘convergence’, often expressed in the naturalised metaphor of the ‘flow’ and ‘tide’, is shown instead to be disconnected and disjointed points of investment, as rather a set of ‘jagged edges’, a set of economic policies and processes that have increased social and economic inequalities, carving out enclaves of wealth in areas of poverty. The ‘jagged edges’ replace the naturalised ‘flows’. Global policies do not spread prosperity, but rather exacerbate economic inequalities and curtail the democratic means to oppose its processes. In recent years, this overall picture of decline has been further complicated as the balance books in some ‘developing’ economies show quite large increases in GDP, yet no evidence that this wealth will ‘trickle down’ to the mass of the population. Indeed, it’s worthwhile remembering that a range of ‘disasters’, such as floods, earthquakes and wars can grow your GDP.

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# The Food-Fuel Crisis

## Derek Reid

Recent studies indicate that we face a looming global peak in oil extraction. Peak oil is the point at which further expansion of oil production becomes impossible because new production flows are fully offset by production declines. While the Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas (ASPO) predicts that it will occur in the next ten years, there is some debate as to whether it has already occurred. According to Deffeyes<sup>1</sup> and Simmons<sup>2</sup> it happened in 2005, while Skrebowski<sup>3</sup> states it will occur in 2010. Much of these figures, however, do not take into account the fact that as the halfway point of a reserve is reached, extraction and refinement of the remaining oil becomes increasingly expensive and requires more energy. Acknowledging these conditions, British Petroleum announced in 2004 that just over forty years of oil remains.<sup>4</sup>

Due to industrialised societies' heavy reliance on oil, peak oil will have major implications for their future. Today's global economic system is effectively based on the availability, abundance and, more importantly, cheapness of oil. According to Rob Hopkins<sup>5</sup>, fifty years ago the world was consuming 4bn barrels a year and the average discovery was around 30bn a year. Today the opposite is true: consumption is over 30bn barrels a year and the discovery rate is around 4bn a year. In the age of oil, some 47,500 oil fields have been found, yet the forty largest ones have yielded 75% of all oil discovered. Discoveries have declined in size and number since 1965, while consumption has continued to increase. The average size of field discovered in the 1940s was 1.5bn barrels of oil. By 2004 this figure was just 45 million, and it continues to fall. For Hopkins, the nature of new discoveries that the market gets excited about, for example the Alberta tar sands in Canada, indicates that we are nearing peak production. "Prospecting on Wall Street" he sees as a final indicator that we are approaching peak: an oil company's share price is tied to its amount of reserves, i.e. the potential future production it has secured. As the size of new discoveries has gone down, companies have increasingly found it difficult to sustain their reserves level. Larger oil companies buy smaller ones to acquire their reserves, thereby securing more potential production. While this has always been the case, Hopkins points to the fact that these takeovers in recent years have become huge, with there even being speculation that BP and Shell may merge. Another development is that oil companies, with record earnings due to the high price of oil, are awash with money with seemingly nowhere to reinvest it, believing they are spending all they need on current extraction and exploration.<sup>6</sup> Increasingly, this has led to companies buying back their own shares, deploying unprecedented profit levels in market dealings that boost their own share price. Chevron



plans to spend \$15bn in the next three years on buying back its own shares, while Exxon is similarly spending \$30bn each year.

Peak oil theory, it is suggested by Hopkins, may well now be a factor in the decisions oil companies are making. The 2007 Global Upstream Performance Review states:

"We believe that the issue has become part of the industry's long-term planning. If peak oil theory is correct, and a decline in world production is imminent, a company must choose among four alternatives – try to become a dominant participant, find a niche operational talent, harvest assets, or liquidate quickly."<sup>7</sup>

There are some who would rubbish peak oil theory, such as economist Ismael Hossein Zadeh.<sup>8</sup> He claims that energy-saving technologies will improve efficiency and so reduce consumption, that new technologies utilised by the oil industry will improve oil exploration and allow oil to be extracted from previously inaccessible regions such as deep water, and that there is plenty of "non-conventional" oil left, such as the Alberta tar sands in Canada. He further claims that peak oil theory discounts alternatives such as gas or alternative-fueled cars. Peak oil theory is also argued against by suggesting that the increased world demand for oil, due to the booming economies of China and India, has been offset by economic downturn in Europe and the US. While it is true that the production of much that the west consumes has moved to the east, Zadeh does not take into account the actual scale of global growth, such as China's investment in Africa. Zadeh also points to increased market speculation, suggesting that, "As much as 60% of today's crude oil price is pure speculation driven by large trader banks and hedge funds." Finally, he suggests recent price spikes in oil are due to geopolitical insecurity in the Middle East, not a shortage of oil.

But, as David Strahan<sup>9</sup> argues, those who point to energy efficiency have not thought it through. The House of Lords Science and Technology Committee has shown that although the UK's energy efficiency has allegedly doubled since 1970, overall energy consumption still continues to increase. It doesn't matter if your latest electrical gadget is more efficient when there are many more of them in use. It doesn't matter if a modern car

does more to the gallon, if the number of journeys continues to increase. As Strahan points out, this is known as the "boomerang effect", or more exotically, "The Khazzoom-Brookes postulate". Strahan also looks into the effect of technologies upon the petroleum industry, and the argument that technological advance enables the industry to exploit previously inaccessible regions, such as deep water. It is not uncommon for the new class of drill ship to be operating in depths ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 feet. Venturing out into ever-increasing depths requires larger equipment with extra hoisting capacity, and more capacity in pumping systems. In addition to increased water depths, you also have to contend with the fact that the geologic target area is quite a bit deeper. You can be in 8,000 or 9,000 feet of water looking for a target 20,000 feet below the seabed. All this adds up to increasing energy demands in order to explore for and extract oil. Here Strahan quotes Jim Henry, a Texas oil man:

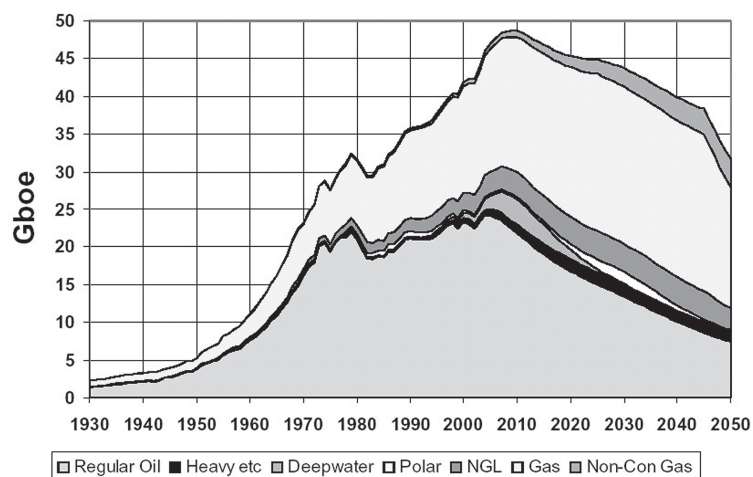
"A lot of people think this new technology is going to save us, but it doesn't work that way ... In the natural course of events we find the huge reservoirs first. In the US we found lots of the biggest in the 30s and 40s. And when they start declining, because production rates are huge, we can't make up the difference with all the little fields we're finding today ... Technology can kind of mitigate the decline, keep the decline from being so steep, but it won't stop the decline."

As for Zadeh's point concerning non-conventional oil, although there is estimated as much as 175bn barrels of oil in Alberta's tar sands<sup>10</sup>, it is hugely expensive, energy intensive, and damaging to the environment to produce. It takes huge amounts of natural gas and water to extract the tar, the gas being used to make steam that is then injected to make the tar easier to extract. The tar then needs cleaned up, which again takes huge amounts of energy. According to Greenpeace<sup>11</sup>, by 2011 the whole process will produce the equivalent of 80m tons of carbon dioxide per year – more than all the cars currently on Canadian roads.

Natural gas has also been hailed as a possible savior to future energy demands. Two types of fuel can be obtained here, Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) and Gas to Liquids (GTL). The latter was used as town gas before widespread electrification. These fuels can be obtained from coal as well as gas, however, the emissions in the case of coal to liquid fuel are twice as high as from conventional diesel.<sup>12</sup> The Fischer-Tropsch conversion process involved is also highly energy intensive. According to the International Energy Agency<sup>13</sup>, gas to liquids production is only 55% efficient, meaning the process itself uses up 45% of the gas. LNG, on the other hand, could be conceived as an interim fuel while we attempt transition, even if it has to be cooled to -160°C to be transported.

There are many estimates of the amount of gas left worldwide, and Strahan<sup>14</sup> gives an average estimate of 11,700 trillion cubic feet – equivalent to 1.9 trillion barrels of oil. However, the production infrastructure needed is not in place. The whole process of building an infrastructure has been plagued by engineering problems and budget overruns. In a report by Deutsche Bank Securities<sup>15</sup>, LNG supply is assessed as having persistently failed to meet forecasts and will continue to do so. According to Paul Sankey<sup>16</sup>, "LNG was seen as the cavalry coming to save the day. In reality we are still waiting. Our conclusion is that LNG supply will stay tight for the foreseeable future, being 2015 and beyond." Also hailed by opponents of peak oil theory is the invention of alternative fuels such as hydrogen cells. As Stahan points out, the technology, at \$1m a car, is currently too expensive. There are other problems too: fuel cell cars are very inefficient. According to Massachusetts Institute of

**OIL & GAS DEPLETION PROFILES**  
2004 Base Case



“The idea that developing countries should feed themselves is an anachronism from a bygone era. They could better ensure their food security by relying on US agricultural products, which are available in most cases at lower cost.”

John Block, US Agricultural Secretary, 1986

Technology<sup>17</sup> there is little difference in emissions between fuel-cell vehicles and their closest petrol competitors.

While Zadeh's reasoning regarding peak oil may be skewed, he does however point to a fundamental truth: that much of the price rises we have seen over the past two years is due to speculation:

“Wall Street financial giants that created the Third World debt crisis in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the tech bubble in the 1990s, and the housing bubble in the 2000s are now hard at work creating the oil bubble.”<sup>18</sup>

### The food industry: its dependence on cheap oil.

The food industry is expected to be one of the hardest hit by the decline of cheap oil.<sup>19</sup> Modern agricultural practice is hugely oil-dependent, as is the surrounding post-harvest processing and distribution systems. From the field to the plate, oil fuels machinery, gets livestock fed, provides the base for agrochemicals, and fuels processing, packaging, and the long supply chain. The food we eat is not only inherently unsustainable, increasingly it is also damaging the environment. The food system itself is under serious risk from global warming caused by the greenhouse gases it emits. Predictable climate cycles, on which the system depends, are increasingly being disrupted. Additional environmental degradation is also taking place; irrigation systems use up huge amounts of water, soil erosion due to nitrogen depletion is evident across the globe, and deforestation continues apace to make way for agribusiness.

In March 2008 *The Times* reported that the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) monitored outbreaks of food riots in Mexico, Morocco, Uzbekistan, Guinea, Mauritania and Senegal, as well as the Indonesian capital Jakarta. The riots have multiple causes, however, the fact that oil has almost doubled in price in a year may well be the largest single contributor to pushing up the price of fertilizer as well as the cost of transport. Climate change has seen harvests seriously disrupted by freak weather conditions, including prolonged droughts in Australia and southern Africa, floods in west Africa, an extreme deep freeze in China, and record temperatures in northern Europe. The push for bio-fuels as an alternative to oil has further placed strain on the food system, especially in the US where these crops have been heavily subsidised. Global stockpiles of basic grains have dwindled to their lowest point in decades and rice has soared to its highest price in over twenty years, with supplies at their lowest since the 1980s.

The global wheat supply is even worse. Stockpiles are now lower than they have been in the last fifty years, according to the FAO, with just five weeks of world consumption available. Global wheat prices jumped by 25% in one day in February, prompted by Kazakhstan placing restrictions on exports through fear that its own population may go hungry. Likewise, India and Egypt have followed suite, with soybean oil shooting up by as much as 60% in one year. According to *The Independent* reporting in June, 37 countries now confirm they are in the grip of a food crisis, and that the price of food is at the centre of attention of financial speculators looking for new profit avenues following the credit crunch. Popham suggests speculative trading in food commodities has increased by as much as 1000% in the past four years and now exceeds \$150bn, while *The Guardian* points out that Wall Street investors own 40% of US wheat futures and over 20% of corn futures.

In May, while releasing its annual outlook report, the FAO predicted that by 2017 wheat could be up 60% and the cost of vegetable oils may rise by 80% – this after prices of wheat, maize and oilseed crops already doubled between 2005 and 2007. It is also reported that although food prices are expected to drop in the future, they will plateau at a far higher level. *The Guardian* also reported in May that global inflation of food prices, as measured by the international food price index, increased by 40% in 2007. This dramatic rise continued during the first seven months of 2008. Any increase in food prices hits the poorest the hardest, as it is them who spend a larger proportion of their income on food. In industrialised nations, the average household expenditure on food is about 10% of income, while for the poorest nations the proportion is as much as 50-80%, so any increase can easily translate into hunger for the poorest fifth of the world's population.

According to Norman Church<sup>20</sup> the situation the food industry is in is totally against common sense. To illustrate his point, he uses the “crazy case” of Swedish tomato ketchup, which undergoes more than fifty-two transport and process stages, further arguing that in many cases countries import and export massive quantities of the same food product. For example, UK imports of milk have doubled over the last twenty years while there has been a four-fold increase in exports. This sounds not only utterly illogical, it is also unsustainable in the long run.

Church looks to the organic sector for possible solutions to this situation, arguing that organic is more energy efficient due to lower fossil fuel consumption and lower emissions than in conventional farming. Drawing from a UK study, this improved energy efficiency stems from lower – or zero – fertilizer and pesticide use, which otherwise accounts for up to half the energy input in conventional potato and winter wheat production, and as much as 80% of the energy consumed in some vegetable crops. Concentrated cereal feeds are the largest energy input in conventional livestock farming; when reared organically a larger proportion of feed for livestock comes from grass. In the case of dairy farming it was found that organic systems were almost five times more energy efficient in terms of unit



output, in this case a litre of milk. However, Church quickly points to problems with this system too, as once produce passes the farm gate it enters the world food system like conventional produce. Britain imports over three quarters of its organic produce, while only 2% of land is organically farmed, which means food miles, energy consumption and emissions savings are quickly lost. According to Church, one shopping basket containing twenty-six imported organic products could have traveled as much as 241,000km.

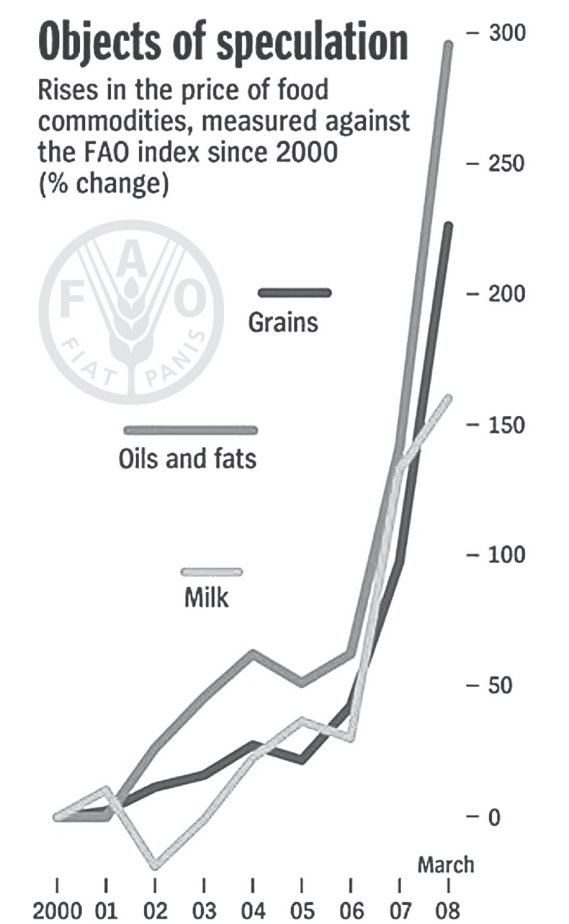
Paul Roberts<sup>21</sup> sees many problems with the modern, industrialised food system, including a lack of biodiversity with the associated increased risk of widespread crop failure, and the spread of diseases such as foot and mouth. However, for Roberts the main threats are energy, climate change, and water. According to Roberts, ethanol refineries now consume nearly 30% of US corn crop annually – up 10% since 2002. This, he claims, has had the effect of pushing up the price of grain paid by cattle and dairy farmers. But the amount consumed by the biofuel industry is still dwarfed by the livestock industry, which uses up more corn than every other user combined. In 2006, more than one third of the 2bn tons of grain produced worldwide was used to feed animals. Forecasts predict that by 2017 global grain prices may increase by 50% above historic averages. By 2070 the world population is expected to peak at 9.5bn, from its current 6.7bn. The question, though, is not how are 9.5bn going to feed themselves by 2070, but how long can the demand of 6.5bn people today be sustained? Roberts' answer is that lowering meat consumption is a necessity. Not least as meat is a very inefficient form of food when you take into account that 20lb of feed equals just 1lb of meat. In other words, for every ton of beef, twenty tons of grain is consumed. Which is why as much as 90% of the grain consumed by Americans is consumed in meat or dairy production.

Corn is the most nitrogen-hungry of all commercial crops – 33,000 cubic feet of natural gas is needed to make one ton of nitrogen fertilizer. This amount of gas could be used instead to generate 9,671 kilowatts of electricity – enough to run an average UK home for ten-and-a-half months. This means that farmers (via the fertilizer companies) are now in direct competition with utility companies for natural gas. Estimates are that as much as 230lb of nitrogen is applied to the typical acre of US corn, with up to 50lb of this leaving the soil and entering the surrounding environment, causing soil depletion, which according to a World Bank study is now so severe that by 2050 the planet may be trying to feed twice as many people with half as much top soil. The story does not stop there. The nitrogen released into the surrounding environment essentially fertilizes everything it meets, such as various algae. When these organisms die, they set off a chain reaction known as eutrophication, which sucks oxygen out of the surrounding water, leaving massive fish-killing zones. According to a 2003 report by the UN environmental programme, the number of dead zones worldwide is about 150 – more than twice 1990 levels. This is not the most lasting effect of Nitrogen. By binding with oxygen the migrating nitrogen becomes nitrous oxide, a major pollutant that depletes the ozone layer and is a greenhouse gas 300 times more potent than carbon dioxide. It is claimed by Roberts that as much as 70% of all human-generated nitrous oxide comes from farming.

As for climate change, high-yield crops are susceptible to climactic shifts. They have been designed for and been evolved under a particular climate regime, so even a modest shift in climate conditions or cycle can have massive consequences for yields. Higher temperatures boost pest populations and allow insects, fungi, and weeds to thrive and pests to migrate into regions historically unaffected by them. Higher temperatures also mean higher levels of bacteria, which accelerate the decay of soil organic matter and thus reduce the soil's capacity to store nutrients and transport water. Such soil will not only erode more easily, it also needs more fertilizer to maintain yields.

However, as they have less organic matter to retain them, they will surrender more of those added fertilizers into groundwater.

On average, according to Roberts, every ton of grain requires 1,000 tons of water. Agriculture now accounts for roughly three quarters of all fresh water use across the globe. In California it sucks up as much as four-fifths of the state's water supply. The global yields of grain have only become possible through huge irrigation systems, with half of the developing world's grain crop grown industrially on irrigated land. To meet future population food demand the FAO predicts a 20% increase in irrigation by 2030. However, many studies indicate that not only is this increase impossible, but that even current water use is unsustainable. Roberts points to a 2001 report by the World Bank, which states that China now exceeds the sustainable flow of the Huang, Hai and Huai rivers by as much as 600m tons a year, to grow grain. In all, one trillion tons of additional water will be needed in order to produce the extra



grain the world is forecasted to need by 2050, a challenge Roberts suggests seems to be beyond our technical, political and physical capacities. So the question now becomes, what sort of agricultural system could produce the food and fibre we need in a world where oil could be as much as \$250 a barrel, and where we have twice the severe weather, but only half the water that we have now?

### International finance: how neoliberal policies ended agricultural self-sufficiency in developing countries

The neoliberal policies of the IMF and World Bank play a causal role in this unsustainable system, in the form of the free trade policies, as they are known, promoted by international financial institutions. A classic example, given by Roberts,<sup>22</sup> is Mexico. In 1982, it threatened to default on \$80bn of foreign debt, a third of which was owed to US banks. The World Bank and the IMF agreed to restructure Mexico's repayments, as they did for many other debtor nations. However, this was only agreed on the condition of debtor nations restructuring their "dysfunctional" economies according to free-market principles. A main target for restructuring was the agricultural sector. A less restricted, more liberalised food trading system was imposed – the Washington Consensus, as it

came to be known – which changed the shape of the global food system. Many nations, Mexico included, had to move away from small peasant holdings to a high-volume, intensive, industrialised model, which was expected to produce surplus for export and the earnings used to pay off debts.

To bring this about, debtor nations were required to liberalise state-run farming – for example, eliminating farm subsidies that, according to the Washington Consensus, distorted trade by protecting small, inefficient farmers. They were also to devalue currencies to make their produce cheaper for foreign buyers. Not only were they expected to export more, by opening up their markets, they were expected to import more as well; not only imports of fertilizer, for example, but more commodities such as grain if it could (apparently) be grown more cheaply elsewhere. Most importantly here, they were also directed to open up their borders to foreign capital, known as Foreign Directed Investment (FDI), the excuse being that many of these nations lacked the infrastructure needed for modern industrialised agriculture. This inevitably led to developing-world farmers with smallholdings being in direct competition with large-scale, multinational, agribusiness operators who still benefited from the very subsidies now prohibited in the developing world. According to Roberts, this was to have a huge effect upon these regions, where farming can account for as much as half of a developing country's economy, in contrast to being a small part of the economy in a developed country, where it may be only 2% of all jobs and only 1% of GDP. Many of these previously food self-sufficient nations now found themselves relying more and more on imports as their farmers increasingly could not compete with their subsidised foreign counterparts. In Mexico this had a devastating effect on peasant farming, which was followed by an even bigger blow in the shape of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), as further phasing out of tariff protection for these countries took place. This led to huge amounts of US subsidised corn flooding the market and plunging many farmers into crisis and in many cases driving them out of business. Big business in the form of multinationals, like US companies Cargill, quickly moved in and monopolised the sector. According to Walden Bello<sup>23</sup>, as many as 1.3m farmers were put out of business in Mexico, and this trend continues as neoliberals in the Mexican government dismantle the peasant support system, a key legacy of the Mexican Revolution. A country which was once self-sufficient in corn is now heavily reliant upon imports, a situation which had such dire consequences as to force tens of thousands of people to take to the streets in 2007 to demonstrate against a 60% increase in the price of tortillas.

For Bello, the global food crisis stems mainly from free-market restructuring of farming. A clear example for him is the case of rice. There has been no transfer of rice consumption to biofuels, as in the case of corn, and only 10% of the world's rice production is traded. However, rice, like wheat and corn, has seen a huge rise in price, nearly tripling from \$380 a ton in January to more than \$1000 a ton in April 2008. Again, as with corn, the rise in price is closely linked to market speculation, and again the question remains as to why countries like the Philippines, once self-sufficient, are now heavily reliant upon imports, and again the answer is seen in the shape of neoliberal economic restructuring. As Bello points out, between 1986 and 1993 debt repayment accounted for 8% to 10% of GDP in the Philippines. Interest payments as a percentage of total government expenditure rose from 7% in 1980 to 28% in 1994, as a result debt servicing became a national budgetary priority and spending on agriculture fell by more than half. As with Mexico, peasants in the Philippines had to contend with a full-scale rolling back of state support. This was compounded in 1995 with the nation entering the World Trade Organisation, and its associated trade liberalisation. The agriculture sector in the Philippines essentially collapsed and



the country, which had had 900,000 metric tonnes of rice in government warehouses in 1986, and which had been self sufficient, began to import rice for the first time. The amount rose from 263,000 metric tonnes in 1995 to 2.1m in 1998.

As Bello indicates, this experience was replicated in many different countries that were subjected to the policies of the IMF and WTO. He points to a study conducted by the UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation, which looked at fourteen different nations and found that food imports had increased in every one: not surprising when the goal of the WTO's policy on agriculture was to open up markets in developing countries so that they would absorb the surpluses produced by the EU and US, surpluses that were only made possible by huge subsidies. In the US, these subsidies increased from \$367bn in 1995 to \$388bn in 2004, giving US farmers a distinct advantage over their developing counterparts. Even though under WTO guidelines subsidies were meant to be phased out, since the late '90s subsidies have accounted for 40% of agricultural production in the EU and 25% in the US. This, along with the fact that due to liberalisation multinational companies have increased their share of the market, has meant that there is now very little room in the market left for the hundreds of millions of peasant farmers throughout the world, further eroding national food self-sufficiency and food security.

The situation is repeated in Africa. In the 1960s, during decolonisation, Africa was a net food exporter, but today it imports as much as a quarter of its food, almost every country being a net importer. For Bello, African agriculture now finds itself in a deep crisis, which has multiple causes, from the spread of AIDS and HIV, war and bad governance, to lack of agricultural technology. However, as with Mexico and the Philippines, lack of government support mechanisms due to neoliberal economics and its associated restructuring of the food sector is a major contributing factor. Liberalisation has enabled subsidised EU beef to drive many west and south African cattle farms out of business, while US subsidised cotton has been unloaded on to markets at as low as 20% of production cost, again bankrupting African farmers. Oxfam estimates that between 1981 and 2001 the number of sub-Saharan Africans living on less than a dollar a day doubled, pointing to structural adjustment as the main source of creating such poverty. This is best shown by Bello in the example of Malawi. In 1999 the government started a programme in which small family farms were given a seed and fertilizer starter-pack, resulting in a national surplus of corn. World Bank directives and aid donors forced this to be abandoned. Without the starter packs output collapsed while the IMF

insisted that the government sell off a large portion of its grain reserves to settle debt. Corn surplus and self-sufficiency soon turned to famine in 2002, a situation which worsened by 2005, when the Malawi government had had enough and reintroduced the programme, enabling over two million households access to discounted seeds and fertilizer once more. The result was a bumper harvest for two consecutive years and a million-ton maize surplus, which then became a national export to South Africa.

### Local production must supplant global structures

Rob Hopkins sees climate change and peak oil<sup>24</sup> as two issues that are totally interwoven. According to Hopkins, peak oil is problematic for climate-change activists. He suggests that George Monbiot has expressed caution about placing any emphasis on peak oil theory, fearing that this will strengthen the case for alternatives, like bio-fuels, increased coal consumption, tar-sand extraction and other processes dangerous for the environment and climate – and, we might add, the market for nuclear. This has led to many climate activists arguing that we must keep peak oil and climate-change issues entirely separate. However, for Hopkins, they are both symptoms of societies addicted to fossil fuel lifestyles the planet cannot sustain.

For Church, the solution lies in organic localisation, in which food production and consumption becomes local and regional as opposed to globalised and transnational. With problems such as food security, greenhouse emissions, food miles, erosion of biodiversity and environmental as well as economic degradation, Church points to a process of exchanging “near for far” in production and distribution systems, with production placed as close to the consumer as possible. Local food systems would take the form of local farmers' markets and shops selling local produce, replacing imported and centrally distributed food. Leaving aside foodstuffs such as bananas, coffee, tea and sugar, products such as meat, cereals, dairy and cooking oils, as well as local fruit and vegetables, could be available throughout the year and imports of these suspended. This, Church argues, would increase self-sufficiency and food security, and help regenerate local and rural economies.

### Notes

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