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SPECTACLE AND TERROR

As these lines are written in San Francisco, the Blue Angels fighter planes are roaring and booming only a few feet overhead, with many in the crowd on the ground cringing, then laughing nervously, and finally nodding casually at 'just entertainment'. The same planes over Gaza City reveal their true business.¹

THE PASSAGE ABOVE from Retort's *Afflicted Powers* indicates the scope of this remarkable work from the Bay Area collective, which connects bombing, terror and spectacle. The book emerges from the anti-war movement, spurred both by its remarkable popular support and the knowledge that the slaughter of civilians from the safety of the skies is not merely the last resort of power, but its regular, integral practice. The authors gloss Thomas Hobbes: 'By terror thereof. To forme the wills of all. And whoever calls this into question proposes an end to what we know of politics as such.'²

Retort's controversial theses on war, capitalism and spectacle have invited widespread debate. Gopal Balakrishnan, in the last issue of *NLR*, weighed their assertion that the us, being in thrall to spectacle, is no longer able to think strategically.³ In the pages of *October*, Hal Foster questioned Retort's opposition to modernity, and asked whether it might lead to a defeatist notion of spectacular politics.⁴ In what follows I will relate these debates to what is perhaps the central motif, and motive, of the book: an extension of Debord's concept of the spectacle, not only to explain the conduct of the us, but to bring out what it might offer a disillusioned anti-war movement. Retort's message for the peace movement is not an easy one. War is certainly a stimulus for political action:

Even those who go out into the streets when outright war is underway find it much more difficult—and we include ourselves in this company—to muster similar emotional energy in the face, for example, of the slow

death from disease and malnutrition of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis under 'sanctions'.⁵

Yet war and the state are central to each other, and to experience warfare is also to experience the modern world in the most complete and extreme fashion: 'War . . . is modernity incarnate', claim Retort.⁶ Frequent war is necessary to the symbiosis of business and state, stimulating the economy in difficult times, producing opportunities for looting—or 'primitive accumulation'—and inuring the population to the spectacle of their armed forces punishing some recalcitrant state by killing and maiming its citizens. In these circumstances, 'peace' is merely a prelude to war, and it is achieved through pacification of the chosen enemy. Such a peace cannot be what the anti-war movement really wants:

Unless the anti-war movement comes to recognize the full dynamics of us militarism—to understand that peace, under current arrangements, is no more than war by other means—then massive mobilizations at the approach of full-dress military campaigns must inevitably be followed by demoralization and bewilderment.⁷

Given the continual threat and regular actuality of terror dealt from the sky, the 9-11 attacks did no more than to return to the us a taste of the force it has wielded across the globe. Arundhati Roy, in a courageous piece published shortly after the attacks, put the matter plainly:

The September 11 attacks were a monstrous calling card from a world gone horribly wrong. The message may have been written by Bin Laden (who knows?) and delivered by his couriers, but it could well have been signed by the ghosts of the victims of America's old wars. The millions killed in Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia, the 17,500 killed when Israel—backed by the us—invaded Lebanon in 1982, the 200,000 Iraqis killed in Operation Desert Storm, the thousands of Palestinians who have died fighting Israel's

¹ Retort (Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, London 2005, p. 102 (henceforth AP).

² AP, p. 107.

³ 'States of War', NLR 36, November–December 2005. Setting this assessment of the us state in its wider geopolitical field, and likening the gamble of the Iraq war to high-risk business techniques, Balakrishnan argues that Retort's conceptions of primitive accumulation and spectacle are, ultimately, 'juxtaposed rather than integrated'. He also sounds a note of scepticism that 'Seattle, Genoa, Chiapas' can rise to the challenge of the current political conjuncture.

⁴ 'On *Afflicted Powers*', *October* 115 (Winter 2006).

⁵ AP, p. 102.

⁶ AP, p. 79.

⁷ AP, p. 94.

occupation of the West Bank. And the millions who died, in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Panama, at the hands of all the terrorists, dictators and genocidists whom the American government supported, trained, bankrolled and supplied with arms. And this is far from being a comprehensive list.⁸

The anti-war movement and all of us society, claim Retort, have yet to internalize that.⁹ It is more comforting to believe that the current war is caused by the perfidy of individual politicians, or by a scrabble for oil, since a solution to those problems can at least be glimpsed.

Yet the character of this book is more unusual than its basic political subject and stance would suggest. It is the collective work of four members of the Retort group—Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts—who by pooling their expertise have created a work of extraordinary range. Aside from the issue of warfare and the state, *Afflicted Powers* examines war and terror as spectacle, the ‘blood for oil’ argument, revolutionary Islam and the us attachment to Israel, and does so with consistent acuity and attention to detail. These elements are built into a synthetic account of the post 9-11 scene which asks fundamental questions about the Left’s direction and positive programme.

Retort is a group of thirty to forty members who meet monthly to discuss a wide range of political issues. Their members are very diverse and include poets, economists, historians, journalists and activists. The origins of the book in pamphlets prepared by Retort for the anti-war demonstrations are still clearly apparent in its eloquent and passionate tone, and in the measured venom they direct at the murderous actions of the machine of state and the powerlessness of the mass opposition it has aroused. One of their models, write Retort, is the Junius pamphlet of Rosa Luxemburg, and indeed her prose—fired by the betrayal of the Social Democrat Party caving in to war, and the slaughter of a generation of the proletariat on the battlefields—does bear comparison to *Afflicted Powers*:

Shamed, dishonoured, wading in blood and dripping with filth, thus capitalist society stands. Not as we usually see it, playing the roles of peace and righteousness, of order, of philosophy, of ethics—as a roaring beast,

⁸ Arundhati Roy, ‘The Algebra of Infinite Justice’, *Guardian*, 29 September 2001.

⁹ AP, p. 97.

as an orgy of anarchy, as a pestilential breath, devastating culture and humanity—so it appears in all its hideous nakedness.¹⁰

The tone and rhetoric of the book are stern, urgent, demanding and unflinching; the ‘we’ of its authors shades into the ‘we’ of the anti-war movement and even of the Left. It is a long time since a collective have addressed the Left in this manner, one precedent being the *May Day Manifesto* of 1967, edited by Stuart Hall, E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams—though this was a collation of a much wider range of material, rather than a task of collective writing, and its tone, the reflection of a moment of opportunity as much as of crisis, was more sedate and patiently reasonable.¹¹ By contrast, Retort shuttle, as they put it, ‘between stubborn expectancy and unbudgeable sense of doom’.¹² And, as we shall see, there is a good deal of doom, in contrast to the stance, say, of Noam Chomsky, who would have us dwell on the achievements of radical politics so as to arrive at a less gloomy assessment of its prospects, or of Rebecca Solnit, an associate of Retort, who in her recent book, *Hope in the Dark*, takes a similar line.¹³

Image attack

The central claim of the book is that, with the attacks of 9-11, the US state was wounded at the level of the spectacle and cannot endure this ‘image death’ or ‘image defeat’.¹⁴ The perpetrators were fully conscious of what they were about, were in fact Debordian in their thinking, reasoning that capitalism is dependent on the colonized social circuits that comprise spectacle—including confidence in the market and the state, and an identification with commodity culture—and that to disrupt spectacle may have great and unpredictable consequences. The attacks, Retort claim, were not atavistic pinpricks but modern politics, an assault above all on the ‘ghost sociality’ purveyed by the media.¹⁵ The assault on spectacle, not on economic power or even people, was their main business, and in this sense they were for a short time remarkably successful.

¹⁰ Rosa Luxemburg, ‘The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis in German Social Democracy’ (1916), in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. Mary-Alice Waters, New York 1970, p. 262.

¹¹ A second expanded edition was published by Penguin: Raymond Williams, ed., *May Day Manifesto 1968*, Harmondsworth 1968.

¹² AP, p. 9.

¹³ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: The Untold History of People Power*, Edinburgh 2005.

¹⁴ AP, pp. 25, 34.

¹⁵ AP, pp. 26–7, 29.

Drawing their phrase from the mouth of Milton's Satan, Retort argue that the attacks created 'afflicted powers': both those of the us state and the Left—the Empire wounded at its image heart, enraged and unable to heal itself, and the Left with no cogent plan to exploit that wound, or salve its own.¹⁶ An indication of the depth of the Empire's wound was the taboo set in place within days of the event on images of the planes colliding with the towers and of the towers falling. Since then, Retort claim, the silence of mass culture has been 'deafening'.¹⁷

There is much that can be said to qualify this view. The motivations of the bombers themselves may never be known, although Retort point to tracts on media theory found in Al Qaeda camps. They must indeed have known that the consequences of their acts could not have been accurately predicted, and this makes their political motives—as opposed to their religious ones, or the desire for just revenge—murkier still. Retort are correct that the void at the level of the image in the mainstream broadcast media was remarkable. Even so, New Yorkers responded immediately by posting images of loved ones in the city to make a display of the dead and missing, pitching the faces of individuals against the brute spectacle of the act, and these impromptu portrait galleries received much mass media coverage. Articles that survey 9-11 material in mass culture find little of it, although there are a few mainstream us tv shows that now take counter-terrorism as their subject, and *The Hamburg Cell*, which focused on the motivations of Mohammed Atta, aired on HBO after being made in the UK.¹⁸ There was more of a response in music, notably with the success of Toby Keith, a renowned country singer, with 'Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)', which sold in huge numbers, Bruce Springsteen's ode to the New York firemen, and the Black Eyed Peas song, again very popular, that opposed the war and did not shy away from dubbing the CIA terrorists.

That there was something about the *images* of the event that was indigestible to mass culture could, of course, be an over-determined matter: avoidance of those images may have been out of regard for the dead and the mourning. It could also be that, as with the First World War, there is an appreciable lag between the end of the event and the appearance of the most significant cultural works that take it as their

¹⁶ AP, p. 5.

¹⁷ AP, p. 28.

¹⁸ For a survey, see Chris Dahlen, 'The Pop Culture of 9-11', 28 March 2005, available at www.pitchforkmedia.com.

subject.¹⁹ Any taboo on 9-11 does now seem to be eroding: Jonathan Safran Foer's novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, gained much publicity, and there are many other novels in prospect; Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* must count as mass culture; Oliver Stone is to make a film about the attacks, starring Nicolas Cage as a police officer trapped in the rubble. There is also a vast outpouring of 9-11 merchandise that surely seeks to heal the image wound: posters of heroic firemen against the backdrop of the fallen towers, badges, caps, T-shirts, magnets and memorial candles. Those who want photographs of the event are catered to by the New York Police Department, which has issued a book of spectacular photographs about the attack and its aftermath. These images, taken by police photographers from the air and the ground, are often of striking beauty.²⁰ In one sense, the exclusion that Retort note—of images of the moment of defeat itself, of the impact of the planes, of the falling towers—is unsurprising, for what state and national mass media would not avoid such images? The fallen towers are visible in mass culture but, naturally, as the backdrop to tales of American heroism, sacrifice and redemption.

In any case, it may be that the point of terror is not merely to disrupt spectacle by producing indigestible images, but to exceed it. Retort highlight the paradox of the vanguard Islamic revolutionaries, who deny themselves all that capitalist spectacle has to offer, and harden themselves against mundane sentiment and appetite, yet who still hold to the effectiveness of the image, and propagate images of their acts through websites. Just as in their lives and deaths they seek the unmediated, so their atrocities perform it, being designed to produce real, bodily fear (not the sublime of air shows), to blanket a city with the smell of fire and blood, to bring to a people sunk in spectacle the ineluctability of arbitrary death. The July 2005 London underground bombings were not meant primarily to create images, but to spread the terror of living burial among the city's populace.

Retort draw the definition of spectacle broadly, as the colonization of social life by capitalism: it is the submission of ever more facets of

¹⁹ Among the works often alluded to here are Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, both 1929, and Dix's great cycle of war prints of 1924. The point can be overplayed: to take just one example, Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*, published in 1916, was a highly successful account of the novelty of the war.

²⁰ New York Police Department, *Above Hallowed Ground: A Photographic Record of September 11, 2001*, New York 2002.

human sociality to the 'deadly solicitations' of the market.²¹ On that definition, the mass media form only one part of spectacle, which is also a constellation of technologies, habits and techniques, from mobile phones and fashion to the aping of celebrities' looks and gestures. The 9-11 assault on spectacle at the level of images worked first and foremost through the mass media, which swiftly found ways to make sense of it in moral terms—the 'cowardice' of the attackers versus 'the innocence' of the victims being the major and almost immediate response. Can a single act of this kind have any chance of disrupting the wider operation of spectacle, or the economic circuits that it supports? What would cause that deeper effect is what is happening now in Iraq: a sustained attack on the population and infrastructure.

A new age of war?

For Retort, the colonization of social life is as important to capitalism as colonization of the Earth, and the two processes are comparable: spectacle being globalization turned inwards to conquer the social. Their account highlights less the role of business than that of the state, which is thought to micromanage everyday life, and require a citizenship in which authentic social life is thinned and atomized, and consumer desires reign supreme. Spectacle continually intensifies, producing ever more attenuated and fragmented social relations. Modern consumer culture becomes less and less able to offer its subjects ways to live in the present, to accept the flow of time or push aside instant gratification. The compulsion to document one's life in images through the habitual use of phone- and video-cameras is hollow at its core, the effect of profound alienation. The only reality that spectacle can offer, write Retort, is that of Reality TV.²²

This model of colonization suggests that there was, or perhaps still is, a natural, unmediated ground of human communication that is conquered and perverted by capital, once and for all, like the logging of a virgin forest or the extermination of an indigenous population. Yet, in this scenario, is the impetus really all one way? Retort claim that commodity society and spectacle are 'endlessly parasitic on the values of a vanishing sociality'.²³ But if that is so, the endlessness of the process implies that sociality is being rebuilt at the same time as it is being colonized and simulated. Are there not consumer technologies, for example, that

²¹ AP, p. 19.

²² AP, pp. 20, 181–2.

²³ AP, p. 180.

increase socialization as well as reduce it? Some technologies, the telephone being a prime example, act as salves for the separation of people brought about by market forces. Many of these appear to simultaneously enable and disrupt sociality, as the mobile phone does in a railway carriage. Digital cameras, to take another example, enable a more intense documentation of the present, but also, in some circumstances, with the display built into the camera itself, can be tools of play, laughter and remembering. Digital photographs, shared online, can link distant relatives and friends more cheaply, immediately and regularly than did print and the postal service.

Yet Retort laments the quality, as well as the quantity, of social engagement, objecting to ‘the lifeless bright sameness’ of consumer culture (and here one thinks of those news stories of US PsyOps troops subjecting their captives to the torture of endless repeats of the Barney theme tune):

Weak citizenship, but for that very reason the object of the state’s constant, anxious attention—an unstoppable barrage of idiot fashions and panics and image-motifs, all aimed at sewing the citizen back (unobtrusively, ‘individually’) into a deadly simulacrum of community.²⁴

The nightmare of the spectacle, write Retort, is that of living in an eternal present, sundered from history and tradition, while prey to an unknown future, a life of fundamental meaninglessness governed by the contingencies of the market. In this, they take on the attitudes of some of W. G. Sebald’s tetchier passages—his complaints about the desolation of English seaside resorts, or, in a book that Retort cite from, his repulsion at the decoration of once dignified German towns shattered by bombing, and remade in a way he finds both vulgar and sinister, shuddering at the sight of a huge advertisement showing ‘an enormous platter of sliced cold meats, as served on every self-respecting supper table at the time, in colours from blood-red to rose pink’.²⁵ There is a rhetorical confidence in Retort’s writing that we can be sure of knowing simulation from reality, false temporality from history and authenticity from commercial confection. Some of that surety seems to be borrowed from Debord although he, in more sombre moments, thought of spectacle and social reality as a dialectical complex, the interweaved strands of which are difficult to separate.

²⁴ AP, p. 21.

²⁵ W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, London 2003, p. 77.

There may also be a generational issue at play here. Those who were politically forged by the events of 1968 and the writings of the Situationists remember a time when a new wave of spectacle, perhaps its most sweeping and complete moment so far, broke over the social scene in the form of television. They also remember the forms resistance took to that ‘colonization’—not such a bad word for that situation. While Debord is clear that the spectacle is a process that bends technologies to its purpose, nevertheless television was his paradigmatic subject. Those who have always lived with its ubiquitous presence, and those of a younger generation who have grown up online, necessarily have a different perspective in which discriminations within spectacle stand out with greater prominence.

The issue of spectacle, for Retort, becomes more acute in current circumstances: the events of 9-11 were used as a pretext for launching a distinct development in US capitalism, and thus we may be said to be living in a new epoch. Of the circumstances that Retort list to characterize this situation, only one can be viewed as truly novel: the dynamics of capital accumulation. Revolutionary Islam and the entrapment of Empire and terror in a battle of images are several decades old. The inseparability of war and state, and the abiding, deadly attraction of politically avant-garde ideals are evidently long-term features.²⁶ The neoliberal means of accumulation, Retort claim, have been complemented by colonization, and this is a marked recent development (there is a similarity in this account to the distinction between neoliberalism and neo-conservatism in David Harvey’s *The New Imperialism*, and a similar stress on the importance of primitive accumulation).²⁷ If this truly is a new development, and it may be too early to tell, it could be said to intensify the interrelation of the other features.²⁸

Retort write that the result of this configuration is a blend of atavism (wars of religion, overt colonialism) and hyper-modernity: ‘the contradictions of military neoliberalism under conditions of spectacle’.²⁹ The

²⁶ AP, p. 11.

²⁷ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford 2005.

²⁸ This is one of the points examined by Gopal Balakrishnan. He argues that war between states, and colonial occupation, have been less common features of the post-1945 era, but also that what has largely replaced them—an ‘asymmetric, discriminatory framework of legal disputes’, including sanctions, supervision of weapons programmes and regime change—blurs the distinction between peace and war. ‘States of War’, p. 28.

²⁹ AP, p. 15.

combination of atavism and hyper-modernity is hardly new either, and may indeed be a structural feature of combined and uneven development. The most obvious examples would be the fascisms of Italy and Germany—particularly the latter, in which the most advanced war machine of its age was placed at the service of a supposedly ancient national destiny.³⁰ The new situation is more distinctive:

the present madness is singular: the dimension of spectacle has never before interfered so palpably, so insistently, with the business of keeping one's satrapies in order. And never before have spectacular politics been conducted in the shadow—the 'historical knowledge'—of defeat.³¹

Spectacle is here characterized as both the baleful enemy of social interaction and the mode of opportunity, obstructing imperial power—and, as we shall see, Retort's formulation is a powerful one.

A stumbling state?

Retort argue that the result of the spectacular defeat of 9-11 has been to push the state into actions that are as much governed by spectacle as by material considerations. Warfare has been elevated from an intermittent action to permanent imperial conflict. They claim that one frequently repeated charge of the anti-war movement—that the war was fought for oil—when taken too simply, ignores the 'partially *non*-factual imperatives of capital accumulation'.³² These include the effort to repair spectacle, and the drive to normalize war in the minds of citizens.

Retort are surely correct to point to the state's efforts to create images that can counter the memory of 9-11, and to their insufficiency: Bush on the flight-deck proclaiming victory in Iraq, Saddam's statue toppled, the dictator captured, the Smokin' Marine who was supposed to embody the cool courage of the us armed forces, and so on. It is not that these were ineffective pieces of propaganda, but they have subsequently soured as the war and acts of terror have continued. The most memorable images so far gathered by the us armed forces in Iraq are those taken on the phone-cameras of the torturers of Abu Ghraib. Similarly, us political

³⁰ See Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge 1984. Hal Foster asked Retort about the novelty of atavism and modernity, yielding the reply that while it is an old configuration, in the new situation the opposition is of an unprecedented starkness: 'On *Afflicted Powers*'.

³¹ AP, p. 37.

³² AP, pp. 80, 42.

support for Israel is seen as no longer being driven by strategic or military considerations, which now would operate against such an alliance, but rather as an attachment at the level of the image: both are simultaneously democratic consumer societies and highly militarized states with a pioneer ethos, and both harbour the guilt and pride of having taken their land by expelling and exterminating another population. The us in seeing Israel looks into a mirror and cannot abandon its own reflected image.

It can be difficult to show that a state is acting largely for spectacular rather than material reasons, just as it can be to show that it acts solely for material ones. In their detailed and compelling presentation of the 'blood for oil' argument, Retort show that it tends to conflate many competing and incompatible claims made about the motives of the us state. Nevertheless, the basic position is put very strongly: there will come a time (perhaps soon) when the oil supply will start to decline, there is a vast increase in demand (including from the us), the Saudi fields are declining and mismanaged, and Iraq is almost in the position of being able to control the world oil price. Against these considerations, Retort note that the statistics for oil supply are very unreliable as they are massaged by oil companies, and that there was no shortage of oil at the war planning stage—indeed the late 1990s had seen a collapse in the price.³³ Above all, though, war was not a structural necessity but a high-risk gamble:

What was on offer to the industry . . . was unilateral adventurism in the face of a global Muslim insurgency, and the prospect of enraging the largest generation of young Arabs and Muslims in history. It risked 20 per cent of the world's oil supply, the entire Gulf strategy, the wider set of us interests in the region, the radical destabilization of the entire Muslim world, the active promotion of the jihadi struggle, and blowback of a wholly unpredictable and uncontrollable sort.³⁴

Some of these arguments have been contested. The question of manipulated statistics could cut both ways: it is in some companies' interests to over-estimate long-term reserves to bolster their share price. Some commentators on the oil industry take the issue of the immediate prospect of oil production peaking soon more seriously than Retort do, and have less confidence that large new fields will be found. Retort believe that new technologies for extracting oil from deep-sea fields or even from tar

³³ AP, p. 63.

³⁴ AP, p. 67.

sands may bolster the supply, although these face significant technological and environmental difficulties.³⁵

In either case, the larger point that Retort make is that neoliberalism mutates into continual outright warfare in pursuit of primitive accumulation. This is an intensification of a system in which there is a nexus of arms buyers in the ‘developing’ world (the richest being in the Middle East), oil companies, construction companies and so on, all of which benefit from relatively high oil prices and periodic energy conflicts. War was a response to a crisis in neoliberalism, particularly the revolt against it that was dramatically realized at Cancún, and a punitive measure to restructure conditions for expanded profitability. But at the same time the us state, wounded in its spectacular heart, was responding in some ways irrationally and inconsistently, torn between the demands of economy and spectacle.³⁶

There are some tensions between these various claims, which are perhaps a product of the book’s multiple authorship. Sometimes the oil industry is thought to value stability, sometimes regular conflict. The arguments about the irrationality of the spectacle-saturated state sit uncomfortably with a much more familiar analysis of postwar us strategy: ‘the us Empire has followed a long and consistent strategic path—centred on and driven by military engagement—to force regional penetration and exploit the existing or resulting “weak states”.’³⁷ The book contains some fine passages on the history of this strategy and its prosecution by bombardment, temporary occupation, the establishing of bases and the corruption of foreign governments and their military forces.

The views could be reconciled by saying that any single act of aggression could have ‘non-factual’ aspects (they may even dominate) but takes its place in a wider strategic schema—yet *Afflicted Powers* calls into question

³⁵ See the letter from Matt Pires in *London Review of Books*, 23 June 2005.

³⁶ AP, pp. 67, 72–4, 80–1.

³⁷ AP, p. 93. Some of these tensions are readily acknowledged in the *October* interview: “‘Blood for Oil?’ is in high tension with “‘Permanent War’”, and meant to be. The chapters rehearse two logics of imperialism, and do not claim to be able to map the one onto the other at all precisely’. Balakrishnan charges Retort with uncertainty here, oscillating between war as breaking down barriers to neoliberalism, and as ‘a product of ideological fixations and delusions peculiar to an impasse of neoliberalism’: ‘States of War’, p. 9; although, as I shall discuss, perhaps both could be true.

the very idea of state strategy. Retort cite Debord on the consequence of the state becoming an entity captured by spectacle: in the process, it loses historical knowledge and thus the capability of strategic leadership. Again, this claim is in evident tension with Retort's account of the consistent state strategy of imperial domination, and one might say with the American state's role in planning and fostering the entire neoliberal turn. Retort add the qualification that the state can and does think about capitalism strategically, but cannot do the same for its coordination with other features, including warfare, geopolitics and ideological struggle.³⁸ To take on that level of analysis is asking a great deal of any state, or of any other body. The danger of Debord's view is that it underplays the complexity, differentiation of specialized parts, and finally the political capacity of the state.

There may, however, be indications that spectacular defeat has driven the us to actions which are counter to its interests, and which may have brought it closer to strategic failure on a global scale. For, although their analyses differ, the idea that us hegemony is in decline, and that the momentum of that decline has been hastened by recent attempts to wield power, is a common feature of a number of recent accounts, not only that of *Afflicted Powers*, but also those of Arrighi, Mann and Wallerstein.³⁹

Yet if this possibility of decline is to be linked to spectacle, we have to ask deeper questions about the concept: how old is spectacle, for example, and how exactly has it developed? On some accounts, it is as old as the armed capitalist state, with its marriage of image-reproduction technologies (printing) and fiesta: Maravall wrote a celebrated analysis of just that combination in Spain, which included at its height the staging of mock naval battles in the pools of the Retiro Park in Madrid, at a time when the state lacked the money to equip actual ships or pay its armed forces.⁴⁰ Plainly, spectacle has since widened its ambit, but has there been a fundamental change in us imperial policy as spectacle itself has altered? Not according to at least one strand of Retort's account, which, as we have seen, stresses continuity. Perhaps, they say, the Clinton Administration

³⁸ AP, pp. 22, 23n.

³⁹ AP, p. 175; Giovanni Arrighi, 'Hegemony Unravelling', parts I and II, NLR 32, March–April 2005 and NLR 33, May–June 2005; Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire*, London 2003; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power: The us in a Chaotic World*, New York 2003.

⁴⁰ José Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*, Manchester 1986, pp. 245–6.

used 'humanitarianism' to serve the interests of spectacle, though even here the bottom line was holding bases in strategic and resource-rich areas.⁴¹ If it is true that spectacle grows ever greater in power and ubiquity, and that spectacle is central to the state, should we not be able to detect some deeper change in its conduct? Yet the changes seem relatively minor: more effective censorship of the mass media, the taming of war journalists through 'embedding', increased squeamishness about us casualties, and some lip-service paid to precision weaponry and minimizing civilian death and injury (though the actual prosecution of the war has been unrestrained and brutal, having many parallels in this respect with Vietnam).

Tracking the vanguard

There is a tendency in liberal opinion to pass too quickly over the character of radical Islam—explaining suicide bombers as the product of desperate circumstances, as if the Great Depression had produced a slew of them. Retort boldly look the problem in the eye, playing up once more the mix of atavism and modernity in the movement. Against such convenient shibboleths that acts of terror are the preserve of a tiny minority who have nothing to do with Islam, they use polls taken in Palestine, Jordan and Pakistan to show that these actions have the backing of large numbers of Muslims.⁴²

Radical Islam is seen as a response to unbearable modernity and the inescapable presence of spectacle. While the Islamic world is perhaps the least penetrated by the cultural products of capitalism, the movement's most fanatical adherents are often well-educated professionals who have lived abroad.⁴³ Their reaction to spectacle has been to forge a vanguard movement—militant, ascetic and ruthless. Retort ask:

Why is it that human beings, faced with the cruelty and disappointment of the present, seem drawn ineluctably to one or another version of the warrior ideal (or the warrior crossed with the flagellant): to a dedication to hardness, ruthlessness, fierce bonding, closure against the mere ness of the everyday; to a dedication finally to Death—to the making, the forcing, of history, and the rewriting of the future according to the script of some dismal Messiah?⁴⁴

⁴¹ AP, pp. 90–1.

⁴² AP, pp. 135–6.

⁴³ AP, p. 150.

⁴⁴ AP, p. 172.

This avant-gardism is a negative image of consumer culture which, in its yearning for an ideal theocratic past, for significant life and a meaningful relation between past, present and future, does at least speak some truth to the inadequacies of spectacle. Retort argue that ‘The purer and more asphyxiating the condition of modernity becomes, the more powerful the vanguard’s appeal—not essentially as a political tactic, but *as a form of life*.’⁴⁵

The vanguard politics of radical Islam is here associated with Leninism, in part by tracing a lineage from one to the other by commenting on the influence of Leninism on anti-colonial struggles. The association does some injustice to both phenomena: Lenin, of course, rejected terrorism on the grounds that it was politically counter-productive, with a pragmatism that seems utterly alien to the ideals of the suicide bombers.⁴⁶ And if there is something vanguardist about radical Islam, has not this, too, been transformed by spectacle? It is hard to imagine Bolsheviks playing out their actions for the cameras (as opposed to re-enacting them once they had achieved state power). For Retort are right about radical Islam’s love of the image. To look at the websites of the Iraqi resistance is to enter a realm in which images, moving and still, are by far the most important feature. At www.albasrah.net, for example, a site which contains material in many languages, titles such as ‘Iraqi Victims’ and ‘Freedom’ bring up large numbers of tiled images, often uncaptioned, which present an effective parade of casualties, many of them plainly non-combatants, and of the petty humiliations of occupation—a seemingly interminable sequence of Iraqis herded, kneeling, or with their faces pushed into the dust by the boots of us troops.

Perpetrators of truck and car bombings have their acts simultaneously filmed from different camera angles to adorn websites. The true believers in spectacle, write Retort, are the ‘webmeisters of revolutionary Islam’ because they (unlike the jaded consumers of the West) believe in the ‘illusion of political effectiveness’.⁴⁷ David Baran and Mathieu Guidère write of:

the profusion of short video accounts on the internet, each presenting a single attack, usually with a logo and a date, sometimes even with a scale-model reconstruction. The strategy is popular. A combatant, writing in an online

⁴⁵ AP, p. 185.

⁴⁶ V. I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?* [1902], Moscow 1947, pp. 74–7.

⁴⁷ AP, pp. 188–9.

discussion group, praised 'the resistance's informational model', urging his peers to form 'teams of reporters, photographers and cameramen'.⁴⁸

Retort's analysis of this aspect of radical Islam is salutary, and what it describes is surely a novelty. But is it spectacle exactly? In Debord's account, which as we have seen was informed by the rise of television, spectacle is associated with broadcast:

By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise . . . if the administration of society and all contact between people now depends on the intervention of such 'instant' communication, it is because this 'communication' is essentially *one-way* . . .⁴⁹

The main purpose of these videos and photographs is not to replay in the Western mass media but to communicate with fighters and their supporters, justify their actions and stiffen their resolve. Almost all of the material is in Arabic.⁵⁰ As Patrick Cockburn has pointed out, far from courting Western journalists, the Iraqi resistance makes it so dangerous for them to operate that triumphs against Coalition forces go unreported.⁵¹ In Vietnam, in total contrast, the NLF and NVA used their spies to track journalists and photographers in an attempt to protect them from harm.⁵² Nevertheless, the international currency and accessibility of the resistance material is new: compare again the war in Vietnam, where the NLF and NVA had remarkable photographers working for them, producing extraordinary images, which remained almost entirely unseen in the US for a full generation after its defeat.⁵³ This activity, in which many people participate—for it is easy and cheap to set such sites up, and to contribute to them—is surely an answering back to power. In the West, the power of television, and its ability to draw in advertising revenue, is waning against the competition of digital media, and almost everywhere its audience has become fragmented. Is the spectacle, in the monolithic sense that Debord thought of it, also faltering?

⁴⁸ See David Baran and Mathieu Guidère, 'Decoding the Iraqi Resistance Propaganda', *Le Monde diplomatique*, 11 May 2005.

⁴⁹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York 1994, p. 19.

⁵⁰ Baran and Guidère, 'Decoding the Iraqi Resistance Propaganda'.

⁵¹ Patrick Cockburn, 'The Abyss in Iraq', NLR 36, p. 47.

⁵² Tim Page, *Another Vietnam: Pictures of the War from the Other Side*, Washington, DC 2002, p. 46.

⁵³ See Page, *Another Vietnam*.

Retort set against radical Islam, in what is close to a structural opposition, the anti-capitalist movement. This movement holds out the possibility of an opposition to consumer society that has nothing to do with vanguard politics or Al Qaeda. They offer a list of characteristics that should be features of the Left in current circumstances: non-orthodox, non-nostalgic, non-rejectionist or anathematizing, non-apocalyptic. Qualities of the anti-capitalist movement are captured in these prescriptions; one need only think of the way that the consultative democracy of the Zapatistas, who have had such an effect on the movement, was founded in conscious opposition to Che Guevara's *foco* model. The movement that is the 'multitude', claim Retort, borrowing Hardt and Negri's term, is the most positive form of resistance on offer, if only because it depends so little on spectacle.⁵⁴

The opposition is perhaps too simply drawn: first, as Retort themselves point out, there are aspects of radical Islam that are about community work in cities where the secular system has failed, and these demonstrate a desire for social cohesion which Islamists set against the atomism and alienation of consumer culture, and which exceeds vanguard politics. Second, elements of the anti-capitalist movement are just as enamoured with the technologies of communication as radical Islam, and with good reason. Even their street manifestations, and those of allied movements such as Reclaim the Streets and Critical Mass, are designed to have an impact on spectacle—typically by capturing the tv news—while at the same time offering their participants an experience that exceeds it. This is suggested in Hardt and Negri's teleology of the multitude, which they say 'consists in the possibility of directing technologies and production towards its own joy and its own increase of power'. In their schema, new forms of labour directly produce social relationships and networks that are based on collaboration and which are genuinely affective.⁵⁵ It is hard to imagine a world-view more at odds with the unremittingly grim analysis of modernity and consumerism on offer in *Afflicted Powers*.

In the early pages of the book, Retort note that there is a dialectic between the digital multitude and 'the machinery of a *self-administered* dreamworld' of "'spectacular" dispersal, isolation and derealization'.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ AP, pp. 177, 192.

⁵⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA 2000, p. 396; and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York 2004, p. 66.

⁵⁶ AP, p. 4n.

The question remains how that dialectic operates, and whether it is not possible to experience both sides of it simultaneously while, for example, blogging in favour of the movement. It is not so much the use of technologies or community-building that divides the anti-capitalists and radical Islam, but rather their positive visions of an ideal future.

Opposing powers

Further dialectics may be discerned within both primitive accumulation and spectacle. With primitive accumulation, violence and injustice coexist with what in Marx's terms is progress. The continuing rise of proletarianization, urbanization and even exposure to spectacle may make primitive accumulation a positive force for change—though any optimism one may have about its prospects must be tempered by another aspect largely latent in this book, the spectre of environmental catastrophe. Spectacle too has its own dialectic: of internal 'globalization' of the social, and the globalization of communication and with it consciousness—specifically with the increasing realization of poverty and injustice on a global scale, which is as much a feature of radical Islam as of the anti-capitalist movement.

The connection between primitive accumulation and spectacle centrally involves digital media, which enable new modes of intervention, and have the capability of bypassing conventional mass media. Again, the comparison can be made with the Vietnam War, during which the widespread publication of oppositional images and texts in the US had to wait for a split in the elite between state and economic interests. In contrast, there is now a vast quantity of 'indymedia' material readily available to anyone with access to a networked computer, including plenty of diverse views on 9-11 and the war against Iraq. It is both an extraordinary resource and a reaction to the intensified control over the rest of the media by states and corporations.

Retort's view of these developments is far too one-sided:

Now no one under thirty entertains the least illusion about what their drab courses in computer science will lead to. They are a ticket to data-punching, if you are lucky—if the job you have been trained for is not outsourced to Bangalore before you graduate. No wonder the actual *subjects* of the information world regard the hustlers and hucksters of cyberspace—the

fifty-year-olds who go on believing the hype—in much the same way as Reaganite children once did their 'sixties' parents puffing a joint and telling their Woodstock stories again.⁵⁷

Yet online activity has become less and less about computing in an isolated sense, as the technology has become more accessible and popular. It is about using the capabilities of the technology to produce political change, in part by revolutionizing the ways in which people interact.

This combination of primitive accumulation under spectacle (and its opposite) does indeed yield circumstances in which the exercise of military neoliberalism becomes more troubled. But 'troubled' is surely bearable to power if the opposition can be sidelined, as the anti-war movement was. This is why the Left badly needs a programme that proceeds beyond a sequence of negatives. Retort address this situation squarely, and outline various aspects of the current scene ripe for further exploitation: particularly opposition to us bases, demands for openness in government, and opposition to enclosure. (But again, this last point is put negatively: why not also talk about the creation of new commons, so central to the free software movement?) The major pressure point in the current configuration, though, must be 'democracy', to harness the ideological weight increasingly put behind that word by the imperial powers to demand that it becomes something more meaningful in the nations that supposedly have it: to reimagine citizenship with substance, and to claim more than the power to shuttle between pink- and blue-tinged plutocratic regimes. The lack of democracy at all levels of life—from the lack of power that people have over their working conditions to their powerlessness in the face of decisions about new nuclear power stations—has strong cultural effects, reinforcing the fake monarchy of celebrity (of which the actual monarchy in Britain is now a part).

Digital technologies, precisely because they are capable of countering the broadcast mode of spectacle, can be important tools in this struggle. They have been used in reaction against the lack of democracy, the imposition of mass culture and the worship of the exceptional (or exceptionally average) individual, to begin to build a culture that is based on dialogue and collective participation. Indeed a task for another left collective could be the writing (for the Web, among other media) of *Common Sense v.2.0*. For it is the defects in democracy that allow regimes to wage war in the face

⁵⁷ AP, p. 188.

of opposition from the majority of their citizens, that permit the assault on civil liberties and the establishment of secret jails where torturers labour over those arbitrarily seized. Paine's quip that 'though we have been wise enough to shut and lock a door against absolute Monarchy, we at the same time have been foolish enough to put the crown in possession of the key' seems as pertinent now as the day it was penned. Efforts to puncture the pretensions of our current monarchs must be tied to demands for a renewed democracy that is both technologically possible and politically necessary.

Some of Retort's simplifications in the area of technology and computer culture seem rhetorical, dramatizations of a scene that contains some genuinely vile and desperate features. Networked computers serve to carry images of anti-war protesters and Islamist beheadings alike, and power the command and control apparatus of the us military's new form of warfare. Luxemburg, it will be remembered, saw capitalist society stripped of its usual ethical and idealist garb to stand before us mired in blood and filth. For Retort, the same can be said of the state and even of modernity itself. If this view is not to lead to outright pessimism, modernity needs to be thought of as a process which produces blood, filth and war, and, alongside them, their antinomies: ethics, philosophy and the demand for democracy.