

REVIEWS

Tariq Ali, *Rough Music: Blair / Bombs / Baghdad / London / Terror*
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THE NEW FURIES

Rough Music is a series of reflections on ‘a watershed in British political culture’, provoked by the war in Iraq and then, even more acutely, by the bomb attacks on London of July 7th 2005. Though written quickly under the impetus of events, I think few readers will be deterred; and they shouldn’t be, for this ‘instant book’ makes many points going beyond British culture, and invites wider speculation on the world of contemporary nationalism and ideologically motivated violence. It documents recent events too thoroughly to be journalistic, as well as voicing shifts in the author’s own political attitude. The title comes from Edward Thompson’s *Customs in Common* (1993) and is not chosen only for effect. ‘Rough music’ was a cacophony directed from those outside and below, to annoy insiders on high, ‘against individuals who offended against certain community norms’. It was also meant to suggest how democratic retribution might come. Interestingly, Tariq Ali’s conclusions move him into partial alignment with the much older positions of Thompson—one of the founders of *New Left Review* over forty years ago, and (indirectly) of Verso Books, publishers of *Rough Music*.

The five items in Ali’s subtitle—Blair, bombs, Baghdad, London, terror—are naturally centred on the Iraq War, and reactions to it. But both his diagnosis and his prescriptions for the future return the reader constantly to one causative factor: the futile archaism and contradictions of the British constitutional order, so easily abused by Blair and New Labour that they simply *must* be reformed, as a precondition of any tolerable post-Blairite

future. Left-wing policies and reassertions of traditional ‘radical’ values are no longer enough. Neoliberalism’s global offensive may have generated ‘holing out’ and autocratic trends everywhere, from Iceland to Australia. But these have been worse in the UK ‘thanks to the grotesque nature of its constitutional arrangements—its unrepresentative first-past-the-post electoral system, TV monarchy and unelected second chamber’. Westminster used to consider itself a world model. It has become a dry-rot infested ruin, where one shame succeeds another. In 2005 (for example) New Labour won its ‘convincing majority’ in the House of Commons with just 21.8 per cent of electoral votes. Should this go on, and the abstention rate rise again, it is quite conceivable that in 2009 Blair’s (or Brown’s) fourth term in office will be supported by well under one fifth of the electorate. ‘Thin democracy’ may have become a general trait of capitalist polities; but even in this dark realm distinctions survive between the more and less abject. And the UK is ceasing to be a democracy in *any* acceptable sense.

It has become an autocracy by ill-concealed stealth. Ali’s Chapter 3, ‘The Media Cycle’, shows how Blair got away with it over 2001–05, and why some of his coterie think it can go on indefinitely. Like other flotsam on the ‘no-alternative’ wave of the nineties, they think that the essence of ‘modernization’ is adjusting society to fit economic and technological advances. Which means *servicing* such changes, via a machinery of collusion between government public relations, a compliant legal system and a servile press. In Britain the BBC was the only serious obstacle, above all at the difficult turning point of the Iraq War. For a Great-British nationalist like Blair—‘in decline’ but still a semi-world power—participation in the war was essential, if clearly unpopular. Hence dissent had to be stifled by legal means, the low point of which was Lord Hutton’s odious Inquiry into the suicide of scientist David Kelly. Kelly had been deeply troubled by the Weapons of Mass Destruction farce, and evidence of official deceit. ‘Don’t worry, we appointed the right judge’, said Blair’s key public-relations man, Philip Gould.

Since *Rough Music* appeared there has been a further illustration of media cycle functioning. Blair is reported as having met with Rupert Murdoch in New York, and agreed with him on the deplorably ‘negative’ (i.e. ‘anti-American’) coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the destruction of New Orleans, notably from the BBC. The positive mission of laws and media alike is, by contrast, ‘steady as she goes’: that is, the maintenance of Britain’s status, and her contribution to neoliberalism’s ongoing revolution. Where can that contribution come from, but the UK’s chosen position in the new firmament?—‘Up the arse of the White House’, as Blair’s Chief of Staff is reputed to have instructed his Ambassador in Washington.

The mission is ‘radical’ in character: that is, it arises from manifested truths and allows no compromise, a quasi-religious destiny whose attainment

justifies any means, and must by definition pass through traps, traitors and travails. Ali condemns Tony Blair for having ‘no radical streak in his political make-up’, but this isn’t quite accurate. New Labour naturally despises traditional Old-Labour, Marxist and other versions of the radical, but has made up for that with its own—a now perfectly familiar capitalist-based intransigence and intolerance, appealing powerfully to the same psychology and inherited emotions. Later on he does admit how recognition of capitalism as ‘the only game in town’ has been successful in remobilizing for itself ‘the same dogma that had once characterized Trotskyism or other isms’, but without drawing the possible conclusion.

That is, without concluding that the transition must have been more than ‘prestidigitation’. Nemesis played her part. Certain aspects of the former Left and Liberal dogmas *invited* the neo-conservatives in; and it is these that today’s democrats must distrust the most. On the Left, the real sinner was ‘historical materialism’, not Lenin, Stalin or any of their progeny (whether dutiful or critical). It was this philosophical conviction of last-instance economic determinism that made it relatively easy to ‘switch sides’ from the eighties onwards, for Eastern and Chinese ruling elites, as well as for so many Western *intéllos*. Destinarians lurked on both sides of the Cold War. This is why the state-socialist avalanche of the eighties deposited so many troubled souls so briefly on the valley floor. They found a chair-lift waiting (padded, modernized) to bear them once more on high. There, the terminus provided more secure heights of inevitability and superiority, as well as better-paid media ‘realism’.

In Graeco-Roman mythology the Furies were the three deadly sisters born from the blood of God falling back to the earth (after he suffered castration by Kronos). Virgil depicts these hair-raising siblings in his Underworld: the descendants of the God-King Uranus and Gaia (the earth), scary enough to make Cerberus run for his life. They are human nature (as it were) casting off its chains, following upon recent unfortunate events in the upper spheres, and determined on a new deal for itself ‘at all costs’. The latter now includes a higher premium on meaningful death.

On 7 July 2005, ‘a deadly quartet of three young Yorkshire Muslims and a Jamaican-born co-religionist from Aylesbury . . . blew themselves up more or less simultaneously’ in the London Underground and on a bus near the British Museum, killing themselves and fifty-two others and injuring hundreds more. Ali explains their motivation with reference to Robert Pape’s admirable analysis *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (2005). It is often thought that Islamic ultra-fundamentalism is the root of this phenomenon’s growth. Pape denies this emphatically. In his own words, in an interview in the *American Conservative* of July 2005:

The central fact is that overwhelmingly suicide-terrorist attacks are not driven by religion as much as they are by a clear strategic objective: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from the territory that the terrorists view as their homeland. From Lebanon to Sri Lanka to Chechnya to Kashmir to the West Bank, every major suicide-terrorist campaign—over 95 per cent of all the incidents—has had as its central objective to compel a democratic state to withdraw . . . Since suicide terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation and not Islamic fundamentalism, the use of heavy military force to transform Muslim societies over there, if you would, is only likely to increase the number of suicide terrorists coming at us.

One may question an uncritical use of ‘democratic’ here, but the main point is not affected. Suicidal terrorism is driven by rankling *nationalist* resentment on the part of populations lacking the normal means of political-military violence, and with small chance of obtaining these. As for the illegitimate occupying power, this has to be not democratic in some ideal sense, but possibly ‘influenceable’ by such tactics, via popular fear, weariness, alternative scenarios and international representations. In the same interview, Pape looks back at Ireland, arguing that there ‘ordinary’ violence—non-suicidal explosions and shootings—was enough to bring about the ‘strategic objective’ of partial British withdrawal, and the IRA’s recent shift onto the terrain of peaceful politics. He also maintains that the formula for effective suicidal terrorism was established by the Tamil insurrection in Sri Lanka in the eighties, a combination of nationalism and Marxism aimed at Sinhalese (and Buddhist) majority rule. Neither side had any connection with ‘Muslim fanaticism’.

Ali stresses the point repeatedly: since the Fury at work here is nationalism rather than prostration before Allah, stopping the military occupation of Iraq is the only plausible answer. But I suspect that a wider-angled view of the change is also in order. Meaningful death (‘martyrdom’, as its supporters say) has assumed such prominence in a global situation where nationalism has been *generally* despised and denigrated. The two things are, surely, intimately related. They derive jointly from the one truism that sober-sense economists of all persuasions agreed about: the nation-state was done for, and with it that corny old ‘-ism’. Last-instance determinism could now prevail only *out there*, in the realm of global market forces. Innumerable books and articles rammed home the message, all expounding the profound wisdom of political abnegation and *laissez aller*. The most entertaining account of this globalizing spasm is John Ralston Saul’s two short chapters in his *The Collapse of Globalism* (2005): ‘A Summary of the Promised Future’ and ‘What Somebody Forgot to Mention’.

Not forgotten so much as deliberately ignored were certain psychological costs, some deriving from socio-economic reality and others from the

ideological onslaught itself. The ‘lowering of borders’ and its accompanying surrender of collective initiative and will-power was a world shock as profound as market forces themselves. In retrospect, it seems astounding that such claims could have been so blandly made and more than half-believed. In fact, it was as if something of the ancient myth was being re-enacted—with mad economists, vulgar columnists, paltry politicians and wealthy ‘donors’ standing in for Kronos. Quite insouciantly, they were setting off the biggest earthquake since the mid-Cold War period, when much of the world still cowered in dread of all-out nuclear warfare. Indeed it may be worse: the menace of Armageddon proved transient, but the disappearance of national states and politics was now projected as eternal necessity—a non-negotiable route onward to Paradise, consecrated by Reason and refused only by incorrigible lunatics or fanatics.

This is of course the conviction behind the ‘War on Terror’: the fruits of ‘crucifixion economics’, as Saul puts it, bestowing justification on true believers and sanctioning pre-emptively ‘radical’ treatment for deviants and resisters. Like Osama bin Laden’s 2001 atrocities, the London bombings were crimes, calling for legal punishment. But the response of Atlantic-led globalism has been away beyond that. It perceives a threat from cosmic unreason, perpetrated by zealots determined not on equality but on their own exclusive heaven and earth—a war launched by (as it were) the super-nationalists of Islamicism.

That such a cause stands no chance of success should (as Ali counsels) take us back to Robert Pape’s less enchanted analysis. Ideological exorcism of ‘nationalism’ implied dismissal of alternative will-power, and of the concrete terms and struggles that had constituted most modern history—above all between 1870 and the end of the Cold War. As Martin Jacques observed in the *Guardian* on 17 September 2005, ‘the defeat of colonial rule’ was ‘the defining event of the 20th century’—*not* 1917, or 1949, or 1989. What militant globalist mania suggests is that national liberation was limited at the time, and has now become largely meaningless. A general belittlement of national identities has made the -ism of nationality, or indeed of discrete peoplehood, perfectly futile. All those who didn’t get there earlier should now give up. Indeed it’s their *duty* to do so. There may be one or two grudging exceptions to the rule, like Palestine, where conflicts have become so entrenched that no other answer seems possible. But on the whole, nationhood is now presented the other way round from how Jacques has it—not as the way into modernity, but as a wilful rejection of it.

That complacent verdict has been the real agent of transformation. It is what turned nationalism into the ‘Furies’, the global rough music that Ali analyses and rightly reproaches: that is, the exaggerated version of a former self, driven to wilder shores by the equally exaggerated (but armed) onslaught

of a globalism that, after 2001, resorted to post-colonial colonialism. Quite possibly there was no other way for the globe to become one. It's also possible that, had Soviet-Socialist oneness triumphed instead, this might have been worse. However, the price of *any* such non-democratic triumph was an equally global barb to the heart of things: a universal wound, in fact, to which humanity's immune system has replied by intensifying the quest for meaning and status. Dismissal of meaning on a global scale was bound to have the worst effects in already dire situations, and to generate a compensatory fury. In his 1898 analysis *Suicide*, Emile Durkheim traced the modern importance of his subject to *anomie*—'lost-ness' or meaning-rejection. He saw how this condition worked in France, and also how it was kept at bay among Australian native peoples, in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. But no one could imagine then how *anomie* would one day itself be 'globalized' as the underside of Free Trade triumphalism.

Such loss of bearings is of course not confined to the non-self-governing, or the totally dispossessed. It is for example prominent in the United States, and undoubtedly played a part in Bush's mobilization of American nationalism, and in the poor imitations by Blair and by John Howard in Australia. However, the most extreme forms emerged among the outcast and left behind, the dependent or the still-colonized (formally or informally). In other words, among the great majority of conflicts leading most tv news programmes and newspaper front-pages, most days, across most of the emerging 'global village'. The strategy for reasserting such causes has come to include the explosive intensification of meaning, in the absence of recognition, and of normal means of warfare.

Enlightened complacency perceives the unfortunates undertaking suicide terrorism as doing so *because* they believe fanatical religious ideas, notably in the Middle East. But zealous excess is itself simply another compensation. The characters depicted in Hany Abu-Assad's film *Paradise Now* may or may not think their death is a guaranteed shortcut to paradise. But as the story and background suggest, what is guaranteed is exaltation in and of their marginalized community. In his contribution to *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (1990), Johann Arnason pointed out that religion's 'particular significance' arises from an ideological edge, or supplement:

More precisely, it is the identification of an ethnic community with a salvationist religion that appears to secure survival more effectively than anything else . . .

because it favours a 'welding' of universalism with ethnic particularity, *in a way that justifies the latter*. Zealotry may support the ecstasy of meaning-in-death, up to the instant of oblivion; the meaning itself comes not from Holy

Scriptures, however, but from the particular national or ethnic background. It is the rage of a denied 'imagined community' (in Benedict Anderson's sense) that represent's God's blood fallen to earth—not the pious aspirations of Islamic or other clerics.

As Ali goes on to underline, most UK public opinion understood perfectly well the earthly connection between the July atrocities and the continuing war in Iraq. Only government tools and columnar megaphones insisted there was no relation whatever, and hence no question of 'surrendering' to fanatics in Baghdad. They were voicing the nationalism of the majority—the Great-British identity crucial to Tony Blair's project, and to the maintenance of quasi-world-power pretences. *Rough Music* doesn't say enough about this directly. However, another essay that appeared almost simultaneously has some devastating observations on the subject: Charles Glass's 'The Last of England', in *Harper's Magazine*, November 2005. This is a straightforward account of how Londoners actually reacted to the July outrages. The author found that the city which defied Hitler's air force in 1940–41 had *vanished*. In spite of Blair's pompous address and headlines about 'standing united'—'after dark on July 7th 2005, Londoners hid at home. Two Thursdays later, on July 21st, when four more bombers made failed attempts to blow up the Tube and a bus, London went quiet again'. Glass had been in Madrid at the time of the March 11th 2004 bombings, and noticed the difference. For the *madrileños* had in truth stood united or (as Winston Churchill once put it) 'carried on bugging on' as usual—and of course, were soon to elect a new government that withdrew the Spanish troops from Iraq.

What had happened? 'Had the lions become mice?' asks Glass—'was the bulldog tethered so tightly to the American leash that it no longer barked?' In May 1941 the German air force dropped more than 100,000 incendiary bombs on London, and destroyed the House of Commons, yet Londoners 'still got on with it', as the *Telegraph* reported the next day. I myself remember lurid descriptions of that raid by an old London friend who worked in the London Underground, and was part of the fire-fighting team struggling to keep the system in operation. The city at that moment was actually close to collapse, and he evoked incidents illustrating this, vividly recalling individuals who despaired and gave up, declaring they couldn't take any more. Yet of course most didn't, because sustained by a communal and national identity.

By contrast, what were Londoners afraid of in July 2005, compared to these hugely greater threats of half a century previously? The most likely answer is 'themselves': that is, the fear lay in people's expectations and assumptions about Britain, rather than dread of Wahhabite Islam. 'In 1940', Glass continues, 'Londoners believed they would forge a fairer and better world after the war', while in 2005 'no one believes the world will be better

than before the war on terror began'. Indeed, descendants of the Left that tried to build the better world of post-1945 are actually in office and refusing to be deflected from their warlike pursuit of Greatness—least of all by recollections of the Welfare State. 'Britain' now means so little that nobody even thinks of looking forward to the popping corks of Victory over Terror Day, or to social rewards that may emerge from 'buggering on' in the right spirit. But living nationalism demands a past *and* a future. If the latter boils down to a cheaper washing-machine imported from China one day soon and getting still farther up the arse of the White House, why bother?

Chapter 5 of *Rough Music* looks at the scarifying episode that summed up much of Blair-style nationalism, the execution of Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell Underground station on July 22nd 2005 (the day after the second, failed wave of bombings). As the whole world now knows, this Brazilian lad took the Underground on his way to work, and ended up with a brain full of lead. He had been mistakenly identified as a bomber or accomplice, and was given no chance to clear himself. Twenty-four hours later Scotland Yard admitted he was quite unconnected to the bombers. But at the same time, nobody was *responsible*. In the country of proudly unarmed policemen, no one resigned for the 'mistake' of blasting eleven bullets into the head of an innocent man. Six months later an inquiry is still dragging on, but with very little belief that its verdict (any more than Hutton's) will make much difference. It was an 'accident' brought about by panic and confusion—among those giving orders, as well as those carrying them out. Somehow, no one's honour was involved.

And that's the heart of the matter. Within living memory, a kind of honour had been the life-blood of national-imperial grandeur: the unbending, aristocratic *Geist* of Churchill and 1940, diffused by a successful identity machinery to most of the population. What Glass's report registers is its disappearance, or (at best) its reliquary status—something like the present-day Windsor monarchy. A once indwelling spirit has turned into something to be weighed on public-relations scales; and, as on this occasion, found superfluous to requirements. With all its faults, patrician rule had seen privilege as tied to an unavoidable—even unfair—responsibility; today's cut-price authoritarianism sees it merely as whatever 'modernization' will let rulers get away with, preferably on the sly.

Almost nobody wants 1940 and *all that* back; but the point is, nothing has taken its place. Thatcherism and Blairism have been primarily tales of its decay, shoring up bits of nostalgia against its ruin, and—even before globalization—counting on external alliances and powers to keep both economy and identity going. No wonder that dark silence prevailed in July. The dilemma was utterly different from New York's '9/11'. Britain had been attacked *from within*, by young Muslims seeing themselves primarily as

British, and punishing fellow-countrymen for their political shame and failure. They had just been through what Iain Macwhirter of Scotland's *Sunday Herald* described as 'the most grotesquely unfair election in British history', a farce that allowed New Labour to prosecute its war in Iraq against majority public opinion. The fact that there was no democratic alternative doesn't justify their actions; but it does, surely, indicate something puzzling (and potentially damning) about the political constitution, and the British identity to which 'the system' is so organically connected. On the latter theme, new 'terrorism laws' are essentially new ways of *not* recognizing there is anything to be said, or changed.

Rough Music goes on to look again at the legal and judicial order which slaughtered de Menezes. Ali again returns to E. P. Thompson, and the longer struggle for civil rights and freedoms Thompson wrote so much about. Helena Kennedy's *Just Law* (2004) is rightly taken as the outstanding recent expression of dismay and anger at Blair's retreat from both social justice and legal rectitude. Kennedy writes:

In many ways laws are the autobiography of a nation and in Britain we have many proud stories to tell but we also have shameful chapters . . . our liberties are being eroded. A serious abandonment of principle is in train; all of us have to say it's time to stop.

And we can only do so by reforming the political constitution. 'Human rights is where the law becomes poetry', observes Kennedy, enabling new stories to be told and a different identity to make its way forward. Such ways find themselves below the surface of official declarations and press conferences, through obscure passages and echo chambers, in the recesses of thousands if not millions of individual minds. More important than its moments of professed publicity, 'identity' hides its own unrelenting Furies, which tend to be worst *entre chien et loup*, as sleep once more fails to come, unable to bypass a returning dread. Going back to Australia shortly after the de Menezes killing, on the interminable long haul, and into a routine of long commuting tram trips and suburban solitude in my adoptive city, I found that nothing would 'get it out of my mind'. It was as if an inner horizon had disappeared, with dark enigma in its wake. In the terms suggested by both Ali and Glass, this was of course part of a meaning-structure, the supportive wall of a national culture inherited by the majority, and naturally strongest among those with direct memory of the 'finest hour'. The hour was truly ended—and not so much by the bombers as by the hail of Special Forces gunfire and lies that came later.

Both the defence of inherited principles and the voicing of new opinions have democracy as their necessary condition. Fairer voting and an elected second chamber won't of themselves furnish answers and visions;

but they can remove the existing obstacles to change, ‘allowing citizens to break ranks on critical issues’ and foster new movements and alternatives. Only via such changes can revolutionary shifts emerge. As Kennedy says, it’s time to stop—and then to enable democracy more effectively, so that breaking ranks will amount to more than occasional mass demonstrations, a paralysed parliamentarism, and little-read pamphlets from the political wilderness. Just as soldiers can be stripped of rank and medals, it’s time ‘radical’ was stripped of its deceptive, appropriated ‘-ism’—now mainly camouflage for the living dead, whether revisiting the defeats of the past, or serving the debased needs of the present.

This is even plainer when set in a comparative, global perspective. *Rough Music* ends with a plea for Britain to ‘quit its role as automated adjutant to Washington’s neo-imperialism and develop a rational, independent foreign policy’. Which also implies that it is time to stop being one of the real sources of insecurity in the new, more globalized world order. All neoliberal Establishments now think of insecurity as emanating from ‘rogue states’, potential havens for terrorists or scoundrel governments trying secretly to build nuclear weapons. In fact, the principal source of insecurity lies in the archaic, dangerously defective pretences of democracy surviving among the North Atlantic leaders and their allies. *Rough Music* gives us a picture of one such farce, and argues it has to be reformed for the sake of its own citizens. And Glass’s report shows how little real life is left inside the UK’s *ancien régime*. Tony Blair found a way of postponing the changes such accounts entail, by drumming up the ‘Greatness’ business once more, in association with an even more bedraggled farce in the USA: a state incapable, in the Year 2000, of even electing a president. George W. Bush had to be smuggled onto the bridge of state by a combination of family-based corruption and Supreme Court judges—until a fortunately timed war let him gain enough support to be elected four years late. And *this* was democratic leadership—the diffusion not of Market blessings alone, but of a consecrated Western universality, devoted to suppressing backward nationalisms and hopeless alternatives.

The new rough music is international, in fact, and it will be played out loudly everywhere in the wake of the Iraq War. Retired imperialists like Britain and France want to go on being examples: their meaning must be made to survive their loss of power, as compensation and continuity. The United Kingdom’s sole hope of remaining any kind of example in the 21st century will be to heed the sounds of mounting rough music, and choose an alternative and more modest course. By quitting the Special Relationship, and attempting to build a different constitution, with an alternative confederal identity, Britain can start to put Iraq, Blairism and moth-eaten greatness behind it at last. The process has already begun. On November 9th, New Labour found itself defeated in the House of Commons by 322 votes to 291

on a move to extend the duration of detention without trial to 90 days, as part of its anti-terrorism legislation. Forty-nine Labour members rebelled, a clear augury of Blair's demise; and with it, rejection of the foreign policy that enticed him into support for the Middle Eastern expedition. The Furies are at last in retreat—like the fanatical globalism and 'crucifixion economics' that gave them their opportunity for re-entry.