

Comment

Global Liberalism is an Oxymoron

A little over a decade ago, Francis Fukuyama famously crowed that the triumph of liberal democracy was such that history had, in effect, reached its Hegelian 'end': the conflict of ideologies by which history was defined could no longer continue, since liberalism had been universally recognised as not just the best but the *only* political system left in the game. Those places around the world where liberalism was yet to ascend were merely the aberrations; it could only be a matter of time before they too fell into step with the New World Order. Even given that Fukuyama has since, rather coyly, revised this stance, the point is that it was, and still is, believed by so many.

Why, precisely, was the hubristic glee of Fukuyama and other neo-liberals so profoundly misplaced? Certainly not because of any coherent *internal* patterns of resistance in the West.

Typically the answer to the question might include something about September 11th, 2001, but it's clear that Fukuyama was proved wrong long before this—in Africa, in Kosovo, in Latin America and in countless other places. James Rubin, an official in the Clinton administration, writing in a recent review of Chalmers Johnson's book *The Sorrows of Empire*, noted that, post-Afghanistan, post-Iraq and post-Abu Ghraib, it was not history which had ended, but the West's faith in the project of constitutional democracy itself. Why?

Events in Iraq over the past year, and in Guantanamo over the past two years, are evidence of a growing crisis of self-belief in the USA, a sign of intense vulnerability rather than as a show of imperial might. The 'theatre of war'—the *performance* of war as a demonstration of power—has a clearly visible subtext, which paradoxically proclaims America's crisis of faith in the very thing that it is supposedly bringing to the 'rest of the world'. The end of history hasn't happened, not because of a sustained attack from a competing ideology (like socialism), not even because of the more disparate—and nebulous—threat of 'terrorism' (the world is *not* a more dangerous place than it was a decade ago). History goes on precisely because 'liberal democracy' is itself a system that can only exist in a world where inequality is guaranteed. Global liberalism is an oxymoron; neo-imperialism, the 'Empire' of globalised capital, brings with it a new 'white man's burden', whereby the states that propound it must abandon its very principles in order to clutch desperately to power. Only by becoming ever more illiberal can they guarantee to us the eventual triumph of liberalism.

This issue of *Variant* continues an examination of racism in Ireland, with both Ronit Lentin and Colin Graham considering racism as an expression of the state's desire for control over the individual body, what Foucault called 'biopolitics'. This is a theme to which we'll be returning in future issues, as we consider the ever-changing political climate both north and south of the border, in the light of interrogations of the 'central myths' of Irish and Northern Irish racial subjectivity, most obviously the myth of whiteness. Northern Ireland recently claimed yet another shameful statistic with its first officially-recognised racist murder in Derry. It's clear that if the 'peace process' continues to focus on the 'two traditions' image of the North, those who will pay the price for parallel parity of esteem (or 'apartheid') are those whose faces don't fit. Watch this space.

From Hard Edged Compassion to Instrumentalism Light

"...it is time to slay a sixth giant—the poverty of aspiration which compromises all our attempts to lift people out of physical poverty. Engagement with culture can help alleviate this poverty of aspiration—but there is a huge gulf between the haves and have-nots.

Government must take this gulf as seriously as the other great issues of national identity, personal wellbeing and quality of life."

'Government and the Value of Culture'

Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Tessa Jowell, Secretary of Culture, May 2004

Alistair Campbell is hardly out of his job and, if the main stream press is anything to go by, we are uncritically to accept—even welcome—the Dept. for Culture, Media and Sport's latest policy document, 'Government and the Value of Culture'. It has been interpreted as an olive branch to the cultural sector; an acknowledgement of past and current failures of New Labour's instrumentalisation of the arts in its subordination to other policy agendas—"education, the reduction of crime, improvements in wellbeing". Its personal tone and flattering appeal to arts institutions and the transcendental genius of producers of "complex culture", has been taken as signalling a change in the direction of government cultural policy.

The introduction sets the tone by immediately conflating New Labour corporatism with old Labour 'socialist' principles of fighting "physical poverty—want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness". It quickly shifts to a language of personal responsibility which displaces the burden of solving political problems from government onto individuals. The 'real world' problems of poverty are supplanted with an accusatory "poverty of aspiration". Having silently framed the 'guilty', We, set against this idle Other, are inculcated in their enlightened transformative process by being told: "Engagement with culture can help alleviate this poverty of aspiration".

Jowell claims "complex culture" provides indirect benefits to society, "...not a dumbed down culture, but a culture that is of the highest standard it can possibly be, at the heart of this government's core agenda, not as a piece of top down social engineering, but a bottom up realisation of possibility and potential," in that "...it can help with education, with keeping society stable..." But she never really lets on how this colonial civilising force remedies the savage (see 'Evaluating the Social Impact of participation in Arts Activities: A critical review of François Matarasso's *Use or Ornament?*', Paola Merli, *Variant* vol.2 no.19).

Despite its warm reception from media commentators and arts administrators alike, this document is far from a "departure from the perceived instrumentalism of recent government thinking" as David Edgar claims ('Where's the challenge?', *The Guardian*, 22nd May 2004). Anyone critically assessing the territory set out in this document must clearly see that. It is a prescriptive social agenda for the arts via the back door; as such it's hard to see how Jowell's position really deviates from the government's current instrumentalist policy, other than in its expedient softly-softly approach and flattery of the sector.

With all the deserved accusations of Stalinism, it would appear that New Labour has woken up to the fear of further alienating the UK's liberal cultural institutions with its instrumentalisation of the arts, driven through the funding bodies. Jowell's address is clearly one attempt by the Secretary for Culture and her scriptwriters to soothe the disillusionment in England, in the run-up to elections, by apparently inviting us to engage with her in defining a social role for culture, one supposedly not incompatible with an 'art for art's sake'. Jowell states: "...it's up to politicians in my position to give a lead in changing the atmosphere, and changing the terms of debate". But a change in "atmosphere" and "terms" is not a change in policy, it's about establishing a political framework, a background, against which everyday politics is conducted and perceived.

This document is little more than a repackag-



ing of the current instrumentalist agenda, only now it is disingenuously presented as being incorporated by the Government from the "bottom up", not instigated from the "top down"—so down the rabbit hole we go. In a naturalisation of New Labour's world view, the delimited values of "complex culture" have magically become interchangeable with New Labour's social values. If this is true and the values of New Labour have been so thoroughly internalised by the Cultural Sector, then Jowell's tract becomes a reassuring reward for behaving 'properly'.

Throughout the document "complex culture" is presented as a positivistic, stabilising force, which facilitates a cohesive society. Alongside this there is a consumerist conflation of creativity with economy, as the arts are also attributed with being "a key part in reducing inequality of opportunity". The agenda is still that the arts are a means to reinforce the Thatcherite individuation of responsibility which has intensified under New Labour: that the solution to social and economic problems lies in cultural transformation and not directly with government, despite the evident decay and detritus of chronic underinvestment in physical infrastructure, the polarisation of incomes, etc.

Whilst the bureaucratic armies of focus groups and market researchers that are plaguing the arts are seemingly questioned, the surely now fatigued (and rumbled) consultative exercise is rolled out yet again. With all its New Labour rhetoric of "rights & responsibilities", the document concludes with a school teacher's wagging finger that the cultural sector has a "duty" to reply "constructively" to Jowell's interpretive framework. As has been mentioned elsewhere, with regard to New Labour's "Big Conversation"—which this document apes in approach—it constructs the agenda on a supposedly personal basis, invites a response, but fails to establish any structures for that so-called "listening" process, never mind any real beginnings to establish actual policy change.

This isn't an 'art for art's sake' manifesto (as David Lister of the *Independent* reported, 8th May 2004), it's art for art's sake with a big exclusionary 'if' about whether the arts can "help alleviate the poverty of aspiration". Disaffirming his earlier enthusiasm, Edgar in his *Guardian* article goes on to conclude: "Jowell edges uncomfortably close to a new social mission for the arts... What this leaves out—if not denies—is art's provocative role.

Through much of the past 50 years, art has been properly concerned not to cement national identity but to question it. In that, it continued the great modernist project of 'making strange', of disrupting rather than confirming how we see the world and our place in it".

'Government and the Value of Culture' is remarkable only for its perverse attempt at a conciliatory, flattering appeal to the funded cultural sector for the replication rather than transformation of dominant cultural values. Sadly, even this muted appeal appears radical in the current Scottish cultural policy environment.

'Pathfinder': The End of Housing Benefit?

From February 2004 there are nine areas testing out "Pathfinder" Projects, a new Housing Benefit scheme, the "Local Housing Allowance". These are: Blackpool, Brighton & Hove, Conwy, Coventry, Edinburgh, Leeds, Lewisham, North East Lincolnshire (Cleethorpes), and Teignbridge. If the scheme 'works', whatever they may mean by that, it'll be rolled out nationwide (just like the privatisation of Benefit Centres' responsibilities in the form of Working Links: see www.variant.org.uk/18texts/18workinglinks.html).

The basic idea is that there will be one standard level of Housing Benefit for all claimants in privately rented accommodation, irrespective of their particular rent, depending on the type of property they live in, e.g. bedsit, one-bedroom flat, number of claimants etc. We don't know as yet what this amount will be. Apparently, people whose rent is less than standard will be able to keep the difference. But getting more benefit than your rent won't apply to many people, and once the cheaper landlords know what the standard is they'll be putting their rents up to that level.

This sounds like an excellent mechanism for making places a more expensive place to live than

they already are, pushing the rents from the bottom up! It's funny, but when it comes to capping interest rates and loans, the Government understands very well the effects on the market of introducing a ceiling on what suppliers can ask for. They say they'll never introduce a maximum interest-rate to curb the activities of loan sharks, because then all the other moneylenders would raise their interest levels to that maximum level. Isn't that exactly what's going to happen in the case of Housing Benefit?

Further details of the scheme include the payment of rent directly to claimants, instead of the option being there of having it paid to the Landlord. It is almost impossible to find a Landlord in the privately rented sector that'll take a tenant on Housing Benefit as it is (then there's the issue of a deposit and the first month being paid in advance!), and then many of them demand that the payment be made straight from the Council into their pockets. Many Landlords may then accept the Council's lower rent 'assessment', £5 a week or so less than they're demanding, in return for what they think will be regular payments. It doesn't always turn out that way though! (In a highly saturated market, such as in heavily student populated areas, Landlords don't have to accept any shortfall in what they know they can get away with charging, and there is a Claimant's reassessment/reapplication every six months for Housing Benefit with all the delays inherent in that—this also happens with any supposed change in circumstances even when there hasn't been one, such as moving between Jobseekers Allowance and Working Links). By insisting that the burden of payment be on the claimant the Council will be saved loads of administration costs—no wonder they're keen to test the scheme out.

The ideology behind this 'reform'/'deform' stinks. The government openly talks about introducing "Shopping Incentives" for claimants to move into cheaper accommodation. How many

Housing Benefit claimants do you know who that live in mansions? This is Social Apartheid. They are explicitly saying that people with less money should be encouraged to move into worse accommodation (and all this when there has been a shift in emphasis to the focusing of benefits to those in low-/under- paid work).

Housing Benefit has been around since 1985. Before that, your Housing costs used to be paid as part of your Benefits, all one payment from one Department of Social Security. In 1994 the Tories introduced a "Housing Benefit Reform" [sic] called the "Local Reference Rent". This is an amount equal to "the average of a range of rents in your locality". It is most often used as a maximum amount above which the Council will pay no Housing Benefit. This is why most claimants have to pay between £5-£10 extra a week in rent out of our giros. The introduction of the new Local Housing Allowance is a further extension of this Thatcherite policy, and will further undermine the already weak position of claimants on the rental market.

Instead of capping the amount of Housing Benefit to be paid, they should be capping the rents Landlords can charge, but no one ever talks about that.

What can be done? We haven't got time now to stop the Councils running "Pathfinder". We do, however, need to set up facilities to monitor the changes and make sure people's complaints get heard, so that the scheme doesn't get rolled out nationwide.

If you have any bad experiences with the new "Local Housing Allowance", definitely make a complaint.

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