

Telling the Truth About Neo-liberalism

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Telling the Truth:
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A Fairy-Tale Ending

In a world where appearances can be deceptive and what appears to be blindingly obvious is cynically misrepresented, the idea that the truth can be uncovered as something readily to hand becomes a monstrous lie. These things are not separable: deceptive appearances and conscious manipulation are connected.

Once upon a time a fairy tale was widely entertained that every decent, law-abiding citizen was devoted to 'the truth'. In this distant land, it was believed that such a thing as a liberal 'public sphere' existed, or something approximate to it, where free and democratic dialogue and exchange could take place without fear or favour. Out of this ideal state of affairs a competition of ideas would take place, with the most rational, rigorous and persuasive versions of what constituted truth winning out in the end. Or at least a new compromise might be formulated out of the various claims to a community of truth.

In this communitarian utopia, the public interest would be faithfully serviced by an intellectual caste devoted to a sober diagnosis of the predicaments and problems facing society. On this basis they would make a disinterested prognosis for social improvement. Telling the truth about the powerful and the powerless would in this way be considered a valuable public service on the road to an enlightened civil society.

Not any longer. On waking from this dream, it was found that the ideal community of truth-seekers, if it ever existed anywhere, had been subordinated by a globally dominant state of Un-truth. This is the overwhelming message claimed by the 2006 volume of the *Socialist Register*, titled 'Telling the Truth'.¹ It is summed up in the opening line of the book: 'A generalized pathology of chronic mendacity seems to be a structural condition of global capitalism at the beginning of the 21st century' (p. vii). It is not just that lies are being told as the occupational hazard of politicians and their media courtesans, but rather that lying and hypocrisy have become an endemic condition of the neo-

liberal world order.

George Orwell's prophecy about congenital authoritarianism in his 1984 horror show was wrong only insofar as he got the dates mixed up. His other mistake was, or as was popularly (and wrongly) believed, that he was describing Stalinism in the USSR. Big Brother is not simply the ironic name for a Reality TV show; it is the hegemonic mindset demanded by Empire and Market that Orwell tried to warn of. War is Peace. Hate is Love. Friends of Freedom are Enemies of Freedom, and vice versa. Truth is contingent on the immediate needs of the Now. In this world, even very limited deviations from neo-liberal orthodoxy are hailed as radical developments despite their compatibility with the governing institutions of neo-liberal capitalism.

Homo Economicus

This is readily apparent in the case of someone like Joseph Stiglitz, who as Chief Economist at the World Bank in the 1990s and in his subsequent book, *Globalization and Its Discontents*, recognized market and institutional imperfections and the crucial role played in actual economic processes by social capital, culture and networks. Ben Fine and Elisa Van Waeyenberge in their chapter note that Stiglitz's deviation from orthodoxy is highly limited by his own Keynesian assumptions. It has also had the unfortunate effect of allowing narrow economic assumptions to determine other discourses about social relations, culture, politics and even ethics. At the same time, as Sanjay G. Reddy reminds us, the World Bank faced severe censure from right-wing commentators for accurately trying to gauge the full extent of acute world poverty. This had the desired effect. Attacks on competing economic methodologies make it difficult for the lay public, that were mobilised in their millions in 2005 to Make Poverty History, from making an informed judgement about which 'truth' to believe.

In one sense there is not really anything new about governments telling lies to their electors. It is just that governments have become more routinely cynical about it. When Empire demands a new figure of hate to replace the Reds, yesterday's tyrannical ally will do. When finite raw materials are coveted,

this is done in the name of the universal interest in 'democracy' and the 'rule of law'. When the War on Terror demands it, a hydra-headed enemy is conjured up, which, as A. Sivanandan told a conference in Glasgow, 'cannot tell a settler from an immigrant, an immigrant from an asylum seeker, an asylum seeker from a Muslim, a Muslim from a terrorist'.²

In a chapter on The Cynical State, Colin Leys charts the decline of the public service ethos governing professional conduct in the welfarist British state to its destruction, sorry I meant to say 'modernization', through Thatcher, Major and Blair. As the British Civil Service was restructured on more business-friendly lines and the public sector marketised, so more power was arbitrarily centralised in the very person of the Premier. Advice from impartial civil servants, balancing the public interest, has been replaced by think tanks and coteries pushing headline-grabbing policies, allowing PR, pollsters and spin-meisters to continually adapt policies to suit the 'needs of the market'.

In the US, as Doug Henwood argues in 'The Business Community', government and state have become akin to front-offices for the gigantic corporations that dominate so much of the world economy. Here, as in the UK, the image of the ruling class has changed, with paternalistic northeastern WASP elites being supplanted by more thoroughly rightwing oil barons from the West and the South, typified by the 'good ol' boy' antics of George W. Bush. Short-term returns on revenue, tax cuts, and deregulation are frenetically pursued by traditional and nouveau elites at the same time as social programmes are savaged. As Henwood notes: 'the distinction between the American ruling class and its business community – with the ruling class presumably operating on a time scale of decades rather than quarters – has largely collapsed' (p. 73).

While he warns against foreseeing a scary, catastrophic collapse of debt-ridden US capital and state, few seem prepared to squarely face the truth that an austerity programme may be just round the corner, perhaps to be launched by former corporate lawyer and former Wal-Mart director, President Hilary Clinton. Indeed, the attack on

social and welfare programmes for marginalised groups is seen by Frances Fox Piven and Barbara Ehrenreich in their chapter on welfare reform in the US as a foil by the ruling elite for a much wider attack on 'expensive' programmes like Medicaid and unemployment insurance. In the process, they seek to unravel further the gains made by the poor through the New Deal settlement and the political obligations of the Great Society ethos. No one but the very rich will benefit from further incursions on welfare, something that is barely disguised by populist appeals of the religious right.

Debased Punditry

In the world of neo-liberal disguises and subterfuges corporate PR is pervasive. The idea of the press as the guarantor of an uncorrupted public sphere that holds the powerful to account is looking threadbare. Robert W. McChesney for the US news media and David Miller for the UK media show, in their respective chapters, that the media have become an extension of the military-entertainment complex. All this has been too painfully evident in the propaganda roll-out for the Iraq War and the subsequent occupation. As for news journalists, with few notable exceptions, their blind patriotism knows no bounds. Their slavish dependence on official sources, that is to say, the interests of the powerful, is rarely questioned. McChesney's belief in the possibilities for critical journalism pulls its punches: 'Embedded reporting in combination with full throttle jingoism on US television news made it difficult for journalists to do critical work' (p. 126).

Miller sees UK news journalism in thrall to the rise of the PR industry and resurgent state propaganda. A profound change separates the social democratic media of the post-war period, which Miller dates from 1945 to 1979, from the neo-liberal media of the past quarter century. In the former period, when labour and capital embraced in a corporatist compact there was less need to systematically misrepresent reality. Today, when the gap between the narrow pecuniary self-interest of ruling elites in the go-for-broke miasma of the market and the 'general interest' in secure forms of

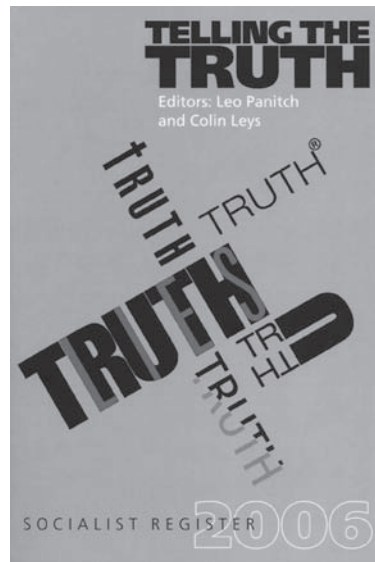
social reproduction has widened dramatically. Unlike media conspiracy theorists, Miller's contribution has the great merit of situating the giant Un-truth of neo-liberal media in material reality.

Into this web of Un-truth are pulled academics, intellectuals and research departments. They usefully provide 'evidence' in the form of carefully-designed data, buffed-up positively to support government policies. Where they are critical of government or their research findings flies in the face of neo-liberal assumptions, researchers run the risk of being 'cut out of the loop' – that is, the academic-policy network where research funding (and academic careers) is secured. While this has not gone as far in the UK as the situation in the US, it has led, for instance, to a deep-seated de-politicisation of the critical social sciences, which have might been expected to show some fidelity to speaking the truth about the state of British society. For those with insecure prospects, playing the part of the public intellectual in the UK as, for instance, the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu had done in France in challenging the vicissitudes of neo-liberal dogma, is particularly unappetizing.

This clears the field for unadulterated pro-Blair punditry. It has also led, for example, to Britain's best known sociologist, Anthony Giddens, recently playing the part of intellectual emissary for the Third Way. Giddens is helping the Libyan dictator Gaddafi, whose son studied at the LSE where Giddens is based, to be rehabilitated back into the orbit of Western acceptability. Meanwhile, in the background, all hell had broken out in the Middle East.³

Ideological Clutter

It is not just careerism that leads to intellectual quietism in academia. It is also the debilitating political role that postmodernism has played for the past three decades. Once seen as radical and daring, subversive even, John Sanbonmatsu rehearses how the postmodern assault on the very idea of 'truth' evacuated any ground from where the powerful might be challenged. Well, maybe there was a bit more to it than that. After the failure of the radical upturn of the 1960s and 1970s the single Holy and Apostolic defence of The



Truth needed to be re-examined. Science and humanism remain embedded within the very class society that gave rise to them.

Does truth entail a direct correspondence with real objects? If so, what if the real objects, say commodities alienated from social labour by capital, are hypocritical liars? During the catastrophe of the Holocaust, Adorno included in his inventory of complicity with growing barbarism naïve beliefs in free access to the truth: 'Since, however, free and honest exchange is itself a lie, to deny it is at the same time to speak for truth: in the face of the lie of the commodity world, even the lie that denounces it becomes a corrective'.⁴ Adorno thought that art would provide a refuge for critique. Michael Kustow claims in his chapter that theatre should provide a bulwark for telling the truth. In the immediacy of stage and audience contact, falsity and manipulation are readily exposed. That is perhaps why the truth about the Iraq occupation is more evident in Gregory Burke's play 'Black Watch' than in the pages of the *Guardian*. But even here the prospects are being narrowed by pseudo-market thinking and the political bad faith that underlies arts funding cutbacks.

Getting at the truth is a messy and far from settled affair, as Terry Eagleton argues in his chapter. If truth is seen as a process, then many of the judgements we are compelled to make need to be considered provisional even though we strongly adhere to them until their falsity can be adequately demonstrated. But what counts as adequacy? Our structure of thinking can protect even the most glaring illusion, for instance that the USSR was a socialist society, from exposure to other truth claims, that the USSR was the antithesis of socialism. The truth is often an unpleasant journey for leftwing radicals. As Eagleton put it: 'Leftists tend to practice a hermeneutic of suspicion: the truth, they believe, is usually uglier and more discreditable than the general consensus imagines. The truth may be precious, but it is not on the whole congenial' (p. 283). In social and political struggles of every kind, both sides seek to conceal their weakness through subterfuge and deception and exaggerate their strengths. In the course of an industrial dispute, for instance, a worker who admitted the whole truth about strike tactics to management would severely endanger the objective efficacy of the action.

Some kind of standpoint needs to be taken up, one that cuts through readymade platitudes but is also undogmatically alive to changing

conditions and self-criticism. If the truth is 'generally rebarbative', as Eagleton would have it, then 'it also involves honesty, courage and a readiness to break ranks' (p. 284). If the 'hermeneutic of suspicion' means that a gap opens up between virtue and truth, a virtuous standpoint may necessitate a break from the absolutist dogmas of truth-seekers. In a society founded on lies about integrity and moral conduct, it may therefore become necessary to appeal to deeper virtues based on justice and solidarity. An obsession with The Truth, Nietzsche argued, represents a kind of madness. It also surrenders the game to those adepts of systematic lying like the tabloid press. 'An appeal to truth', to call on Adorno again, 'is scarcely the prerogative of a society which dragoons its members to own up the better to hunt them down'.⁵

Infinite indulgence and zero tolerance

What Loic Wacquant calls the new 'scholarly myths' attempt to create an infinite indulgence towards the market and the security forces, on the one hand, but an unflinching 'zero tolerance' that criminalises recalcitrant sections of society, especially the young, impoverished, black, urban working class. Such 'scholarly myths' depend on the appeal of scientific coherence and a mythical structure. What 'everyone already knows' to be already the case is thus validated by scientific rhetoric and authority. This includes the US export of supposedly scientific theories of criminality like the celebrated 'broken windows theory' which has been credited with 'cleaning-up' New York's streets. Severe punishment for the slightest indiscretion will, according to this scholarly myth, prevent misdemeanours from escalating, say from vandalism to homicide.

Something like the 'broken windows' paradigm has already made deep inroads into British criminal justice, policing and social work functions. ASBOs anyone? But, as Wacquant concludes, such US-derived scholarly myths are wholly devoid of scientific validity. Instead, they 'function as a planetary launching pad for an intellectual hoax and an exercise

in political legerdemain which, by giving a pseudo-academic warrant to sweeping police activism, contribute powerfully to legitimating the shift towards the penal management of social insecurity that is everywhere being generated by the social and economic disengagement of the state' (p. 109).

The neo-liberal submergence of the very conditions where truth might become a possibility is not confined to the US and the UK (the so-called 'anglo-american bloc'). Atilla A. Boron identifies a 'crisis of democracy' in Latin America where the struggles for democracy have been paid for with an enormous cost in human suffering, mass murder and state-sponsored torture. Boron is pessimistic about the possibilities for democratic truth in Latin America. Even the winning of this level of democratic rights is tempered by the incipient authoritarianism of neo-liberal capitalism where the market always attempts to exercise despotic power over wage labour. Here the Market and Democracy are incompatibles:

'Market-driven politics cannot be democratic politics. These policies have caused progressive exhaustion of the democratic regimes established at a very high cost in terms of human suffering and human lives, making them revert to a pure formality deprived of all meaningful content, a periodical simulacrum of the democratic ideal while social life regresses to a quasi-Hobbesian war of all against all ...' (p. 55).

Class and Resistance

If contributors to this anthology sometimes recall the social democratic welfare state with an over-fondness, at times bordering on a rather nostalgic 'world we have lost' image, it only adds to the seeming catastrophic loss of the conditions where the truth about our current predicament might be voiced. Instead of an accent on proof and veracity, public discourse is degraded into emotivism and sincerity appeals, of the Blair-corporate 'trust me, you guys' variety, a point pithily made by Deborah Cameron some years ago:

'The problem with today's public language, however, is not so much that it represents reality inaccurately or dishonestly, but that it does not set out to be a representation of anything at all. When organisations proclaim they are "pursuing excellence", or when they write scripts for their employees to parrot, they want us not to believe the words, but to applaud the sentiments behind them. Their claims are not primarily "veracity claims" ("what I am telling you is a fact"), but "sincerity claims" ("what I am telling you comes from the heart").'⁶

How is this endemic condition

of Un-truth and faux-sincerity to be countered? *Socialist Register* has a long tradition in its annual anthologies of addressing the urgent issues of the day from a broadly socialist approach. In its early days EP Thompson appealed to 'the people' as a source of resistance to the self-interested power of the rulers.

While acknowledging the importance of Thompson for British radicalism, G.M. Tamas sees this emphasis on 'the people' as an unspecified aggregate of plebeian decency as less than useful for critical forms of resistance. On the way, however, Tamas conflates class with 'caste' and, from the point of view of effecting class-based resistance to Un-truth, ends up in a right old muddle. His problem is that he bends the stick away from the humanism of *Socialist Register* favourites like Thompson and Raymond Williams to divorce class from how everyday life is actually lived under capitalism. For Tamas a 'way of life' is not about class but about 'caste'. 'Class', in fact, exists only as 'economic reality' but is 'cultural and politically extinct' (p. 255). Class is reduced by Tamas to a dead abstraction that provides no way out of the morass. At least Thompson and Williams, despite their affirmation of 'the people' and plebeian cultures, presented some resources for hope, even if they need to be tempered with self-critical activity. *Socialist Register* is required reading on its publication every year. This volume continues that tradition as, surely, will next year's anthology. It may even attempt to reconnect the distorted truths of class society with their counter-point in communities of resistance.

Notes

- 1 *Telling the Truth: Socialist Register 2006*, edited by Leo Panitch and Colin Leys
- 2 Quoted by James Hamilton, 'UK response to terrorism 'has resurrected primitive racism'', *Sunday Herald*, 17 September 2006, p. 27.
- 3 Anthony Giddens, 'The colonel and the Third Way', *New Statesman*, 28 August 2006.
- 4 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, London: Verso, 2005, p. 44.
- 5 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 30.
- 6 Deborah Cameron, 'The Tyranny of Nicepeak', *New Statesman*, 5 November 2001.

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