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Author/s:

Cubitt, S

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Against the New Normal

Sean Cubitt, University of Melbourne

Cultural Politics Pandemic section

Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will

I felt a great sense of relief when I heard someone say 'We all hold our breath when we pass a stranger in the street'. We do, or I do and confess it here even if not everyone does. It is a private, even intimate gesture, secret, shameful, that you wouldn't want the stranger to notice. Trying to think of a post-Covid culture, and what *Cultural Politics* specifically and cultural politics more generally can bring to building it, this kind of intimate/public crossover seems a way in.

I wanted to start with the epigraph from Gramsci's prison letters, in the form it takes as the concluding aphorism in the poet Enzensberger's 'Constituents for a Theory of the Media' (1970), one of the most utopian expressions of cultural politics, a continuing inspiration for radical media practice. Gramsci wrote as a man afflicted in life, imprisoned when everything he had dedicated his life to had been defeated by his greatest political enemy, the moment of European fascism's first success, in a progress that Gramsci knew would not stop at prison. There are parallels with every subsequent dark passage in history, from the Cold War to HIV and the current pandemic. Gramsci seems to offer a moral obligation: it is the duty of teachers and scholars to hope, and provide the means of hope to others. Less often observed is that Gramsci's statement is dialectical. Optimism is only authentic when it is won from steel-eyed observation of the actual darkness. Optimism can only be achieved by plunging first into pessimism.

ONE: The virus itself.

Tom Ray, the island ecologist, opined at the *Doors of Perception* event in 1995 that any circumscribed environment would, by a mathematical law of nature, generate enough species to fill it. What was true of islands was also true of the biomass of the human population. Considered as an enclosed environment, humanity is under-populated. Gut flora, bacteria and lice do not fill the niche created by separating humans from the rest of the physical environment. Viruses emerge when they evolve strategies for entering the walled continent of the human biomass.

There is no obvious answer to the quandary that Ray's proposal puts us in that doesn't involve huge numbers of deaths, each one of which must be experienced, and every one of which is an intolerable

moral burden. Only the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, the aristocrat, can view the deaths of others with impunity (we have to imagine UK Prime Ministerial adviser Dominic Cummings and the silent parade of similar grey eminences in the silos of power as such aristocratic anarchists). The price of our isolation from nature is corona, but the cost of tearing down the walls that taught the virus how to pick locks is also corona.

TWO: Corporate cyborg

It is clear that oligarchs and racists have made the best of the crisis, and it seems likely that Wall Street will do the same. The distance between plutocrats and the global poor will not diminish, even if the odd plutocrat dies. Structural inequality, and its accelerating resurgence, was not made by the people who benefit from it. It is the product of a posthuman system that evolved as their servant and which, like Covid-19, has become autonomous and homicidal. This system is fundamentally technical, and to the extent that it has human components, they are reduced to functionaries whose humanity is excluded from the efficient operation of the machinery they serve. The humanity that arrogantly defined itself as the opposite of machines finds the situation reversed: humans are rejected by the machinery they invented. The actually existing corporate cyborg has no affection for humans, rich or poor. Its program allows only for profit-taking. We know that it is not animated because, unlike every living being, it has no survival instinct. It will destroy us and even itself in the blind pursuit of profit, which exists only in the present. "In the future we are all dead" is only true from a human perspective. "In the future, we are all in debt" is the corporate cyborg's credo, and the present tense is significant: we *are* in debt for money we *will* pay back, but since the lonely instant of final reconciliation never comes, debt creates an eternal present, without a goal, even the goal of self-preservation and self-perpetuation.

THREE: Fatalism

The current situation is a compound result of human exemption from natural and technical environments. We can and should blame the system we were born into, but that doesn't give us a way out. Besides, as everyone says, there are no precedents, though it might be more useful to say that what precedents there have been are not ones that produce morally or systemically desirable solutions. The nadir of our conjuncture involves imagination. This is one of the domains where cultural politics is as significant as power and economics. 'Imagination' here in the sense of Jameson's remembered remark that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of

capitalism (Jameson 2003: 76)¹. Culture is what's left when the lights go out. The last lights to go out will be on Wall Street, last flickering fires of Armageddon, not beacons of civilisation.

A decent number of commentators note that the concept of 'private health' is self-contradictory. Public health, planned economies and the social wage (though few polities dare call their strategies by their Cold War names) are now in place in the advanced economies, with the constant exception of the USA. Dogmatic neo-liberalism has proved ineffectual; and neo-populism courts disaster from Brazil to Hungary. Left optimism encourages us to see more social, less privative and competitive cultural underpinnings revealing themselves as the genetic material for a post-Covid world.

Equally many if not more respond with miscellaneous xenophobias, mobilising traditional fears of religious, racial, and migrant strangers, and bizarre innovations in the fear of technology like burning 5G network masts, and fear of nature expressed by turning pets out of doors. Fear and hatred of the other match contradictory survivalist advice on hoarding and bingeing of consumer goods and electronic media, once vehicles of ideology, now instruments of mental health. Right optimism's vision of survival and recovery envisages returning to business as usual, perhaps even breathing greenwashed air.

Alongside Left and Right public optimism, privately, not even said aloud to our nearest and dearest, probably especially not to them, is a far more dangerous political culture: fatalism.

In the Global North, death is elsewhere. For a generation, death has been an unfamiliar event, transpiring in hospitals and care homes away from public eyes, an intimate encounter almost more secret than sex. To die in the street is pitiful, even shameful; to die at home an accident or vanity, and in the pandemic dangerous and selfish. In the Global North, death, in the singular, is neither metaphysical terminus nor gateway to afterlife but the arithmetic sum of the deaths of others. We can't say the word 'mortality' without adding the word 'rates'. Death is a statistic, whose numbers rapidly transform into a diagram, The Curve, a visualisation whose abstraction approaches the vacuum of a simulation, eradicating even the memory of actual deaths. The Curve is a vehicle of repression. It represses public fears, but by doing so forces them into the unexpressed interior of the citizen, and intensifies them, so they no longer come out as anxiety, but as numb acceptance of the

1 Jameson writes 'Someone once said . . .'. Similarly Gramsci attributes 'pessimism of the intellect' to the novelist Romain Rolland. It seems appropriate to the argument in this essay that there is no individual behind these inspirational sayings. To cite another example filtered through Raymond Williams (1989), the resources of hope are communal or they are not hopeful.

predestined model. Shit happens, and the high likelihood is it will happen to me. This fatalism, and the commensurate whistling in the dark we undertake with intensified media escapism, is the dark centre of Covid culture.

FIVE: A New Colonialism

On the 26th of May 2020, reports emerged that Rio Tinto had blasted two sacred sites, more than 40,000 years old. One archaeological find that survived is a braid of human hair containing fossil DNA linking directly to Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura traditional owners who still live around the Juukan Gorge in the Hammersley Ranges, part of the Pilbara region of Western Australia. The blasts were legal under punitive 'Protection' laws dating back to the 1970s that strongly favoured mining interests. In the weeks that followed, the Morrison right-wing coalition government began a campaign to 'build our way out of recession', specifically by getting rid of 'green tape' at federal and state levels to allow the extraction industries in particular to exploit the rising price of ore in international markets boosted by Keynesian policies of infrastructure construction in China and other territories. This policy initiative coincided with the explosion of the #BlackLivesMatter protests, which in Australia focussed on Indigenous deaths in custody, 434 in the last 30 years without a single prosecution being brought to court.

There have been no scenes like those perpetrated by the National Guard under White House orders targeting protesters in US cities. The similarity lies rather in the use of the pandemic as a smokescreen for new modes of exploitation in Australia and new modes of both repression and political campaigning in the USA. Dominated by virus coverage, news media have less time and column inches to devote to the increasingly flamboyant corruption of politics and big business. Apart from their consolidation of the kleptocracy, these actions are symptomatic of a new mode of colonialism. In the Australian case, the government tries to ensure that the nation's role as a resource colony is maintained, after the collapse of the British Empire, by ensuring either the fading or the rising hegemonic powers or both know that the country is open for pillage. In the USA, genocide by inaction, economic and social exclusion, and incarceration is being extended to more active forms of direct violence, with armed white protesters occupying the Michigan state legislature treated as heroes, and unarmed black protesters occupying streets treated as criminals and terrorists.

The shield for these shameful and terrifying advances of neo-nationalist inflected neo-liberalism is the almost equally shameful and terrifying term 'new normal'. The extreme actions are nostalgic for

a time of white supremacy in both countries; and aim to reverse the extremely modest gains – as in Western Australia’s laws protecting Indigenous sites – of environmental and human rights legislation, again a retrospective action. It is only the fact that these brutalities are founded on imaginary pasts that allows some kind of optimism to emerge.

SIX: Imagination

It is crucial to confront this interior dark as much as it is to confront the more social expressions of xenophobia and public blaming, and the ominous symptoms of intensifying neo-populism and plutocracy. It is crucial because without understanding our own (sense of) impotence as a *cultural* force – not just a reflection of political and economic circumstances – can we mobilise this pessimism in the service of something beyond it. Optimism not grounded in pessimism is sentimental, in the sense that it takes no responsibility for bringing about what it wants to enjoy. Jeff Lewis, in correspondence, points out the pleasure of contemplating empty streets as apocalyptic sites. It is a way of imagining death differently to its statistical abstraction; of imagining the world as it may persist without me. That posthumous world continues, as so many people have said, like something from a movie. Though we know movies enforce empty streets with permits to shut down thoroughfares, and that their current movie-like desertion is also a matter of advisories and enforcements, nonetheless that look of spaces as they appear after – after death, my death, the extinction of my species – has become an omnipresent intimation of extinction, an emblem of fatalism, no longer a psychological aberration but a property of the world.

This has its utopian dimension. It removes my eyes from the centre of the universe. It proposes that some other gaze, some other consciousness, surveys the scene of my absence. If on one hand I imagine a world focussed around its missing centre, the world as a memorial to me, on the other I'm forced to recognise that something – cinema, the built environment, nature in whatever form we imagine it – will persist as consciousness. If earth, the only experiment in consciousness we know of, may persist even after humans die, then consciousness is not the sole dominion of humans and human-like animals but a planetary thing, diffusely shared among technologies and ecologies.

We have a population problem, it is true, but it is soluble if we sacrifice just the 8 richest people, freeing up enough to go round (Oxfam 2017). Of course the kleptocrat class can corrupt enough people to defend themselves, just as the richest nations build walls round their territories and persuade their poorest citizens that it is they who benefit, not the rich. All this is the ordinary business of wealth and power, the all too familiar work of culture as ideology. Faced now with The

End, not only my death but the death of my species, plutocracy represents death as the deaths of others². Pessimism insists, in the face of official discourse, that I will die, and that we will die. It is a kind of resistance.

Like all resistance, it shares the shape of what represses it. There is however one lesson everyone should take from psychoanalysis: no repression is ever complete. Ecologically neither 'I' nor 'we' is or has ever been entirely isolated. 'I' has been a social construct since Freud; from John Muir (2019) in the 1870s to Arne Naess ([1976] 1989) a century later, the human 'we' is conceivable likewise only as an effect of the incomplete and restless repression of nature. The thing that dies is an effect of exclusions. A body's flux of air, water and food, that we still deny, we now fondly imagine recalling us, as a river recalls the rocks it rolls aside and wears away in the shape of its meanders. If I remember water, water remembers me. In a pandemic lockdown, no-one can see you dance, but the displaced air and pounded floorboards recall each step and gesture. Nothing is lost.

And nothing is gained. This panpsychism is also a mode of fatalism, a consolation worthy of Boethius (1999), whose own prison notebook, written 1500 years ago, justified God allowing evil into creation, and dwelt on pre-destination. It is important to have such nostrums for our predicament: it makes the waiting bearable. But it gives no clue yet what cultural politics can achieve at this crossroads. We dream of a global cosmopolis informed by the knowledge that if Covid persists anywhere, it persists everywhere. We dream that Trump's disastrous rejection of intelligence (optimism of stupidity, paralysis of the will) ends US hegemony and the neo-Right project, and that the clear skies over Delhi and Shanghai teach our bosses to savour a planet without fossil fuels. But we dread that, with the Belt and Road policy, Xi's China is after all ready to take on the hegemonic role, that it will revert to dirty power in a matter of months, and that any vaccine will be the preserve of the wealthy North, leaving vast pools of sickness evolving in the South, justifying new racist wars on migrants. But if Wall Street never lets a good crisis go to waste, nor should whatever we call the radical alternative to the capitalist cyborg. I call it the Left: widdershins and sinister in the eyes of our master, 'anarchists' and 'terrorists' in the words of Trump and Xi.

Refusing identity and embracing planetary consciousness are at best only preliminaries to producing another world, and at worst easily oriented to melancholia. 'What is to be done?' is not a Left question anymore because it is too easy to answer 'Nothing'. Equally, it is too easy to answer, as

2 "Ideology' and 'representation' are hotly contested terms in the theological byways of cultural studies. Call them biopolitics, assemblage or discourse: the things they describe are the same.

Lenin ([1902] 1961) did, with planning. Planning is not hope. It is stamping the future with the demands of the present. Like debt, plans, successful plans at least, work against the emergence of the radically new, and that is what we must demand of ourselves – *not* of the future – if a post-Covid world is to be possible in any form we would actually like to inhabit. Hope is not given: it is a permanent work, undertaken in crisis, thus critical work, thus permanently working on the negative – *not* this plan, *not* this way. This is how to oppose the planned restoration of oligarchy, plutocracy and the human privilege – in any case an ideological premise when vast swathes of the human population are treated as externalities in exactly the same way as the natural environment. Covid-19 will always be part of the future. We do not know if Covid will be or will have been, only that it is now part of the resources out of which any future must be made. The pandemic is an opportunity to imagine the post-pandemic culture. It teaches us that imagination, a term largely lost from cultural politics, is potentially dangerous, only trustworthy when at its most negative, and immensely powerful. The lie that the corporate cyborg knows best and respects individuals or humanity is shattered now. In its ruins we can say of post-Covid culture

It is not individual. What the commons may look like we cannot guess: we can only begin to make them possible

It is not human. What an ecology that embraces organisms and technologies may be, we have no idea. But we can begin to create its infrastructures.

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