



BOOK REVIEW

THE EMPIRE OF THE
SPECTACLE

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Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War, RETORT, by Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts, London: Verso, 2005, \$24 CAN/£10/\$16 US, PB 1-84467-031-7

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Through a dual focus on the means of material and symbolic production, this book challenges conventional wisdom about world politics and war since September 11, 2001. Through an analysis of capital and spectacle, imperialism, and the image world, the authors rethink left politics and discover common ground for a multitude that would be an alternative to US empire and an antithesis to al Qaeda. While they paint a grim picture of the present, their message is that resistance is possible, and it might be more effective if it were framed as a movement against the tyranny of military neoliberalism.

The authors begin by arguing that both the US empire's power and the power of resistance to it are "afflicted" in different ways. By invading and occupying Iraq, the US is on the verge of a strategic failure worse than Vietnam, while the

antiwar movement in particular, and the left in general, is afflicted by its own “limits and insufficiencies” (p. 5). The problem, as they see it, is that the left will be doomed to repeat the experience of failure when speaking truth to power unless it takes seriously the new revolutionary vanguard in our midst and draws a new political map of the world. Their cartography, which highlights “the contradictions of military neo-liberalism under conditions of spectacle” (p. 15), rests on the premise that the state is vulnerable because control over the image is never total.

In their neo-Debordian first chapter, 9/11 is understood as a violent, spectacular riposte to a US state that depends upon an investment in images as much as in stock markets. The authors insist that understanding what took place requires a dual perspective on the “struggle for crude, material dominance, but also...as a battle for the control of appearances” (p. 31). The exploding Twin Towers demonstrated that the US no longer had a monopoly over violence and the means of destruction. But the spectacular state was then “obliged” to answer this suicide bombing by using its afterimage to implement ultra-right-wing policies and launch a new round of image war and mass destruction in the name of “security.” There were “ordinary military, neo-colonial, grossly economic logics” at work (p. 34), but they also stress the imperatives of image-war and its relation to a new round of primitive capital accumulation.

The second chapter critiques the commodity determinism of the “blood for oil” account. Oil, they argue, is a commodity fetish that masks the mutation of liberalism and the return to primitive accumulation. Beyond strategic and corporate oil interests, the “dialectic of oil and armaments – of ‘build and destroy’” (p. 70) extends well into other industries and countries. In this wider perspective, the Iraq war was not so much about oil as it was about “extra-economic” restructuring of the conditions for profitability. In the case of Iraq, neoliberalism (the conservative revolution against the welfare state) converges with the revolution in military affairs to yield a new hybrid – military neoliberalism.

In the third chapter, they examine the historical trajectory of US militarism. If technology begat modernity and war begets information technology, then war has become “modernity incarnate” (p. 79). Their story echoes Foucault, who said that politics is the continuation of war by other means. The permanent war machine, facilitated by weak citizenship, has its own momentum and seeks to “normalize” itself through sanitized images of war and a culture of terror. Yet the empire’s structural inclination toward war is not merely a matter of propaganda to preempt public opinion. Other contingencies – greed, hubris, mania, bureaucracy, ideology, shifts in international power relations, domestic politics – push in the direction of military intervention, “regardless of the likely tactical efficacy of the particular action” (p. 104). Empire is thus structurally inclined toward endless war and a culture of terror, as all the destruction sets the stage

for crude accumulation or future maneuvering. For Boal *et al.*, the present turns out to be the totalitarian future that Hanna Arendt foresaw: the “endless accumulation of armed power proposes itself...as the very basis of the social order” (p. 107).

Chapter four delves into US–Israel relations. The authors argue that, for the US, the state of Israel has played a spectacular, double role as a market-enriched “democracy” and as a hypermilitarized colonizing Western power. US support for Israel is a “compulsion,” an “ideological addiction” (p. 130). While its role as a real “strategic asset” was short-lived, Israel served as a model for US arms buildup and the militarization of politics. Israel’s preoccupation with “security” against “terror” generated the framework for the US’s unilateral response to the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, they contend Israel is a “failed spectacle” because the Zionist modernist image of “Making the Desert Bloom” turned into an image of contested space and dispossessed Palestinians. The price to maintain this delusion of empire is paid by “actual bodies, actual death and despair” (p. 130).

In chapter five, the authors explore political Islamism to understand the attacks by militant jihadists, and what provoked them. In brief, they contend that “Political Islam has fed on the twin crises of (failed) secular nationalism and the (failed) post-colonial state” (p. 138).

Oil, primitive accumulation, Cold War geopolitics, neoliberal pressures, the liquidation of left politics, and the disaster of urbanization have all contributed to arresting modern secular development. In this context, al Qaeda has “transformed itself from a vanguard organization into something like a mass movement with a nearly unlimited pool of potential operatives” (p. 138). It has absorbed the West’s ideas of revolution and fed on the image of US-inflicted horrors and rapid consumerism. What is new here is the power of Internet-enabled image-politics to constitute a new multitude whose face “is that of Islamic resistance” (p. 159). This response may be to unprecedented conditions of misery, but it is disastrous because it forces history and the rewriting of the future into a War in Heaven. However, political Islam is capable of renouncing jihad and producing gradualist, nonviolent forms of democratic inclusion. In addition to understanding the hybrid nature of political Islam, the left will have to analyze another face of modernity – consumer culture and technologies. Consumerism is a present-minded way of life; for revolutionary Islam, it is a “vision” and a “false depth” that cultivates revulsion and drives opposition into al Qaeda. This opposition is rooted in a crisis in time brought about by real-time media interactivity. Communication technologies make it possible to invent a history and expel the banalities of the present. But submission to new technics of the spectacle also produces problems for power that not even the US military and political elite can control – witness the aftershock of the photographs taken of

smiling, thumbs-up US soldiers and naked humiliated or dead Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison.

The unwelcome conclusion they draw in their final chapter is that Terror is modernity's only "vicious and fantastical" opposition. Terrorism is not a political tactic anymore, but a "form of life" (p. 185). The challenge for the left is to undertake a "non-nostalgic, non-anathematizing, non-regressive, non-fundamental, non-apocalyptic critique of the modern" (p. 185). Otherwise rearguard action will become permanent rearguard action, and go on "determining the paranoid form of modernity adapted in response to it" (p. 186). Grounds for optimism of the will have appeared in the antiglobalization movement, in the antimilitarism and imperialism of the peace movement, but "effective resistance has to be framed in terms that challenge the whole texture of modernity" (p. 189). What lies at the core of capitalist modernity is "endless enclosure" (p. 193, italic in original), a "continual *disembedding* of basic elements of the species's lifeworld" (p. 194, italic in original). They suggest that this dialectic of enclosure and disembedding is a lens through which North and South can find some common ground to frame resistance to US empire.

It is impossible to capture the analytical depth and polemical tone of *Afflicted Powers* here. It will have to suffice to say that this book speaks the truth to US power while rejecting the new militant's cult of Terror. In light of the London Tube bombings in 2005, which saw a new generation of indigenous militant jihadists contribute another image-moment to the political theater of martyrdom, this is a prophetic book. However, it presents the US state as an apparatus exercising such exceptional extrasovereign power that "democracy" can only mean submission to US empire. While this may be the case in Iraq, the elections of Lula da Silva's Workers Party in Brazil, Evo Morales' Movement Towards Socialism in Bolivia, and Michelle Bachelet of the Chilean Socialist Party suggest that the left needs to take advantage of the falling rate of illusion, not only, as the authors propose, by forging links between images of war, floods, and riots but also by making links between progressive social movements and party politics. In Boal et al.'s view, authentic, nonviolent opposition to modernity would begin with a deeper understanding of the predicament of late-capitalist modernity and those who oppose it. The authors remain "realists" who find grounds for optimism in antivanguard social struggles against neoliberalism as well as "local challenges" to the state and the technics of war. But if spectacle is the link between the politics of US empire and the culture of capitalism, then democratic media activism will be integral to any social struggles against the tyranny of military neoliberalism.