

An Exchange on *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*

RETORT

Part manifesto, part history, Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War, published last summer by Verso, emerged from a broadsheet produced for the antiwar demonstrations of spring 2003. Its author is Retort, “a gathering of some 30 or 40 antagonists of the present order of things, based for the past two decades in the San Francisco Bay Area. Four of the group—Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Mathews, and Michael Watts—did the main work of writing.” (That is all we are told of its producers except for this aside: “one of [us] knows the hell of the Nigerian oil derricks firsthand, and another what it was like to practice law in the California prison system; one of us counts Bruegel and Pasolini as his heroes, another the Levellers and Carlo Tresca.”) Presented as an account of world politics since September 11, 2001, Afflicted Powers extends beyond this date in its historical reach, theoretical implications, and practical challenges. Its contrapuntal chapters, six in all, argue the renewed pertinence of the concept of spectacle for the present form of empire, and investigate the historical bases of the “Blood for Oil” position of the antiwar movement; trace the gradual militarization of everyday life in the United States, and frame the mirroring of such “permanent war” in the history of Israel; outline the conditions of the rise of “revolutionary Islam,” and respond to its radical refusal of modernity with a call for a “non-apocalyptic” critique from the Left. Afflicted Powers invites debate, and October has opened its pages to such a discussion, here focused on issues imagined to be of most interest to its readers. What follows are the questions (posed by Hal Foster before the first bombings in London) and the responses (delivered by Retort in the midst of the first flooding of New Orleans).

1.

“The distinctive feature of the new world situation,” you write early on, is “its deep and perplexing doubleness. . . . A bald-faced imperialism is crossed with a struggle for control of ‘information.’” And later you sum up: “Primitive accumulation is to be carried out in conditions of spectacle: that is the new reality in a nutshell.”

Yet how new, finally, is this reality, how distinctive this doubleness? However extreme it appears today, isn’t the conjunction of “atavism and newfangledness” structural to the

dialectic of modernization at large? That is, are we witness to a shift in kind here or only in degree? Or is such a long view merely a way of flattening specificity and relieving responsibility?

If we immediately have recourse to a quote from Brecht (when in doubt, wheel out the quizzical Stalinist one more time), will that confirm *October's* worst suspicions? Perhaps. But we cannot help feeling that the poem below speaks more completely to the “dialectic of modernization” than any prose is ever likely to. It is the first of Brecht’s *Five Visions* from 1938, called “Parade of the Old New.” (“Parade” makes a welcome change from “spectacle,” which is a word, we realize, that gets a bit shopworn and all-consuming with time.)

I stood on a hill and I saw the Old approaching, but it came as the New.

It hobbled up on new crutches which no one had ever seen before and stank of new smells of decay which no one had ever smelt.

The stone that rolled past was the newest invention and the screams of the gorillas drumming on their chests set up to be the newest thing in music.

Everywhere you could see open graves standing empty as the New advanced on the capital.

Round about stood those who inspire terror, shouting: Here comes the New, it’s all new, salute the New, be new like us! And those who heard, heard nothing but their shouts, but those who saw, saw certain people who were not shouting.

So the Old strode in disguised as the New, but it brought the New with it in its triumphal procession and presented it as the Old.

The New went fettered and in rags. They revealed its splendid limbs.

And the procession moved through the night, but what they thought was the light of dawn was the light of fires in the sky. And the cry: Here comes the New, it’s all new, salute the New, be new like us! would have been easier to hear if everything had not been drowned in the thunder of guns.

This sounds like the world we live in.

We agree with *October* and Brecht that in modernity there is never an end to the swapping of places between atavism and newfangledness. And this is because atavism is modernity’s truth. Modernity is a mutation of the Old. Its newness is not structural. Everything about the basic furnishing of human oppression and misery has remained unchanged in the last 150 years—except that the machinery of same has been speeded up, and various ameliorations painted in on top. The New that modernity offers is never, and can never be, the kind of rethinking and reconstruction of our productive and symbol-making powers that would again put past and future in genuine dialogue. “Newfangled” is a late-medieval word, which from the start had no illusions about the kind of novelty markets have to offer.

Nonetheless, we do think there is something distinctive about the Old New of the past four years. *Afflicted Powers* is an attempt to describe it. Very roughly, what seems to us unprecedented is the starkness—the extremity—of the confrontation between New Oldness and Old Newness. No one, surely, came close to anticipating that the opening of the twenty-first century would be structured around a battle between two such virulently reactionary forms of world power (or will to world power), and that both sides would see so clearly that the battle is now to be fought with both bombs (crude attempts at re-colonization, old-time resistance struggles, patient recruitment of armed cadres, crowds waving the latest version of the *Little Red Book*) and images.

2.

The 9/11 terrorists, you write, “followed the logic of the spectacle to its charnel house conclusion.” Yet you also credit them with great strategic canniness, anticipating that the “perpetual emotion machines” could be “captured for a moment” to produce “the perfect image of capitalism’s negation,” and that the U.S. response would be to lash out, militaristically, and so “confirm the world of Islam in its despairing strength.”

Is the spectacle as calculable in its consequences as you suggest here? Was 9/11 so foreseeable in its effects—both in “the West” and throughout the Islamic world? You acknowledge that “the new terrorists succumbed to the temptation of the spectacle”; at times in your text might you do so as well—to the temptation, above all, of the spectacle’s semblance of totality? Granted, you speak of its complex appearance and uneven development around the globe (even as it now achieves global reach); yet might your use of the concept sometimes occlude other forces—of power and opposition alike—and drive other critical models of both prematurely out of court? Has the state truly come “to live and die by its investment in, and control of, the field of images”? Isn’t this—might the very concept of the spectacle be—a paranoid formulation, which, even as it secures a threatened opposition to power, also reduces its possible effectivity?

Bombs and images. If we were to point to a basic disagreement we have with the overall drift of *October’s* questions, it would center on your suggestion that in the book—or at key moments in the book—it is the image-world and the image-battle that are primary. Maybe inevitably, the questions *October* poses single out our chapters 1 and 6, where the nature of spectacle and modernity is tackled head on. We do not claim to have solved the problem—the intractable problem, which seems to us the main theoretical challenge to left politics in the present—of thinking the technics and dynamics of the struggle for mastery in the realm of appearance in relation to the more familiar, and newly visible, facts of imperial power. But this is what the book tries to do; this is the task it sets itself. So that even in the chapter that takes as its object the spectacular dimension of the past four years of international politics, it is the spectacle as a form of state power—the state’s entrapment

in the logic of image-control, and the possible vulnerabilities such entrapment brings in its wake—that predominantly concerns us. Even the notion we propose of September 11 as a moment of image-defeat, which is as close as we come to entertaining the idea that the field of disseminated appearances may now be seen as a specific political terrain, with its own determinant weight in the equation of interests and material capacities; even this immediately opens onto a discussion of what it was—in the actual availability of armed force, and the lack of effective imperial control of client regimes—that September 11 brought into focus.

Perhaps we should say it explicitly: it may or may not be the case that a particular image-event can *in itself* alter the balance of world-political forces, surging out of the blue of international disorder and remaking the terms of statecraft. Logically this is possible. The notion of spectacle at least suggests a tendential development toward a situation in which, empirically, something like this might one day happen. *But September 11 was not it.* It was an image-defeat, yes; but it only produced the long-term or mid-term effects that it did because, as an image, it resonated so ominously with the gross material realities of “failed states,” the disintegrating world arms market, the threats to the state’s monopoly of the means of mass destruction, and the general neo-liberalization of war.

This much is stated by the chapter in question. And naturally we would want to defend the notion that chapter 1 of *Afflicted Powers*—the discussion of spectacle—really does stand in complex relation to the chapters that follow. We meant it when we wrote that “no one level of analysis—‘economic’ or ‘political,’ global or local, focusing on the means of either material or symbolic production—will do justice to the current mixture of chaos and grand design.” Or again, at the end of the Introduction, that “readers will find themselves shifting, in the chapters that follow, between hard and disagreeable materialities—cold figures of profit, piled-up statistics of death and impoverishment—and broad-ranging speculation on current forms of social control. This double perspective is true to the nature of the moment.”

We are painfully aware that much of the work of coordinating our terms of analysis—plotting spectacle against primitive accumulation as the two imperatives actually collide, or specifying the year-by-year tensions in state policy between the logic of permanent militarization and the necessities of “weak citizenship”—remains to be done. But *some* of it we do in the book. The discussion of spectacle, for instance, makes no sense without the picture of state power sketched in “Permanent War.” “Blood for Oil?” is in high tension with “Permanent War,” and meant to be. The chapters rehearse two logics of imperialism, and do not claim to be able to map the one onto the other at all precisely. (We shall go on trying. Some such map, we are convinced, is what the antiwar movement needs.) The chapter on Israel is, among other things, an attempt to point to a case in which a “spectacular” relation between states, as opposed to one based on more normal calculations of global interest, has had specific effects. The apodictic survey of modernity in chapter 6 (whose risks we acknowledge in the text) is prepared for, we hope, by the account of Qutb and Al-Qaeda that precedes it.

And so on. The apologies offered above for what we were unable to do in the book are not *pro forma*. From start to finish we were haunted by the fear that the very disparity of our terms of analysis would in the end stand in the way of effective totalization. (This, for us, would be a defect—at least in a text that aims to describe the main lines of international politics—not a thing to be proud of.) But we saw no way out of the dilemma. The heterogeneity of our terms was true to the facts.

Above all—and here is where we find *October's* questions sometimes a bit dispiriting—we wanted to find ways of taking spectacle seriously as a term of political explanation without turning it into the key to all mysteries. In a word, the concept needed to be desacralized. It needed to be applied, locally and conjuncturally—to dirty its hands with the details of politics. We wanted *Afflicted Powers* to start from the premise (which we saw confirmed month by month by the whole dynamic of the Iraq disaster) that the spectacle is subject, like everything else, to change, and is not necessarily able to assimilate every challenge, every destabilization. *An image-world can enter into crisis*—as we believe has happened since September 2001. Saying so does not entail any final verdict on the crisis's depth, or the long-term danger it poses to the apparatus of spectacular symbol management. The crisis may be temporary. But it is a crisis. Over the past four years the world of appearances has been, to some degree, reconstellated. That we recognize the ability of the image-apparatus to recuperate this moment of openness—that we even acknowledge that “crisis” is a repeated trope of spectacle itself, always flashing up the doom and fascination of modernity in some anguished new shape on the screen—says nothing against the need to describe those forces that lately put spectacle in doubt.

3.

“Ultimately,” you write, “the spectacle comes out of a barrel of a gun. State power informs and enforces it. Mostly that fact is hidden. The spectacle is that hiding.”

Here your doubles—primitive accumulation and spectacle, “the military neoliberalism” of the imperial U.S. and “the perpetual emotion machines” of the media—suddenly become one. “Unless I am very mistaken,” Adorno wrote, snootily enough, to Benjamin regarding his Arcades Project, “your dialectic lacks one thing: mediation.” Might some of your own snooty readers be similarly “mistaken”—especially given passages like this one where the spectacle is as both mediated and mediator? “Is this a ‘material,’” Adorno also asks Benjamin, “which can patiently await interpretation without being consumed by its own aura?” Might your account of this doubleness have a related kind of magical force—or is this unmediated yoking together of extremes part of “the magic” of the current regime, its transgression of once-accepted limits of power that seems to spellbind so many? Yet if so, might you rehearse this magic in your very description of it (as Marx, it might be argued, fetishizes the commodity in his very account of it)?

“Ultimately, the spectacle comes out of the barrel of a gun.” We think we understand *October’s* uneasiness here. But don’t take our *détournement* of Mao too literally. Really all our Little Red aphorism says is the obvious: that insofar as the spectacle of social order presents itself now as a constant image-flow of contentment, obedience, enterprise, and uniformity, it is, equally constantly, guaranteed by the exercise of state power. Necessarily so, since contentment, obedience, enterprise, and uniformity involve the suppression of their opposites, which the actual structure and texture of everyday life reproduce—and intensify—just as fast as the spectacle assures us they are things of the past. We are not quite clear why saying so strikes you as collapsing the one form of social control into the other. Of course we are interested in occasions when such a collapse actually happens, precipitated by historical events. Remember that our post-Maoist cliché comes at the end of a chapter on Israel. The armored bulldozers thirty feet high, the Tim Burton neatness of the strategic suburbs, the rubble of the Gaza ideal homes, the constant clatter of the helicopter gunships, the gray of the turrets along the separation wall, looking out on the filth of No-Man’s-Land—we are with Benjamin, against Adorno, in believing that at moments history *consumes* mediation, and puts the obscenity of power naked on stage.

4.

You draw your title from Book I of Paradise Lost—the “afflicted powers” are those of Satan cast down. And even here, in affliction, there is a doubleness in your analysis: the Left is afflicted (who could argue?), and yet, you insist, so too is the imperial U.S. In fact you term 9/11 “a spectacular defeat” for this regime, claiming it has “no answer to [the] image victory” of Al-Qaeda: “Where, in the end, is the image the war machine has been looking for—the one to put paid to the September haunting?” And as you note, the most infamous image to circulate since 9/11—that of the hooded torture victim at Abu Ghraib—“instantly dismantled the rhetoric of liberation.”

Yet, with defeats like these, some in D.C. backrooms and bars might chuckle, who needs victories? As you also suggest, 9/11 has served as the cover both for the military neoliberalism prosecuted abroad and for the political neoliberalism pursued at home—less a frantic “reassembling” of powers, perhaps, than an awesome burgeoning of them. (And no doubt for some Pentagon people, Abu Ghraib has its use-value as well.) “Why,” you ask, “should we follow the lead of the spectacle itself in electing this one among many atrocities . . . as a world-historical turning point?” Why indeed? Doesn’t your affirmation of the putatively epochal status of 9/11 play into the ideology of John “Our Lives Were Changed Forever” Ashcroft and friends? Or, if 9/11 was a defeat, might it be a momentary one on the order of “the culture of defeat” à la Wolfgang Schivelbush—a national trauma quickly transformed into an imperial triumphalism?

“With defeats like these, who needs victories?” We guess this is essentially the Carl Schmitt challenge: that in practice September 11 gave the U.S. state the classic opportunity it is always looking for, to reorient politics around the “us and them”/“friend and enemy” distinction that is the state’s eternal alibi. (There is a Conspiracy Hillbilly version of this, which we leave to the attentions of the mice.) The challenge is interesting, but the actual pattern of events does not seem to us to have followed the Schmittian script very closely. If the last two years have been (covert) victory for the state, what would defeat look like? States certainly can thrive on the “construction” of an enemy, but not if the enemy winds up being actually victorious in the field. The cunning of reason can go only so far. Handing Iraq on a plate to the mullahs seems a high price to pay for unanimity (and Republican votes) at home. And what unanimity? For how long? The trouble with the spectacle, from the state’s point of view, is that its monadology of consumption constantly dissolves (even paranoid) distinctions and puts Don’t Know in their place.

5.

“Modernity” appears as an unmitigated horror in your text (“war is modernity incarnate,” you write at one point). We make no apologies for modernity (much less offer lessons in dialectics), but is it as utterly disastrous as you make it out to be?

Your stark definition of modernity forces you into sheer opposition to it, and this position seems to draw you into a relation of enemy-twinship with revolutionary Islam, a relation from which you then struggle to escape. (Shades of the mutually abhorrent rapport between Communists and Fascists in the 1920s and ’30s?) “How we may henceforth most offend our enemy”—you share Satan’s lines with Al-Qaeda, and yet, even as you too are horrified by Osama and company (you make it abundantly clear that the enemy of your enemy is precisely not your friend), and even as you deliver a blistering critique of vanguardism, you show a begrudging respect for this “vanguard of Terror”: “the new vanguard has been able to take advantage of the new world order in ways that have left most other forms of opposition far behind.” More than once you call for “an opposition to modernity having nothing in common with Al-Qaeda’s . . . non-orthodox, non-nostalgic, non-rejectionist, non-apocalyptic.” Yet here again you seemed to be locked in a static oppositionality that you can’t quite spring open. Can you clarify your position here?

Further, might it be that today radical invention, and not only reckless power, is most in the hands of the Right—both here and abroad? And that the response on the Left should not be either reversion (to reclaim some semimythical past) or triangulation (that path surely leads to Hell, as Clinton showed and Blair continues to demonstrate) but forms of détournement of this Rightist vanguard? What are the possibilities of Situationist responses to this situation? Given your account of the spectacle, is there any “go-for-broke” strategy of the sort imagined by Kracauer and Benjamin at a prior moment of its intensification? Or might this be a line of theory and praxis where your stark opposition to modernity is not productive?

“Might it be today that radical invention is most in the hands of the Right?” In many ways it seems so—and not for the first time in the last one hundred years. (We are back to Brecht in 1938 again.)

This connects with *October's* unease, several times repeated in your questions to us, at the vehemence of *Afflicted Powers's* hostility to modernity as such. The issues here are complex, but essentially we stick to our guns. It is possible, we believe, to approach the phenomena of modernity from a position of root-and-branch opposition and yet generate the best, most adequate, descriptions of what it is one opposes. It is not only possible; it seems in practice to be *necessary*. To describe modernity, one has to think (and feel) culturally, anthropologically—one has to keep at the center of one's sense of things modernity's disorienting, disenchanting power. And never lose hold of the extremity of that disenchantment, as it is lived by actual human subjects finding (and losing) their way in a new form of life.

This is why the critique and assessment of modernity has come so often and so powerfully from Fascists, Maurassians, Anglo-Catholics, and assorted psychopomps. And why the Left, with its eternal “hard-headedness” and optimism in the face of the new (Old) technics, has so utterly failed to get modernity in its sights. It is possible, further, to approach the current mutations of modernity from a position of utter loathing without for a moment believing that modernity is reversible—without orienting one's opposition on a fantasy of Going Back. The Right's radicalism is the radicalism of Return. But there will be no Return. What, then, will the Left's radicalism be premised on? Not on the promise of cyberspace, we hope. Not on an empty *Avanti!*

You are right that in calling on the Left to sketch out a new form of opposition to the modern—one having nothing in common with the warring fundamentalisms—the best we can do in the book is intimate what that new form will have not to be. “Non-orthodox, non-nostalgic, non-rejectionist, non-apocalyptic,” etc. We agree this gets us only to the start of things. But even to get to the start—even to propose the reconstruction of the critique of modernity as now the Left's main theoretical task—is something, considering the utter intellectual nullity at present characteristic of opposition forces in the U.S. (with their endless policy studies plus futile sniping at Bush).

Let us say it again. For a mixture of good and bad reasons, the critique of modernity over the past one hundred years or so—as opposed to the critique of capitalism—came most powerfully from the Right. The Left had no patience for the critique's foundation in nostalgia (so-called), organicism, High Romantic individualism, and aristocratic disdain for mass culture and slave *ressentiment*. The impatience was justified, but the result of the Left's abstention from the question of modernity was in the end disastrous. It ceded the ground of anger and fear and disorientation in face of the “all that is solid” to a cruel and resourceful foe. (So that simply to pose the question, “What would a non-aristocratic, non-reactionary opposition to modernity be like?” is immediately to feel a conceptual—and even more, a rhetorical—void opening beneath one's feet.) And to the extent that the

Left tradition inevitably did include moments when the modern condition was thought about as a whole—as of course was true of Benjamin and Adorno, or, for that matter, Debord and Lefebvre—what resulted most often, it seems now in retrospect, were Right-wing motifs repeated in an ultra-Left register.

We are now living through a new round of resistance to modernity—a globalized guerrilla, as we say in the book, making at last the “ten, twenty, a hundred Vietnams” that Che called for a generation ago. Little did he dream in whose name, and in favor of what, the new insurgencies would be fought! And little did he realize how defenseless the Left’s metaphysics would leave it—the Left’s compound of cheery technophilia and communitarian humanism, we mean—in the face of a true *demonization* of the life-world capitalism had brought into being. Modernity, says Benjamin somewhere in the *Arcades Project*, is “the time of Hell.” The language, again, is that of the Right. It is a line from *The Pisan Cantos*. We could imagine it nowadays issuing straight from Al-Zawahiri’s mouth. But what *other* imagery, what other rhetoric, what other set of descriptions might be possible—ones that find form for the horror and emptiness of the modern, but *hold out no promise of Going Back*—seems to us the political question of the years to come.

6.

In the last few decades Situationism has been often (ab)used as a rhetorical way to shore up some “illusion of political effectiveness” (as you put it in another context). We imagine you are more than skeptical of this tendency (not long ago October published a text, coauthored by one of your party, with the title “Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International”). You have little to say about art here, or indeed of culture that is not one with the spectacle. We have to ask: In your analysis is this space now voided?

“In your analysis is this space now voided?” Analytically, of course it cannot be. Empirically, we wonder who’s been doing the voiding.

One of us woke up this morning (September 25, 2005) and opened the paper to the following words, from Mohammad Sidique Khan, one of the London bombers—spoken with a south Yorkshire accent, we are told, so if the video is an Al-Qaeda concoction they have, as usual, been working hard at the details of virtual reality:

I am going to keep this short and to the point because it’s all been said by far more eloquent people than me. But our words have no impact upon you. Therefore I’m going to talk to you in a language that you understand. Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood.

I’m sure by now the media has painted a suitable picture of me. This predictable propaganda machine will naturally try to put a spin on it to suit the government and to scare the masses into conforming to their power- and wealth-obsessed agendas.

I and thousands like me are forsaking everything for what we believe. Our driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer.

This is how our ethical stances are dictated: Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people, and your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters.

Until we feel security, you will be our target. Until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment, and torture of my people, we will not stop this fight. We are at war, and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of this situation.

This, sadly, is the voice of our time. It is the New Old speaking. Of course it is possible for art to reply even to this extremity—did we not start our set of answers with a prose-poem by Brecht? And does it not still apply, all too vividly? Do we not begin *Afflicted Powers* by putting Milton opposite Abu Ghraib? And go on to describe the Bush administration's panic in the face of *Guernica*?

But we look around at the actually existing art world of the Empire and see no reason to expect much in the same vein. We shall refrain from putting alongside Mohammad Sidique Khan's last testament a brief listing of the themes and styles of this week's gallery offerings in New York and Los Angeles, or a sample of the "ethical stances" of their reviewers.