

Hard Times today: popular culture and the austerity myth

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Hard Times today: popular culture and the austerity myth

The myth of 'austerity' is our alibi, a myth so persuasive that it has given its name across the western industrialised nations to the very age in which we live.

"Where are the red-eyed dreamers and clenched fist fighters?

Didn't they swear when these walls fell a citadel would rise?

They've turned to schemers, all, and underwriters

Leaning on the parapets to tell the same old lies."

(Nick Burbridge, *After the Deluge*)

In his seminal collection of cultural readings, *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes turned his attention to a quintessential twentieth century myth embodied in 'The Brain of Einstein'. This appropriation of the brain of the great genius as "a mythical object" is, for Barthes, paradoxical since "the greatest intelligence of all provides an image of the most up-to-date machine, the man who is too powerful is removed from psychology, and introduced into a world of robots". As Barthes points out, Einstein "is commonly signified by his brain, which is like an object for anthologies, a true museum exhibit".

Of course Barthes' commentary is not free from sarcasm, which he suggested, in the contradiction of our times, may well be "the condition of truth". "What this machine of genius was supposed to produce was equations", he claims, so that "[t]hrough the mythology of Einstein, the world blissfully regained the image of knowledge reduced to a formula".

It was hard not to think, with a fair degree of spleen of this 'single secret' when in the teeth of the Brexit vote, BBC's *Newsnight* dragged out (or tuned into) the representation *par excellence* of the austerity myth: the National Debt Clock. With its ever moving display (£5,170 per second is being added) it felt like counting down the end of the world rather than staring unflinchingly into what Barthes dubbed the 'falsely obvious'. Mark Fisher's 'capitalist realism' hypothesis includes the notion that, for many, the end of the world is more conceivable than the end of capitalism, an observation made also by Zizek. The 'truly obvious' question, though, is as Neil Badmington put it in the preface to

our collection referring to Barthes' phrase: "What kind of 'ideological abuse' lies behind the naturalized call for austere existence?"

This is, in a sense, where our work started; discovering the politically defining concept of the moment returned to us as "depoliticised speech". Our concern was for the myth of 'austerity', a myth so persuasive that it has given its name across the Western industrialised nations to the very age in which we live, a period that began with the global economic crisis of 2008. 'Austerity' is no longer controversial, not even the current issue, save for a few academic economists: rather it is a given. We may deplore the suffering involved but how we got here is taken for granted. We must continue to take our unpalatable medicine without questioning how we came by the infection. Our invitation was for interested parties to explore the ways in which popular culture gives expression to austerity; how are its effects conveyed; how do texts reproduce and expose its mythic qualities. Also to consider the impact and influence of austerity across media and textual categories from political media discourse, music, videogames, social media, film, television, journalism, folk art, food, protest movements, slow media and the practices of austerity in everyday life. It was designed to secure a response to Deleuze and Guattari's provocation that "We do not lack communication. On the contrary we have too much of it. We lack creation. We lack resistance to the present."

More specifically 'austerity' invokes times that are inevitably 'hard' thus co-opting the past more specifically as our title suggests: 'hard times', like *Hard Times*, have seemingly always been with us. In fact, Dickens' 1854 'bout' of serialised popular fiction, written to revive a weekly periodical, provides a useful starting point for our celebrations of popular cultural resistance since his is a satirical and critical response to a powerful early model of austerity. It is largely forgotten that the full title of Dickens' shortest novel is *Hard Times - For These Times*, further reinforcing a situated historical critique rather than simple unavoidable facts. Dickens is also explicit about the way we should respond to the brute facticity of this world and that is with 'fancy', the faculty of imagination which the novel embodies and demonstrates.

As Stuart Hall pointed out, "popular culture is one of the sites where the struggle for and against the powerful is engaged". Hall's point about "the struggle for and against" is still an important one but the period since his intervention has seen fundamental changes to the essential relationships between, for example, popular culture and media and audiences and producers – popular culture 'after the media', even. What's at stake here is the significance of popular culture as an arena for debating the ideological implications of austerity in the 'new Hard Times' of ever-reforming and increasingly essentialized and narrowing neo-liberal arrangements.

Part of Banksy's ambition for his 2015 beachside art event Dismaland was to be a "family attraction that acknowledges inequality and impending catastrophe" and also "a theme park whose big theme is 'theme parks should have bigger themes'". Here, as elsewhere in the work of our contributors is work that is "audacious in its message and production", indeed the 'author' of the

payday loans piece (a “pocket money loans” shop offering money to children at an interest rate of 5,000%) quipped that “It is just amazing having this much sarcasm in one place.”

Of course, sarcasm is only one flavour in our “unrestrained semioclasms”. To cite just a few examples, Gargi Bhattachary situates myths of austerity in the fabrics of everyday life while Alistair MacTaggart reads lyrical reflections on austerity in popular music. ‘Jolly Fucker’ reads sleight-of-argument merchant Nigel Farage - now you see him, now you don’t - through the cracked lens of Sleaford Mods.

A more conventional form of activism is explored in the work on US protest camps of Anna Feigenbaum and Fabian Frenzel while Donatella Della Ratta challenges the simplistic ‘2.0’ rhetoric of ‘armchair journalism’ when dealing with Arab uprisings. Antonio Lopez and Peter Sarram extend the argument to cinema occupations in Rome as acts of cultural communing. In a different key Wayne O’Brien deals with videogame criminality in this ‘age of austerity’. *Benefits Street* is given a close reading as ‘naked ideology’ – see here Fraser Nelson’s treatment of our ‘dirty little secret’.

Jacques Ranciere has written that “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it” but also, darkly “around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.”

Austerity is explicitly a profoundly ethical strategy, offering everyone the opportunity to ‘do the right thing’ even if that is merely suffering the apparent vagaries of ‘the markets’. Pain is part of the hard sell and adaptation is inevitable, whether that means downsizing your accommodation or your ambition. At one level this could be understood as a form of rough-edged social cohesion, the rallying in adversity of a ‘big’ society. It also reaches out to revive or co-opt a ‘spirit’ which in other forms and times of adversity saw us through, for example, when we were ‘putting on the Blitz’. However most tellingly at a moment when the excesses of bankers seem to have been ‘visited’ in every sense on those worst effected, is Barthes’s reminder that principally myth acts as an alibi. This seems key to understanding an ‘austerity’ that we all must share, though very few of us might be seen to be responsible for ushering it in. This is the crux of our argument and the ultimate rationale for our responses to it.

And importantly, the project takes a feminist impulse, as Helen Davies and Claire O’Callaghan summarise in their afterword. Initially, postfeminism in popular culture might seem incompatible with an era of recession. For Angela McRobbie and for Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, postfeminism is typified by an investment in conspicuous consumption, commodification, class privilege and earning power. How could Carrie Bradshaw, heroine of *Sex in the City*, maintain her ‘independent’, ‘empowered’ lifestyle without plenty of credit, we might ask?

By the way, that national Debt clock’s still ticking, offering an unimaginable large number: £1.7 trillion (or £27,710 per person) – no wonder we all need to tighten our belts. That, of course, is just one way to look at it. Another is to think how

much we found, when 'needed', to bail out the banks: £1.3 trillion! When it comes to a decision about whether to protect the banks or pay off the debt, it seems that the government has made its choice quite clear.