Baroque Sunbursts

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In the late 1980s and 1990s, the psychic privatisation which is now such a striking feature of contemporary British Life entered a new phase. The miners' strike in the 80s had seen the defeat of one form of collective life. The privatisation of nationalised industries, the selling off of council houses and the proliferation of consumer electronics and new entertainment platforms (such as satellite tv, then in its early days) prepared the way for a retreat from, and denigration of, the public world. As the home became more connected, the space outside started to be abandoned, pathologised and enclosed.

It is in this context that we must see the Tory government's attack on rave in the 1990s. The infamous Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 targeted squatting, hunt saboteuring and unauthorised camping as well as rave. At the time, the Act looked arbitrary, draconian and absurd. The regulation of partying, under legislation that relied on the ludicrously vague term 'repetitive beats' seemed like overreaching. Yet the Act showed once more that authoritarianism has always been the supplement of neoliberalism's official emphasis on individual liberty. The founding event of neoliberalism was the savage crushing of Allende's democratic socialist administration in Chile. Throughout the 1980s, the Thatcher government had deployed authoritarian measures against the urban black population, and against the organised working class. But why now pick on ravers – who might be disturbing rural peace but weren't for the most part engaged in systematic dissent or rebellion?

The campaign against rave might have been draconian, but it was not absurd or arbitrary. Very much to the contrary, the attack on rave was part of a systematic process – a process that had begun with the birth of capitalism itself. The aims of this process were essentially threefold: cultural exorcism, commercial purification and mandatory individualism.

Cultural Exorcism

The exorcism was directed against what Herbert Marcuse called 'the spectre of a world which could be free'[1] – a spectre that music culture especially in its collective and ecstatic modes, has always called up. The historic mission of the British bourgeoisie was the total elimination of this spectre – something it was as close to achieving by the beginning of the twenty-first century as any culture has ever been. Rave's association with the English countryside made it especially problematic. As Michael Perelman shows in *The Invention of Capitalism*, the rise of capitalism would never have been possible without the enclosure of the countryside. 'Although their standard of living may not have been particularly lavish, the people of pre-capitalistic northern Europe, like most traditional people, enjoyed a great deal of free time… The common people maintained innumerable public holidays that punctuated the tempo of work.'[2] At least one third of the year was devoted to leisure. For capitalism to become dominant, this leisure culture, and the set of expectations and habits that went with it, had to be eliminated. This entailed the brutal destruction of the peasantry's capacity for self-provisioning. In addition to violent dispossession, the bourgeoisie also propagated a dismal cult of work, which extolled the virtue of hard work while condemning any use of time not devoted to capital accumulation as profligate and morally degenerate.

Rave's ecstatic festivals revived the use of time and land which the bourgeoisie had forbidden and sought to bury. Yet, for all that it recalled those older festive rhythms, rave was evidently not some archaic revival. It was a spectre of post-capitalism more than of pre-capitalism. Rave culture grew out of the synthesis of new drugs, technology and music culture. MDMA and Akai-based electronic psychedelia generated a consciousness which saw no reason to accept that boring work was inevitable. The same technology that facilitated the waste and futility of capitalist domination could be used to eliminate drudgery, to give people a standard of living much greater than that of pre-capitalist peasantry, while freeing up even more time for leisure than those peasants could enjoy. As such rave culture was in tune with those

unconscious drives, which as Marcuse put it, could not accept the 'temporal dismemberment of pleasure... its distribution in small separate doses'.[3] Why should rave ever end? Why should there be any miserable Monday mornings for anyone?

Commercial Purification

Raves also recalled the interstitial spaces – between commerce and festival – that provoked anxiety among the early bourgeoisie. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, as it struggled to impose its hegemony, the bourgeoise was very much exercised by the problematic status of the fair. It was the illegitimate 'contamination' of 'pure' commerce by carnival excess and collective festivity which troubled bourgeois writers and ideologues. The problem which they faced, however, was that commercial activity was always-already tainted with festive elements. There was no 'pure' commerce, free from collective energy. Such a commercial sphere would have to be produced, and this involved the subduing and ideological incorporation of the 'marketplace' as much as it entailed the domestication of the fair. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White pointed out in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 'the fair, like the marketplace, is neither pure nor outside. The fair is at the crossroads, situated in the intersection of economic and cultural forces, goods and travellers, commodities and commerce'.[4]

The concept of 'the economy' as we now understand it had to be invented, and this required the stabilisation of the unsettling and unsettled figure of the fair. 'As the bourgeoisie laboured to produce the economic as a separate domain, partitioned off from its intimate and manifold interconnectedness with the festive calendar, so they laboured *conceptually* to re-form the fair as *either* a rational, commercial, trading event or as a popular pleasure-ground.' Such a division was necessary in order that the bourgeoisie could make a clean and definitive distinction between morally improving toil and decadent leisure – the refusal of 'the temporal dismemberment of pleasure'. Hence, 'although the bourgeois classes were frequently frightened by the threat of political subversion and moral license, they were perhaps more scandalised by the deep conceptual confusion by the fair's mixing of work and pleasure, trade and play.'[5] The fair always carried traces of 'the spectre of the world which could be free', threatening to rob commerce of the association with toil and capital accumulation that the bourgeoisie was trying to impose. That is why 'the carnival, the circus, the gypsy, the lumpenproletariat, play a symbolic role in bourgeois culture out of all proportion to their actual social importance.'[6]

The carnival, the gypsy and the lumpenproletariat evoked forms of life – and forms of commerce – which were incompatible with the solitary labour of the lonely bourgeoise subject and the world it projected. That is why they could not be tolerated. If other forms of life were possible then- contrary to one of Mrs Thatcher's most famous formulations – there were alternatives, after all.

Mandatory Individualism

Capitalist modernity was thus shaped by the always-incomplete process of eliminating festive collectivity. It is possible, says the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish*, to read the impress of such collectivity in the very form that disciplinary institutions such as the factory, the school and the hospital would assume. 'Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of 'contagions', of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in 'disorder.'[7] In this memory, which is also a fiction, a hyperstition, plague and festivity fuse: both are imagined as spaces where the boundaries between bodies collapse, where faces and identities slip. 'A whole literary fiction of the festival grew up around the plague: suspended laws, lifted prohibitions, the frenzy of passing time, bodies mingling together without respect, individuals unmasked, abandoning their statutory identity and the figure under which they had been recognised, allowing quite a different truth to appear.' The solution is an imposed individualism, the inverse of carnival: 'not the collective festival, but strict divisions; not laws transgressed, but the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy

that assured the capillary functioning of power; not masks that were put on and taken off, but the assignment to each individual of his 'true' name, his 'true' place, his 'true' body, his 'true' disease.'[8]

The capitalist realism that took hold in the UK in the 1990s and aimed to complete this project of mandatory individualism. Any remaining traces of collectivity were now being extirpated. Such traces were to be found, not only in raves, in traveller encampments and free parties, but also on the football terraces and in football fan culture, elements of which were in any case fusing with rave. The 1989 Hillsborough Disaster was English football's equivalent of the shock doctrine analysed by Naomi Klein. The disaster – caused by the malicious incompetence of 'Thatcher's police', the notorious West Yorkshire force – allowed an aggressive corporate takeover of English football. Terraces were closed down and from now on each spectator was assigned an individual seat. At a stroke, a whole form of collective life was shut down. Modernisation of English football stadia was long overdue; but this was a neoliberal version of 'modernisation', which equated it with hyper-commodification, individualism and corporatisation. The crowd was decomposed into solitary consumers, and the rebranding of the top tier of English football as the Premiership and the selling off of television rights to Sky were the harbingers of the hyped-up existential desolation of life in twenty-first century England. The lonely connectedness of smart-phone addiction is a depressive hedonic reversal of MDMA festivity. Sociality is supervised by multiple embedded corporate platforms. We become our faces, working 24/7 for communicative capitalism.

The move to mandatory individualisation was not of course immediately successful. The Criminal Justice Act provoked new forms of carnivalesque rebellion, most notably Reclaim the Streets. If the images of motorways blocked by ravers now seem to belong to a long ago historical era that is tantalisingly distant – as impossibly far off in some ways as the countercultural 60s – then the waves of new political organisation that have passed through Greece, Spain, Scotland and now (with the Jeremy Corbyn surge) even England remind us that the project of mandatory individualism can never be completed. At any point collectivity can be rediscovered, reinvented. The 'spectre of a world that can be free' has always to be stifled. It could flare up in any festivity that goes on 'too long', in any workplaces or university occupation that refuses the 'necessity' of drudgery, in any flourishing of a group consciousness that rejects the 'inevitability' of competitive individualism. The sheer extent and intensity of the machinery that was necessary to shut down rave is a testament to this. Individualism has had to be enforced, surveilled, compelled. All of capital's-now flailing and conspicuously exhausted-inventiveness is dedicated to this compulsion.

'From time to time', writes Fredric Jameson in *Valences of the Dialectic*, 'like a diseased eyeball in which disturbing flashes of light are perceived or like those baroque sunbursts in which rays of from another world suddenly break into this one, we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces are still possible.'[9] This psychedelic imagery seems especially apposite for the 'energy flash' of rave, which now seems like a memory bleeding through from a mind that is not ours. In fact, the memories come from ourselves as we once were: a group consciousness that waits in the virtual future not only in the actual past. So it is perhaps better to see the other possibilities that these baroque sunbursts illuminate not as some distant Utopia, but as a carnival that is achingly proximate, a spectre haunting even – especially – the most miserably de-socialised spaces.