

The Season of Kisses and Sighs

Cuts and Protests against Cuts in Britain



The stuttering course of the capitalist economy, accompanied as ever by the alternating tales of disaster and reassurance that make it distortedly visible to the spectator, has now, in Britain, reached the stage of cuts in government spending. What choices do we have in the face of this turn of events? We are told there are just two: submit to the cuts in order to restore the health of the economy or fight them so as to preserve existing public services. These are the choices held out to us in newspaper articles, politicians' speeches, news programmes, management pep talks, advertisements and other pronouncements rained down on us by the dominant society. These are the choices we have taken up in our own thought and conversation. But like all the rest of the choices that are made public by the dominant society, they happen to be false.

The Coalition government and its allies tell us that the cuts are necessary. They promise us that things will eventually get better. They urge us to acquiesce. It has to be said that this is a course of inaction many of us are tempted to take. It is what we have done in previous economic crises and we have not done much to shake off the habit of resignation since. We have also found that submission has its rewards. If the past is any guide to the future, public services will not be completely decimated. Our earnings will not plunge relentlessly downwards. Only a small minority will be made unemployed, and most of those will eventually secure alternative employment, albeit at somewhat lower wages than they received before. Even those who fail to find another job will be kept alive, after a fashion, by the state. In any event, we are hardly suffering at the moment. Our real wages may have fallen back to where they were in 2005, but most of us were not poor in 2005. We may not have as much money as we would like, we may worry about our debts and the prospects of our children and parents, and we may have had to cut back a little here and there. True. Yet

we are far removed from anything resembling profound material poverty. We do not need to take to the streets to secure bread, for we do not live on bread alone and such bread as we need we can still afford to buy at the supermarket. Besides, it is so very *easy* to go on plodding through one's everyday life in the way one always has. Families, friends, homes, jobs, cars, holidays, nights out, shopping, sport, there is always *something* clamouring for our attention; always *something* to swallow up our time and draw us down those all-too-few (and all-too-deep) ruts that define our lives. Our sense that there is nothing we *can* do to change things only makes this slide into submissive resignation easier. So too does our penchant for easing our isolated bitterness by blaming the whole sorry mess on immigrants, benefit claimants, civil servants, greedy bankers or some other scapegoat we have found dangled in front of us.

Perhaps it is true that, if we give those in power a free hand, most of us will find ourselves in a few years' time more or less back where we were when the recession started. After all, the doomsayers have always been wrong before. *But is that enough?* Doesn't the recession tell us something rather terrible about our condition? Doesn't it clearly and cruelly demonstrate how very little control we have over our lives? The economy within which we work is no more under our direction when it is growing than when it is contracting. During good times and bad, we are *subordinated* to its dictates. Of course, we would like to believe that we are not unfree in our work because we exercise some choice as to which jobs we apply for and we have some discretion over what we do while we are at work. But a forced choice between wretched options is not liberty; and trapped as we are between intrusive monitoring by managers, vexing performance targets, a wider organization of work over which we have no say, and a global economy that does our bidding to roughly the same extent as the weather does, our prized autonomy in the workplace seems the most threadbare of illusions. And what does the threat of redundancy tell us about our work? Our position has not suddenly changed. Despite all those friendly chats with management, and the team work and camaraderie, we have *all along* been disposable tools of our employers. All day and every day, we are nothing more than the means by which *they* realize *their* ends. When we can no longer perform that role, we are discarded as surplus to *their* requirements, which is what "redundant" means. The fact that our bosses may be reluctant to impose redundancies, preferring instead to retain surplus staff or introduce part-time working, takes nothing away from this analysis. We are merely being shown the same concern that a farmer displays for his prize livestock. He will put them down only when he has to.

The economic crisis also reveals unhappy truths about other aspects of our lives. Perhaps we have grown used to a pleasant chat with someone who works at a business or office we frequent. When bankruptcy, restructuring or redundancy strikes, our acquaintance vanishes. We never see or hear of her again. For all the pleasantries that may have passed between us, the only real relation we had was that between a supplier of goods or services and a buyer. When that was gone, precisely nothing was left. We shared no other activity and decided nothing else together. It is the same with the vast majority of our connections with people. They are relations of exchange, mediated by commodities. As we pass through the public world, who do we encounter but strangers hurrying by in separated indifference and the self-effaced, masquerading for wages? How often do we do anything more with those we meet than discuss and pay for commodities?

But perhaps you will say that all that may be true about the wider world, but the real meaning and richness of our lives lies in our *private* worlds? We know that work is shit. We know that politics, the economy and the environment are all going to the dogs. Nonetheless, you say, we can find some real happiness and fulfilment with our families, our friends and our leisure. Unfortunately, we cannot separate our private existences from the alienated world in this way. Our families, friendships and leisure are not refuges that somehow exist apart from the dispiriting processes of capitalism. On the contrary, they have been created by and for capitalism and share the same alienation that bleeds through every other aspect of the capitalist world. We are creatures of capitalism. Our domestic worlds, our intimate lives and our free time have all been adapted to the needs of capitalism. All have been shrivelled and shrunken down to the desperately narrow dimensions that the system permits. The family, for instance, is merely the domestic unit that happens best to serve a society that isolates individuals from each other, separates them from the management of the society, and requires them to submit to the world order it presents to them. In the soothing name of privacy, the family abandons history to its capitalist masters. In this jealously-defended isolation, we encourage children who have been reduced to dependence falsely to recognize themselves in the roles, the values, the pleasures, the activities and ultimately the jobs the society makes available. We mould them to accept and adhere to imposed and domineering collectives, starting with the family itself. For ourselves, we strive to find our greatest fulfilment within the small web of social relations and the tiny resources to which the family gives rise. None of it goes smoothly, for it is never easy to force the living into shallow graves. But we do our best. We temper our expectations of happiness. We create family occasions over and over again in which the unstated rule is that we profess our mutual love and contentment and convincingly play the happy family. We fiercely embrace a transcendental notion of love that hovers in disembodied abstraction above the resentment, division, abuse, punishment, incomprehension, blackmail, mediocrity and confinement that make up the actual lived experience of family life. In these and so many other ways, we would have ourselves believe that the image of familial contentment we have been given by our society is the defining reality of our lives.

Our friendships and leisure are hardly better. Of course, there are pleasures and adventures in our friendships, but they are much too small. We share so little with our friends. We have too little at our disposal. Through the work that we all do, we create the very world we live in. Everything around us is put there by us. But we do not create it for ourselves. We do not create it with our friends. When we come together, all we have are the paltry time and money left to us by work and the alien world our work has produced. We are reduced to chasing desultory diversions amongst the ruins. Our games are petty. We could build a very world with and for our desires. We end up going on vacation.

In public and private, we are colonized. We live by occupying the ideas of happiness, normality and the cool the commodity society brings to us, haunting its promises like ghosts roaming the corridors of a ruined mansion in search of a long dead love. We deny it, of course. We are our own men and women, we say. We pride ourselves on not believing the stupid claims of the adverts and the politicians, even as we spend each and every day living out the fundamental notion of consumable happiness that each advertisement and each politician conveys. We are sure that we each have our own individual styles, even as those styles uncannily coalesce around a bare handful of models in each era. We are mistaken. We

can see this quite clearly when we look back at old photographs of ourselves. We insisted on our irreducible individuality then too. Yet the records show that we were entirely of the time. No matter how absurd the fashions and tastes may have been, our hairstyles, clothes, houses, cars, reading habits, musical tastes, and ideas in general duly reflected them. When this comes to our attention, we laugh, perhaps, and feel a little embarrassed. But we learn nothing and take no action. We blame it all on the follies and gullibility of youth. We waive away the staggering truth that everything about us has been dominated from afar without giving more than a moment's thought as to how this state of abjection came to be. We retreat into that amnesia and indifference which seems to be necessary if we are to go on as we are. We sift nostalgically through the snapshots of carefully-staged displays of spontaneous contentment we have taken at the many occasions that seem to have no other purpose than to allow such photographs to be taken. We create the ground for the next disaster by forgetting what is essential about the ones that have gone before.

Is this really enough? Is this *all* that we desire? Are we content to sit tight under the insults of government and economy in the hope that we may one day return to the slightly-more-affluent alienations of yesteryear? Are we too scared, too timid, to take on the society whose very intimidating immobility testifies to how little it is ours and how little we are? If the answer is yes, well so be it. But do not be surprised if you struggle to remember what you have been doing during all these years, as you drift with scant attention behind the disappointing person and disagreeable habits you have become. Do not be surprised if you one day find yourself staring at the exhaust pipe you have fed through the passenger window, wondering where it all went wrong. It always goes wrong, my friends, when it is rotten from the start.

Merely enduring the cuts is not the only option we are given. We are also presented with clamorous calls to defend our jobs and public services against the cuts. We are given to understand that something valuable is being taken from us. We are even sometimes told that the victories of past generations of working people are under threat. All this, I would suggest, is quite preposterous.

The rulers of society and their supporters were once quite candid about the ends they hoped to obtain from good conditions and services. In 1837, Leonard Horner, a factory inspector, said:

“Independently of all higher considerations, and to put the necessity of educating the children of the working classes on its lowest footing, it is loudly called for as a matter of police, to prevent a multitude of immoral and vicious beings, the offspring of ignorance, from growing up and around us, to be a pest and a nuisance to society; it is necessary to render the great body of the working class governable by reason.”

When speaking in the House of Commons on 17 February 1870 in favour of the Elementary Education Bill 1870, W. E. Foster argued that “the speedy provision of elementary education” would allow the state to secure “our industrial prosperity” and remove “that ignorance which we are all aware is pregnant with crime and misery, with misfortune to individuals and danger to the community”. Moreover, “if we are to hold our position among men of our own race or among the nations of the world we must make up the smallness of our numbers by increasing the intellectual force of the individual.”

A more modern note was struck in Winston Churchill's explanation of the idea behind the introduction of unemployment insurance (one of the forerunners of modern social security benefits), as reported by the *Daily Mail* in 1909. In Churchill's view, the purpose aimed at by the reform was:

“to increase the stability of our institutions by giving the mass of industrial workers a direct interest in maintaining them. [...] [This] scheme [...] will help to remove the dangerous element of uncertainty from the existence of the industrial worker. It will give him an assurance that his home, got together through long years and with affectionate sacrifice, will not be broken up, sent bit by bit to the pawnshop, just because [...] he falls out of work. It will make him a better citizen, a more efficient worker, [and] a happier man.”

The ends aimed at by modern public spending include similar objectives. But since these statements were made, the capitalist economy has grown in size and sophistication. The extension of a relentless consumer culture to the vast majority of the population has also become a key motor of its growth and its sole claim to legitimacy. The roles performed by public services have changed accordingly. New environments, new abilities, new attitudes, and new levels of public health are now created, not just directly to meet the new needs of business and government but also as new incentives and new rewards for our submission. For example, it is no longer enough to give the mass of the population an elementary education that merely instils “order, discipline, cleanliness, deference to authority, and the tolerance of boredom at work” (in the words of one historian). These remain important goals of the education system, but today's education must go beyond them. It must now manufacture people who have the personalities, skills and willingness to do what is required of them without being told (deceptively referred to as “initiative” and “the ability to work by oneself”) that modern service industries and high value businesses demand. It must now, by means of its organs of “higher” education, produce the specialised workers and the specialist knowledge that allow the dominant society to produce its technological and cultural commodities, to shape its world and the individuals who serve it, and to mystify everything. And, to bring all this about, it must help foster the misunderstanding that the new education and the work to which it leads constitute desirable opportunities for individuals and welcome progress for the society. No more noble purposes are served by contemporary education. Indeed, no very different purpose is served by *any* of the public services. Without exception, they are mechanisms for reproducing an alienated society. They seek to integrate the majority into a life of alienated labour and abundant consumption and disarm the minority left to a more meagre survival on the margins of society. They are an unrelenting assault on the possibility of authentic and self-controlled life. They always and everywhere damage or destroy us as individuals. There is nothing victorious in this. In the very few instances where a public service or a legal right arose out of our struggles, it represented the defeat and not the victory of those struggles, the moment when the goal we pursued slipped out of our hands and became one more uncontrollable, external process pressing down on us.

This is not to say that public services do not provide us with facilities that are valuable *within the context of the existing society*. Without doubt, central government, local authorities and the bodies they fund can and do supply services that allow separated individuals who have surrendered their powers of world-creation to persist more easily in that separation and surrender. But I come back to the question of whether this is enough for us. Are we content

with libraries that allow us to while away our free time with a novel about a missing swimsuit model or the autobiography of an entertainer (the most commonly borrowed fiction and non-fiction library books)? Do we want know more than an opportunity to grind our way through 16 years of submissive study of falsified knowledge and emerge with a degree and a job in property development, renting, business, research, education, health or social work (the most common graduate employments)? Can we think of nothing better than to have strangers to whom we are inevitably just another job of paid work dress and wash us so that we can spend the rest of the day staring at the television or gossiping about ever less? Would it be cause for jubilation to have a social security system that paid enough to allow its recipients to participate fully in the time-wasting futility of seeking a worthwhile life through commodity consumption? Need I go on?

The call to defend jobs, education and public services is, in effect, propaganda in favour of the existing way of life, one of many eulogies of the dominant society that take the guise of dissent. There is no *qualitative* difference between life as it was before the cuts and life as it will be afterwards, between public services and private services, or between employment and unemployment, even if one is a slightly more comfortable form of eviscerated life than the other. We are not obliged to confine ourselves to the false choices and tiny distinctions that the dominant society magnifies into fundamental conflicts and real progress. No matter how urgent and profound the crisis for which they claim to be the remedy, pseudo-critiques that take for granted the *fundamental* features of our alienated world (such as alienated labour, alienated consumption and the state) serve only to dissipate our discontents, refine this society's depredations, and trap us just where we are. If we are ever to escape our *already-insufficient* lives, we must, I think, *point-blank* refuse them.

Those who sincerely participate in the anti-cuts movement out of a genuine disgust at what the government is doing may wish to consider the fate of one of its precursors, the anti-Poll Tax movement. The movement was successful. But what were the practical consequences? The movement itself, having obtained the only objective it had set itself and removed the only misery it had objected to, lost everything that held it together and disintegrated. Its participants returned to the isolation and alienation of a daily life that was very little changed. Everything they won drifted away from them. The Poll Tax was abolished and Margaret Thatcher deposed. But the Poll Tax was merely replaced by the Council Tax, another remote bureaucratic and legal procedure devised by central government, administered by local authorities, enforced by the courts and bailiffs, and completely out of the hands of ordinary people. Margaret Thatcher was also replaced, with John Major becoming the new leader of the Conservative Party. He proved more palatable to voters than the hopelessly unpopular Thatcher and led the party to victory in the General Election of 1992. The Conservatives remained in power until 1997. Capitalism has, alas, persisted for far longer. The fact that one of its governments was forced to develop a fairer and therefore more acceptable form of local taxation has probably only helped it to endure.

How often have we said of late (and how often have we heard others say) that what we need in this country is a revolution like those in Tunisia and Egypt? But they are only words. We avow in easy abstraction the need for revolution yet we *do* precisely nothing about it. We can barely conceive of an autonomous project on such a scale. Our capacity to think and act by and for ourselves, to step beyond this society's cowering norms, is undernourished to

the point of starvation. Well, we shall just have to create what we need. We might begin by bringing to the practical project of revolution at least as much time, effort and passion as we have been want to lavish on our jobs, families, pastimes and vacations. We might also develop the habit of viewing and treating our enemies *as enemies*. No part of this society is for our benefit, no part of it serves our best interests. Indeed, *everything* that this society allows might usefully be taken as a personal *attack* upon us. Its goods, its services, its visions of the good life, its models of deviance, its cities, its politics, its protests, its moralities, its high culture and cheap thrills, its gaudy fashions for young women and its drab uniforms for middle-aged men, its good jobs and shit work, everything that its media, its politicians, its domesticated critics, its teachers, its researches, its manuals, its managers, its celebrities extol to us, all of it, quite without exception, always and everywhere tends to confine and disfigure us, to make us into the kind of people that the separate economy and the separate power of that state needs in order to survive. So, a parent-teacher meeting, for example, is not an opportunity to help your child develop his or her knowledge, maturity and independence but an invitation to collaborate in the destructive process of implanting the falsified and tamed knowledge, the limited aspirations, and the acceptance of established authority and mores which contemporary capitalism expects of its producers and consumers. Equally, for the teacher, such a meeting is not part of an authentic vocation but is simply a facet of a process of alienation in which all of his or her time, thought and effort as a teacher is sucked into procedures and a curriculum imposed from above. Here and elsewhere across everyday life, the question is: what can we (parent, teacher, child) do to stop this expense of spirit in a waste of shame? Perhaps we can see nothing we can do today. If so, the question renews itself tomorrow and the day after as a fresh challenge to our cunning and ingenuity, our ability to publicize our discontent and seek out potential partners in the dance of revolution. Does this sound like a dreary life of unbroken militancy in the service of a political cause or party? If it does, think again. There is no cause. There is no party. There is only the creative, enriching and entirely practical task of defeating *by ourselves* our *own* unhappiness and our *own* subordination, of overthrowing a social arrangement that is unfit for us *as individuals* and creating a better one *by and for ourselves*. We must develop a theory and practice that precisely *prevents* the emergence of ideas, procedures and leaders that dominate us.

The Coalition's cuts are shrouded in a lying ideology of liberation. According to David Cameron's speech at the 2010 Conservative Party conference, his "big society" will bring about a shift "from state power to people power". This is arrant nonsense. For the past forty years or so, the Right has secured its political power by offering us a mirage of personal transformation, a twisted reflection of our confused desire for freedom and change. In point of fact, the abridgement of the state the Right has brought about is minimal and its neglect of the power held over us by employers and the economy has been total. But even the suggestion of an attack on the state terrifies the Left. We need not be so concerned. The state is not a friend. The problem is not that the state is being attacked but that some part of it will be left standing. The problem is not that the Coalition is too bold but that its project of the emancipation of the individual is a pathetically timid and incomplete farce that fails to embrace the totality of alienated life and is conducted by the very state it purports to savage. Perhaps it is time to talk less about opposing the cuts and more about accelerating and extending them *beyond any control but our own*. Perhaps now is the moment to wrest the project of individual and social emancipation away from our masters and set it loose *for*

real in our homes and places of work, our schools and universities, our minds and bodies, *and all the rest of our public and private worlds*. What do we *really* have to lose? The careering absurdity of our world is not worthy of us; and neither are the lives of loud satisfaction and quiet desperation we lead within it.

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