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Book review
Independent
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Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War

Retort - Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews and Michael Watts, London: Verso, 2005, 224 pages, £ 11.99, ISBN-13: 978 1 84467 031 4.

Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War offers many important critical insights towards developing a fuller understanding of the world as it enters the latter part of this decade, and the forces - dominant and submerged - seeking to shape it.¹ The title *Afflicted Powers* is taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and serves an elegant but grimly realistic double meaning: that of the militarised global empire of capital bearing the weight of "the affliction of power" but also, the harsh fact that the forces of opposition and resistance *too are afflicted*, both by the monumental weight of history - a history, at this stage largely shaped by forces overwhelmingly hostile to them - as well as the ongoing but inescapable necessity of defining and facing the enemy without resigning to abject despair.

The authors of the book, the first origins of which saw the light of day in articles published in *New Left Review*, define themselves as "a loose gathering of antagonists to capital and empire" including the four main protagonists: Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts. The second name perhaps gives a clue as to the book's impressive contemporary development and application of the concept of *spectacle*. T.J. Clark was originally a member of the notorious Situationist International until his expulsion along with the rest of the nascent English Section by the SI's leading theoretician and author of *The Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord, over their refusal to break off relations with Ben Morea's New-York based anarcho-Dada-infused grouping Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, due to the admittedly dubious politics of some on the countercultural fringes of that group. Retort attempt to develop and apply the concept of the spectacle to a world more and more disarmingly reflected in such an image. Debord defined 'the spectacle' as "not a collection of images, but a social relation mediated by images", a concept that seems so far in advance of the year of its writing 40 years ago as to be almost predictive of the world to come, even coming to be adopted by many of its sworn enemies, not to mention the tiresome faux-blasé poses assumed by the variants of political and cultural postmodernism.

The concept of spectacle then - a world of fragmented social relations mediated by images - has been dismissed by those who claim that 'all things being equal' in their relativist banality, render such relentless hostility to simulated and manufactured reality, as at best dated and at worst another 'tyrannising' narrative attempting to remake the world in accordance with its will. The contempt for such empty reasoning is obvious in the course of the book, and one shared by the reviewer, but what

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is of particular interest is the sense of historical grasp of events displayed in its chapters. The book seeks to understand the present with an impressively cold eye, whilst at the same time making its sympathies equally clear.

Afflicted Powers offers a wide-ranging critical survey of the post-9/11 world as well as being a forceful but assiduously non-doctrinaire polemical intervention. Beginning with the acknowledgement of the centrality of the US in the global empire of capital, Retort argue 9/11 was the defining “image-event” in “the battle for the control of appearances (p.30) fought as much with approval ratings and focus groups as M16s and Humvee trucks .

The authors also acknowledge that the violent image of Islamist jihad is real, and offer a comprehensive debunking of any notion of supporting some imaginary ‘anti-imperialist’ opposition to the War on Terror, favoured uncritically by sections of the traditional left, also making convincing common linkages between the imported modern Western idea of a *revolutionary vanguard* seizing power and the suicide bombers of Al-Qaeda and those inspired by them.

As Retort show in the course of the book’s six chapters and afterword and endnote in this the new expanded second edition, the spectre of Islamist terrorism and the self-defined indefinite mandate to counter this by the US military machine adopting tactics of ‘shock and awe’, offer a spectacle in the realm of appearances almost equal to that of the Cold War, to which this arguably serves as a belated replacement. Underlying this “strange mixture of chaos and grand design” (p19) is that equally strange mixture of moral hubris and glacial cynicism so characteristic of US political and military elites, glaringly illustrated by the incumbent Bush regime, and its specialty turn in homespun conservative populism. The book draws convincing comparisons between the “worldwide televised image of failure” (p.89) suffered by the US in Vietnam, and the protracted conflagration of Iraq, where spurious notions of combating ‘Rogue States’ supposedly in possession of ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ were first attempted to disastrous effect.

However, *Afflicted Powers* aims to offer more than a critical diagnosis of the fallout from 9/11 and the ‘War on Terror’. The book argues that war and the preparation for war – both ideological and economic, are endemic to capitalism, especially in its neoliberal form, as such they speak of a *military neoliberalism* supported by the same forces this seeks to spread by force across the globe:

Primitive accumulation is to be carried out in conditions of spectacle: This is the new reality in a nutshell. And the spectacle itself is in the process of mutation. A new round of technical innovation has made alienation-into-a-realm-of-images a pervasive, banal, *constantly self-administered* reality. (p.187)

It is this same banal everyday reproduction of the social relations of late capitalism as much as the spectacular, militarised expressions of force that *Afflicted Powers* seeks to explain. The authors offer no easy answers or calls simply to ‘build the party’ (or even movement), but instead demand that we face the world described as *it is* in all its seemingly overwhelming disenchantment, resolved to

“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” (p.208); *Afflicted Powers* offers many valuable tools toward that task.