



DOCUMENT

UFD0022 Mark Fisher

Cybergothic vs. Steampunk

In his response to Badiou's analysis of globalisation, subjectivity, and terror, Mark Fisher calls for a new politics to counter both the decadence of capitalist realism and the nihilistic appeal of ISIS

In December 2015, Hilary Benn made a speech in the House of Commons, supporting air-strikes against Syria. The speech, and the hysterical acclaim it received, were an exercise in retromania: the equivalent in politics of what the 'new' *Star Wars* film is in cinema: the same old thing again, but worse. Benn's intervention was a repetition of exactly the kind of speech that was made to justify the attack on Saddam Hussein, and which therefore led to the emergence of ISIS.

One great value of Badiou's intervention is that it checks any temptation to treat all this as if were just a mistake. As Badiou makes clear, from the point of view of capital, the Iraq war and its consequences were not some blunder. They were an opportunity to trial a new form of (post)colonialism, in which states of conflict open up a temporary autonomous zone for capital accumulation, and plunder can continue without the irksome duties involved in setting up and running a state.

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already inside, while the victims can no longer obligingly remain offscreen, even if they wanted to.

Badiou and Benn are in agreement about one thing, however: that ISIS can be described as fascists. While this classification is tempting, it obfuscates rather than illuminates the nature of ISIS's malignancy and its relationship to the current (decadent and doomed) phase of capitalist domination. Badiou is closer when he characterises ISIS as gangsters: they are indeed part gang, part apocalyptic cult, part franchise. If nothing else, ISIS is a slick brand—a brand that is far more effective than anything capital can come up with at the moment in any case.

ISIS holds up a mirror to twenty-first-century capitalist nihilism. This nihilism does not have the Mephistophelean fervour of nineteenth-century existentialism, nor is it the cold scientific nihilism described by Ray Brassier. This is a boring nihilism: an existential poverty that accompanies the material poverty into which capital plunges so many. A tiny minority escape material poverty, but only capital's most devoted addicts can evade existential poverty.

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limits of all kinds, and existential limits are not the least of these. Capital cannot care, but humans cannot help but care. For all the capitalist realist posturing, the open secret is that human beings continue to engage in caring and nurturing practices, practices which, moreover, remain more important to them than anything capital can offer. Shopworn PR injunctions won't cut it in any more. How can you believe that 'anyone can make it', when you and everyone you know is unemployed or underemployed? When the reward for poorly paid night shifts and cold early mornings is more of the same, if you are lucky? You can never do enough for capital. It's not enough to produce and retail shoddy commodities no-one really wants—you must also be 'passionate' about it.

When Ken Livingstone talked a while ago of ISIS members 'giving up their lives' for the cause, he was shouted down in yet another example of desperate capitalist media decadence (the British media abounds in such examples, a sign that is in its death throes). The distinction between understanding something and justifying it is elementary, and Livingstone was making a similar point to the observation that Michael Corleone makes about the Cuban rebels in *Godfather II*. 'I saw a strange thing today,' Michael remarks to Hyman Roth. 'Some rebels were being arrested. One of them pulled the pin on a grenade. He took himself and the captain of the command with him. Now, soldiers are paid to fight; the rebels aren't.' 'What does that tell you?', Roth asks. 'They could win,' Michael replies. ISIS won't win, but the analogy points to the very serious problem that capital now faces. Paying people has never touched people's deepest motivations. You need to offer some other cause, some other purpose. What happens when you demoralise people, destroy their capacity to commit to any purpose in life beyond capital accumulation, and don't even pay them? What if you don't even offer them the possibility of being exploited, and classify them as a surplus population?

Capital doesn't have much of an answer, but ISIS does. A disputed poll 'suggested that more than one in four French youth between the ages of 18 and 24 have a favourable or very favourable opinion of Isis, although only 7–8% of France is Muslim.' Whatever the truth of this survey, the willingness to believe it indicates that there is a growing suspicion that societies dominated by capital are now encountering mass disaffection and defection. 'More than three of every four who join Isis from abroad do so with friends and family. Most are young, in transitional stages in life: immigrants, students, between jobs

and mates, having just left their native family. They join a "band of brothers (and sisters)" ready to sacrifice for significance.' The motivation is belonging and fellowship, not hatred. 'A survey of those Saudi men who volunteered for Afghanistan and who later fought in Bosnia and Chechnya or trained in al-Qaeda camps has found that most were motivated not by hatred of the west but by the desire to help their Muslim brothers and sisters.' For all that ISIS offers horrifically false solutions, it responds to real problems. (In calling Islamism identitarian, Badiou doesn't credit the extent to which ISIS offers at least a partial escape from the dismal identities that capitalism has assigned to so many young muslims, and to so many others too.)

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Capital is nothing if it is not parsimonious, and for the last thirty years it is has sustained itself by relying on ready-made forms of existential affiliation. This reliance on already already-existing forms of identification—all those nationalisms and religions, with any number of archaisms ready to crawl out of the crypt—is what postmodernism has been. There are no 'pure' archaisms, nothing ever repeats without difference, and ISIS is properly understood as a cybergothic phenomenon which combines the ancient with the contemporary (beheadings on the web). It faces not a confident capitalist modernity, but a capitalism that has retreated from the present, never mind the future. Left to its own resources—or rather, left to the resources it retains from previous forms of exploitation—capital can never come up with anything new. Postmodernism was its ideal form, and the naturalised postmodernism of capitalist realism was its optimal solution to political and cultural antagonism. The UK has specialised in developing the steampunk model: Victorian social relations, but now with iPhones.

But the conditions which sustained capitalist realism have now evaporated, and the real enemy which prompted the neoliberal counter-revolution is re-emerging. This enemy was not the necrotic Stalinist monolith of the USSR; still less was it the cult of Parisian Maoism, which was only ever the most minor of distractions. No: neoliberalism was designed to eliminate the various strains of democratic socialism and libertarian communism that bubbled up in so many places during in the sixties and seventies.

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Wherever this possibility emerged, capital crushed it, most ruthlessly and most spectacularly in Chile. But the rising tide of experimental political forms in so many areas of the world at the moment shows that people are rediscovering group consciousness and the potency of the collective. It is now clear that molecular practices of consciousness-raising are not opposed to the indirect action needed to bring about lasting ideological shifts—they are two aspects of a process that is happening on many different time tracks at once. The growing clamour of groups seeking to take control of their own lives portends a long overdue return to a modernity that capital just can't deliver. New forms of belonging are being discovered and invented, which will in the end show that both steampunk capital and cybergothic ISIS are archaisms, obstructions to a future that is already assembling itself.
