

RADICAL DIFFERENCE

There are some vicious ironies lurking in British history. In the summer of 1940, 3,000 women and 15,000 men of German origin deemed 'suspicious' by the British government, were rounded up by police and interned on the Isle of Man. A further 1,500 internees joined the women's camp in the course of the summer. Erna Nelki, a political emigre active in the Weimar Republic in pro-abortion campaigns and socialist movements for educational reform, but interned in 1940 under suspicion of enemy collaboration, describes the situation on the island:

Of the 1,500 women then living in the camp, most - 85% - were Jewish emigrants, many of whom had fled for *political* reasons. But 12% were Nazis!

No attention was paid to such things in allocating accommodation. Jews who had been vilified and harassed in Germany had to endure daily insults from Nazi women still triumphantly celebrating victory. One poor creature who had come across on a children's ship shared a double bed with a Nazi, who could be heard screaming, 'Get away from me, you stinking Jew!'¹

After insistent questioning in parliament as to why those seeking refuge in the 'mother of democracies' from a brutal dictatorship were now subject for a second time to exile and defamation, a tribunal was set up under Sir Cecil Hurst to review the grounds for internment, and in the course of the following year, large numbers were indeed released. Erna Nelki now regards the episode as closed; generously, she attributes her internment to the exigencies of a wartime moment when the frontiers between friend and enemy, place of safety and place of danger (mainland/island) had, she says, to be drawn in the first instance indiscriminately. 'We feel no bitterness towards England.'²

And yet, at a time when the cultural and political boundaries etched out over forty post-war years are so dramatically shifting, it is worth recalling the potentially violent effects of the authoritarian inscription of social identities - friend versus foe, defender of the nation versus enemy within - at moments of historical crisis: effects written into the psyches and bodies of historical subjects, in the manner of their life and death (there were suicides on the Isle of Man and, in one particularly gruesome incident in July 1940, when German speakers were still being rounded up indiscriminately, 1,500 male internees, deported by the British government and sent on an unarmed cargo boat to Canada, were torpedoed *en route* by a German U-Boat, and drowned to a m;;n.³

A situation in which the coercive ascription of a putatively shared 'German-ness' led those persecuted under fascism to become at best the bedding partners, at worst, the partners in death of National Socialists will never return in the form it took in Britain in the early 1940s. History is rarely so obligingly simple as to repeat itself. Remembering mass internment on the Isle of Man does however usefully highlight two principles for an understanding of the processes whereby history is made in the present. It reminds us, first, that there is no necessary equivalence between the formations of authoritarianism, and those of party politics or nation states. Authoritarianism has never been the sole preserve of regimes written into the history books as 'fascist': deportation and internment - in the colonies, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man - have long been the preferred vehicles for a peculiarly *British* form of authoritarian nationalism, which preserves the unsullied space of the English mainland by expelling threatening elements to a tightly guarded place offshore. And as Anna Marie Smith points out in her analysis in this issue of parliamentary debates on Section 28 of the Local Government Act, the boundaries of what she terms authoritarian discourse are, equally, rarely congruent with the lines that divide the political Right and Left. The founding assumption of Section 28 - that manifestations of 'flaunting gayness' should be suppressed from the public arena - were shared by speakers across the party spectrum; as Anna Marie Smith notes,

anti-gayness, and attempts to neutralise the threat of radical difference in general, have no natural socio-political home; they can be found on the right and on the left, in any class formation, and even among lesbians and gays ourselves. Thus we cannot rule out the possibility of the strategies of Thatcherite discourse being reproduced by a Labour-led bloc in future.

This is a salutary insight at a time when, with a weakening of support for Thatcherite conservatism at home and abroad, the British Labour Party has begun to prepare itself for imminent accession to government. At such a time, it is a matter of particular political urgency to sharpen our awareness of the strategies and techniques of disciplinary power in *all* its manifestations - not just in its guise as 'Thatcherism'.

In 1930s Europe, it was not simply national boundaries that were transgressed by fascist expansionism. The Nazi seizure of power in 1933 triggered a chain of events which, by the 1950s, had produced not only a fundamental reorganisation of the political and ideological map of Europe - its Cold War division into 'East' and 'West' - but of its psychic mapping in fantasy. The disjuncture between the physical and psychic topographies of Cold War Europe was regularly dramatized for me when I lived for two years in West Berlin by the startled expressions of first-time visitors, on their discovery that a city whose imaginary location was so firmly 'Western' was geographically positioned deep in the heart of 'East' Germany. What, then, are the psychic, cultural and political consequences when the topography of a continent is disrupted as dramatically as it has been this past year? What hopes is it appropriate to nourish for a future 'democratic' order across an expanded

Europe? What may be the consequences for specific communities and constituencies of the reordering of national, political, ethnic, sexual and class identities now underway not only in Europe, but globally?

This issue of *New Formations* in no sense sets out to answer those questions; but it does begin to chart a debate in which, we would suggest, possible answers may be situated. In different contexts - the former, in a diary of events in Beijing in the summer of 1989, the latter, in an exposition of the work of the late C. L. R. James - both McKenzie Wark and Hazel Carby argue for an internationalist understanding of the dynamics of radical movements and the politics of revolution. For Carby, an analysis which situates James's work in the context of international socialism offers one way of combatting the 'structural marginalization' of this and other Third World literatures from critical debates in Europe and North America - and thus of constructing a cultural politics of 'race, caste and class' in an international frame. McKenzie Wark, charting a more contemporary revolution (the abortive uprising of the Democracy Movement in China) paints a picture of a mode of political struggle played out across the surfaces of global communications networks, and concludes that, despite the brutal massacre in Tiananmen Square in June 1989, 'new possibilities for constructing politics in the information landscape have momentarily been glimpsed'.

While the interest of both Carby and Wark centres on forms of political struggle (and on the question of how to write their histories), other contributors address the theoretical issues thrown up by a politics of difference. As Cindy Patton points out in her study of the construction in biomedical discourse of an imaginary entity, 'African AIDS' - a category then mobilized to legitimate what Patton terms the 'genocidal' policy of mass vaccine trials in the African continent - discursive violence of this kind derives some of its force from 'the desire for an incommensurable . . . difference': a desire whose traces are visible, not only in the practices of the scientific and medical establishment internationally, but in political struggles closer to home. A particularly intractable problem has been thrown up for example by the political antagonisms surrounding Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*: the problem, that is, of how to formulate a democratic politics that recognizes the potential incommensurability of differences ethnic, religious or political, yet at the same time refuses to trace those cultural-political antagonisms to an origin in essential (racial) difference. To cite Homi Bhabha,

the *Satanic Verses* . . . provides a whole replay of that problem of the incommensurability - the impossibility of comparison - of different kinds of cultural positions. . . . We're challenged by the *Satanic Verses* crisis to face something very deep: that perhaps our models of the social contract, or of harmonious or organic society, should be rethought in terms of the reality of contestation and challenge within co-existing cultural systems.⁴

Bhabha's argument for a cultural-political economy which 'keeps open the terrain of unresolved differences' (an argument which has found activist expression in campaigns for the right to dissent by groups such as Black

Voices in Support of Salman Rushdie and Women against Fundamentalism) is addressed in this issue of *New Formations* by Paul Hirst, who argues the political need for negotiated 'standards of validity' against which epistemological and political claims may be measured. Hirst and other contributors to this volume suggest, not only that cultural difference may at certain moments be profoundly resistant to resolution (David Lloyd's article, for example, shows how Kantian aesthetics supplied displaced theoretical resolution to just such a set of intractable cultural-political antagonisms in late eighteenth-century Germany); it is further proposed that the assertion of radical difference may precisely be a prerequisite for democratic formation. It is on these grounds, for instance, that Anna Marie Smith defends the 'promotion of homosexuality'; for Smith, the public 'flaunting' of lesbian and gay sexuality is a necessary corrective to authoritarian visions of the British nation as one rooted in a coercive, patriarchal familism.

In contemporary Britain - in the Rushdie crisis, in struggles over Section 28, over responses to AIDS, over abortion rights, pornography and censorship - race and sexuality have been the flashpoints of conflict around which have coalesced new conceptions of a democratic politics of difference. It has seemed therefore appropriate, finally, to include in this issue of *New Formations* two contributions whose focus is simultaneously on racial and sexual difference. Susan Willis sketches three responses to her own question, 'Is there a place for Afro-American culture in commodity culture?': the response of Afro-American women writers (Toni Morrison, Alice Walker), whose vision of a Utopian cultural space beyond commodity capitalism Willis admires, while remaining sceptical of its essentialism; the response identified by Willis with British black cultural studies⁵ - its espousal of the commodity form as 'something that can be played with and subverted'; and finally, the response from historians of the commodity form, who seeks to identify the moments at which it assimilates or suppresses black tradition (Willis herself attempts this kind of historical re-writing of Mickey Mouse, for example). All of these strategies, she insists, are partial and historically contingent. One might add that they are often bound by the constraints of academic cultural studies, with its penchant for political position-taking. So let me conclude by pointing the reader to one contribution to this volume which refuses any such fixing of cultural-political identity: Tracey Moffatt's photo-essay *Something More*. Reminiscent of the familiar melodramatic scenario in which 'the female lead leaves her troubled and provincial home for the lights and dreams of the big city',⁶ Moffatt's images none the less refuse both the easy solutions of narrative closure, and the certainties of fixed sexual and racial identities (who *is* this heroine?). *Something More*, then, offers a useful reminder, not only of the fluidity of cultural identities, but by extension, of the volatility of the positions that may be espoused in the search for a radical politics of difference.

NOTES

- 1 G. Dischner (ed.), *Eine stumme Generation berichtet. Frauen der dreißiger und vierziger Jahre*. (Frankfurt-am-Main: Fischer 1982), 65.
- 2 *ibid.*, 69.

- 3 *ibid.*, 65.
- 4 H. Bhabha and B. Parekh, 'Identities on Parade. A Conversation', *Marxism Today* (July 1989), 25.
- 5 The reference is specifically to K. Mercer, 'Black hair/style politics', *New Formations* 3, (Winter 1987), 33-55.
- 6 I. Periz, 'Something More', catalogue notes, (August 1989).