

## EDITORIAL: SHORT CENTURIES

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*Scott McCracken*

The fiftieth edition of *new formations* passed without editorial comment. We did not even award ourselves the polite round of applause usually accorded to a half-century. But the journal's longevity creates some advantages. Debates in cultural politics are well-served by a historical perspective. In the 1980s, when the journal began, the Left was on the look out for new conjunctures, for realignments. For the most part, however, the shift to the Right in that decade produced disarray and disorganisation on the Left. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked the end of one version of the 'short century',<sup>1</sup> a narrative that left the 1990s adrift, at least from the point of view of periodisation. In the last *new formations* (Autumn 2003), *Remembering the 1990s*, Joe Brooker and Roger Luckhurst argued that, with hindsight, 11 September 2001 might be seen as both the end of the decade and the century. At the last (more than usually lively) *new formations* editorial meeting, it was suggested that the invasion of Iraq – the most opportunistic and aggressive response to 9/11 – might be seen as a defining moment, the point at which a new conjuncture crystallised.

Certainly, there is something defamiliarising about the new imperialism. Where Cold War manoeuvres were cloaked in ideology, the naked appropriation of territory, cultural artefacts and economic assets in the Gulf is shocking. The flimsy justifications for war seem to require no evidence, just reiteration in the face of the facts. It is, of course, too soon to tell just what the fall-out might be. As I write, preparations are under way for the biggest European demonstrations against a US President since the campaign against Cruise missiles in the 1980s. The networks that contributed to the anti-capitalist movement of the late 1990s are remobilising to converge on London and, anticipating trouble, the Blair government has begun to exaggerate expected numbers in the hope that it can spin the events as an anti-climax.

In the context of a present as unstable as any in the journal's history, the journal continues to do what it does best: to grapple with the difficulty of the contemporary as the context for maintaining its engagement with the past. Future issues will engage with the problems of conceptualising the current situation. This issue opens with an exchange that fulfils our aim (begun in no. 47, *After Fanon*) to make the journal more of a forum for debate. Simon Gikandi's article gives the issue its title. He offers us a different short century to that of Hobsbawm, one that throws eurocentric historiography into relief. African modernism, Gikandi argues made possible an imaginative space in which the process of decolonisation could develop. In response, Uzoma Esonwanne questions Gikandi's characterisation of

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London, Michael Joseph, 1994.

cultural nationalist and (African) Marxist critiques of modernism. Steven Nelson, by contrast, argues that it is wrong to perceive African art as neglected in recent decades. Broadening the discussion beyond modernism and nationalism, he suggests, might be to see contemporary African art in relation to post-liberation Africa in all its complexity.

Parvati Nair and Sara Wills also deal with the aftermath of Empire. Nair focuses on the disruption caused by the hijab as it stirs up historical residues in Spanish culture. Spanish discomfort is culturally specific, but, Nair argues, not atypical in its inability to recognise neither the historical presence of Islam in the West nor the patterns of migration that bring into question the premises of the European nation state. Sara Wills' example is the Australian response to global migrations, but again we are faced with the paradox of a generalised parochialism that welcomes the one way flow of cheap goods generated by globalisation, but not the consequent flow of people. If both articles operate under the shadow of 11 September, both show that that event only intensified existing contradictions.

In a theoretical meditation on the same conditions that give rise to Nair and Wills' analyses, Ian Buchanan's return to Jameson's seminal essay, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', seems timely. Buchanan seeks to rescue the debate the essay inaugurated from the cul-de-sac of personal animosity and asks whether Jameson has been misunderstood. In his view, Jameson's use of the term 'third world' is not descriptive, but dialectical, a starting point in a process where the original term is transformed beyond recognition. A reconsideration of the whole of Jameson's oeuvre, Buchanan article suggests, might provide us with one of the theoretical tools whereby the present conjuncture could be interpreted.

The prefix 'post' was one tactic commonly deployed in the 1990s to reconceptualise the present's relationship to the past. Both Jon Stratton and Neil Turnbull propose that the term has a useful afterlife, but put to specific rather than to universal use. Stratton rereads Kathy Acker's novel *Empire of the Senseless* as a post-Holocaust text, arguing that it poses still pertinent questions about violence and representation. The invasion of Iraq, he argues, returns us to these questions, ones that were never really left behind. Neil Turnbull's response to the decline of grand theory is to suggest that its afterlife, 'post-theory', emerges out of the everyday rather than grand schema, but that this need not mean the abandonment of utopian better worlds. David Dwan is equally frustrated by Heidegger's inability to grasp the problem posed by mass communication, but finds the exploration of the relationship between Heideggerian philosophy and the public sphere a valuable one. Ben Highmore's engagement with the modern everyday is perhaps a way between the two. Highmore reads the 1964-5 New York World Fair with and against the grain: in terms of the utopian futures on offer and the international and national politics of the time. For Highmore, these early examples of the forces of corporate globalisation already offer contradictory outcomes.

These complex applications of theory to contemporary culture and politics continue an important part of the journal's project over the last fifty issues. At the beginning of November 2003, *new formations* sponsored a workshop on theory and radical politics at the European Social Forum in Paris, and we will be commissioning articles for a special issue on the new theoretical paradigms emerging around the world that attempt to conceptualise the contradictory effects of the new conjuncture. *new formations* 52, *Cultures and Economies*, edited by Mandy Merck, will register a renewed interest in economics in cultural studies, a move not uninfluenced by anti-capitalist protests. *new formations* 53, *Intellectual Work*, will examine the narrowing space for resistant thought in new and old media, in politics, and in new and traditional institutions of education. As always, it will be the prospects for renewal that interest us most. We continue to try to make sense of the present, to identify its constellation, while maintaining the historical work that will establish its relationship to the past.