

THE BAD NEW DAYS

David Glover and Scott McCracken

2007 marks twenty years since the founding of *new formations* in Spring 1987. James Donald was the first Managing Editor and the journal has appeared three times a year ever since. The first issue was preceded by a series of edited collections under the general title of *Formations*, of which three volumes were published: *Formations of Pleasure* (1983); *Formations of Nation and People* (1984); and *Formations of Fantasy* (1986). *new formations* retained the previous emphasis on ‘feminist and socialist cultural theory, history and debate’ – later broadened under the subtitle ‘A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics’ in 1989 – and expanded the earlier *Formations* editorial board. Two of the original *Formations* series’ founding members, Cora Kaplan and Jenny Taylor, remain active on the current *new formations* editorial collective, while a number of others have continued to serve on its advisory board. Early numbers of *new formations* picked up and developed the loosely thematic mode of organising each issue that we still retain, bringing together linked strands of work, while also finding a place for free-standing individual essays.

In Spring 1992 *new formations* moved to its current publisher Lawrence & Wishart under the editorship of Judith Squires. David Glover succeeded her in 1996 and Scott McCracken served as editor between 2000 and 2004. The journal is currently co-edited by Glover and McCracken, who will be followed by Jeremy Gilbert and Wendy Wheeler in September 2008. But the editorship remains a joint responsibility in which the whole collective participates, meeting to discuss and debate the journal’s ongoing projects at least three times a year.

Twenty years after the first issue, looking back at the first editorial is an exercise in transhistorical nostalgia. James Donald, wary of the genre – ‘all too prone to vacuous good intentions and unredeemable hostages to fortune’ - talks of the late eighties as ‘these bad new days’. Partly a reference to Brecht’s injunction: ‘don’t start from the good old things but the bad new ones,’ the ‘bad new days’ also invoked an implicit comparison with the 1970s, when a British television programme, ‘The Good Old Days’, revived a romanticised version of the Music Hall for a live audience, dressed in Victorian costume.¹ By 1987, the reaction against the militancy of the 1970s was in full force. The re-enactment of ‘Victorian values’ had moved from the screen to government, where they were trumpeted by Margaret Thatcher. Thatcherism still looks like the key shift in British politics of the post-war era. The lady herself still reappears: in novels about the 1980s, such as Alan Hollinghurst’s ironic depiction of the seductive and catastrophic spectacle that was her decade, *The Line of Beauty*;² and even occasionally for tea at Downing Street with her New Labour successors.

1. See Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, Anna Bostock (trans), London, New Left Books, 1973, p121.

2. Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*, London, Bloomsbury, 2004.

3. Alain Badiou, *The Century*, A. Toscano (trans), Cambridge, Polity, 2007, p101.

4. On the historiography of the twentieth century see *new formations* 51, *The Short Century* (Winter 2003-4): 7-38.

In retrospect however, Thatcherism represented but the local version of a global reversal for the Left. Alain Badiou in his collection, *The Century*, makes 1980 the end of a short century that began with the October revolution of 1917.³ Eric Hobsbawm marks its end a decade later;⁴ but if the moment of its beginning is not exactly clear, what is certain is that the end point of this new age of reaction has not yet been played out. Donald remarks on the suffix ‘post’ that came into vogue in the 1980s, an indicator of a sense of an ending. But he asks already whether ‘the time has come to start thinking not only in terms of the Post, but also in terms of the “Pre”’. It has been a long time coming, but now, at last, ‘pre’ does seem more appropriate than ‘post’. We know we are in it, but the full implications of the new age are not yet clear.

Which is not to say, of course, that the journal has eschewed coming to terms with the new era’s formations, cultural, theoretical and political. It is interesting that Donald takes, as his two examples of the bad new days, the Los Angeles Olympics and Live Aid: the first described as a ‘totalitarian extravaganza’, the second as a ‘neo-colonial “party”’. Again in retrospect, these two spectacles appear as auguries of the new period, but cannot now be seen as unqualified examples of decline. In an unconscious return to Donald’s editorial, the essays discussing Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s work that open this issue and Bertrand Taithe’s essay on humanitarianism, which closes it, expand on a sporting event and the history of humanitarianism.

Increasingly, international sports tournaments have become a medium through which a new global order is represented. Los Angeles was perhaps the last Cold War Olympics. Beijing carries the weight of China’s emergence as a world power: journalistic accounts of its preparations are rarely divorced from the implications of national economic growth, whether political or, as it attempts temporarily to clear the skies, environmental.

Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s *La Mélancolie de Zidane* and the three commentaries that accompany it address sport’s peculiar ability to dramatise the intersections of politics and culture. In this respect, the figure of Zinedine Zidane is more than a player. In Toussaint’s short work, translated here into English for the first time, Zidane is more than himself because of the multiple stages on which he plays. Commentaries by David Macey, Timothy Bewes and Thangam Ravindranathan explore further the reach of Toussaint’s text, as well as the incarnations of Zidane himself. As the child of Algerian migrants, the figure of Zidane is a product of the histories of both Algeria and France, but a figure that resonates with the present and, in Toussaint’s text, seems to suggest something of what the future might be.

Spectacle has been a constant, if continuously evolving, aspect of capitalism. Photography, one of the earliest of the new technologies that expanded its forms of display, remains one of the most important. Three essays in this issue demonstrate three different aspects of photography. Peter Buse examines the remarkable history of the Polaroid camera as an early example of technological instantaneity, the significance of which is only now becoming visible in the wake of its obsolescence. Gillian Rose searches for

an ethics of looking that might be appropriate to the public, photographic memorialisation of the dead in the aftermath of the London bombings of 7 July 2005. Mitra Tabrizian's photo-essay demonstrates the continuing power of photography as an art form. Her images of Iranian exile evoke the in-between worlds of the migrant refugee, the predicament of being never at home.

Exploring theoretical models that might help our understanding of the present and the past has always been part of the journal's project. The work of Giorgio Agamben has come into its own as a way of understanding the exceptions justified by the 'war on terror', even though his theory (via Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin) of a 'state of exception' predates the current 'emergency' by many years. Simon Morgan Wortham's essay examines the role that the 'politics of friendship' has played in the critical relationship between Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida and asks whether Agamben's own approach to friendship is not closer to deconstruction than his challenge to Derrida's work would seem to suggest. Maisaa Youssef uses Agamben's theory of the bare life to theorise the Palestinian predicament. In addition, in an ambitious piece, in which Agamben, alongside many other theorists, makes an appearance, Paul Copley attempts a rethink and expansion of the spheres of semiotics and ethics into a new theory of 'semioethics'.

The 'Live 8' concert in 2005 reprised the original Live Aid censured by Donald in the first editorial. In *new formations* 59, Priyamvada Gopal offered an account of the 'Make Poverty History' campaign that balanced its consciousness-raising potential with its failure to examine the material roots of impoverishment. In the final essay of this issue, Bertrand Taithe outlines a history of humanitarianism, from the creation of the Red Cross to 'compassion fatigue', arguing that its ideology rests on a singularly apolitical grasp of the world order. And perhaps this suggests that in many ways the rigorously analytical stance of the journal remains as it was in 1987. But we hope it also shows, at the same time, that we are alive to the potential for change in even the most tawdry of spectacles. We are as concerned as we were at the outset to prefigure as well as to look back, and to look back the better to see ahead.