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Disrespecting Multifundamentalism 1

Disrespecting Multifundamentalism

By Melancholic Troglodytes

The term 'respect!' has gone from rude boy subcultural slang to reactionary Third Way spin, from grassroots contestation of power, to tool for disciplining the new dangerous classes. Melancholic Troglodytes offer a critical genealogy of the strategies used by proletarians to challenge bourgeois dignity and respectability and call for some new (use) values of our own

'Give respect, get respect!' – British government's action plan

It is essential to understand at the outset that Tony Blair's latest moral crusade based on returning respectability to cities and villages is not a gimmick or a quick fix but part and parcel of a protracted attack on the working class.

The aim of this text is twofold: first, to analyse the nature of this attack by showing the antagonism between bourgeois *respectability* and proletarian *respect*; and second, to demonstrate how this conflict is related to the demise of two of capital's most pernicious ideologies – that of religious *fundamentalism* and secular *multiculturalism*.

Perhaps understandably, some readers may balk at our contention that the journalistic inanity known as (eastern) fundamentalism and its flip side of (western) multiculturalism are in crisis. After all, are we not subjected in the media to a daily barrage of mullah-morons self-righteously preaching the finer points of Shari'a law? Do we then not have to endure the gormless liberal multiculturalist paternalistically tut-tutting his *uncivilised* interlocutors? Has not Hamas secured a major victory for fundamentalism in Palestine? Is not religion calling the shots in Iraq? Is there not sufficient evidence that the world has gone completely insane? Should we not adopt a bunker mentality and hide until this tempestuous madness has run its course? By tracing the vicissitudes of the notion of respect we hope to offer a more nuanced – as well as optimistic – assessment of the current state of class struggle.

'Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time, in you?' William Shakespeare Twelfth Night

Class society has always made use of both ideology (Marx) and discursive practice (Foucault) in order to secure the status quo. These mechanisms of regulation have in turn relied on nodal values through which *respectability* has been policed. These nodal values exist in a chain of signification and the study of their evolution can be instructive.

During what is lazily referred to as pre-modernity (more accurately slavery, serfdom, feudalism, etc.) the nodal value greasing the wheels of society was *honour*. The gladiator in ancient Rome, the crusader during the Middle Ages and the knight during feudalism accrued honour through a mixture of courage, skill and sacrifice. Their lower class counterparts – the slave, the serf and the peasant – remained in a permanent state of *shame*.^[1] Only occasionally could a lower class person wipe away the shame associated with their social status and gain honour. This required a superhuman endeavour. Spartacus stands as an archetypal example of such a move. Outside this cosy polarity between shame and honour, *respect* began to make a tentative appearance amongst the populace. Artisans and craftsmen who managed to monopolise certain trades began to be granted a grudging respect by the aristocratic elite.

[IMAGE]

From the 17th century onwards, with the gradual advent of the formal phase of capitalist domination, *absolute* surplus value extraction became the norm in many industries. Exchange value was characterised by the regulation of punctuality, sexuality and discipline. The nodal value that became associated with this phase was *dignity*, which implied that identity is independent of birth, institutional roles and hierarchy. The Dutch national liberation movement of 1579-1581, the English Revolution of 1640-60 and the French Revolution of 1789 represent a series of historical ruptures which transformed society's nodal value from honour to dignity.

To turn up at work punctually, engage in the production process conscientiously, look and sound orderly and discharge one's sexual duties spartanly (in other words to be a *good citizen*) were characteristics of dignity. By default, remaining unemployed, dirty and promiscuous became a sign of undignified behaviour, punishable by poverty and stigmatisation. The English Ranters were an early victim of bourgeois indignation. Naturally most radicals have been deeply suspicious of dignity. F. Palinorc has dismissed it as a shibboleth of bourgeois thought:

[Dignity is an] absurd, utopian cry under a system of total value domination, analogous to the battle cries of *democracy* and *liberty*. [2]

Later we will attempt to show how the situation is somewhat more complicated, but for the time being let us pursue the historical development of capital further.

Those societies that have negotiated the passage from formal to real domination have experienced a more flexible form of surplus value extraction and a greater disparity between the private and public spheres of human behaviour. Also, in this phase, workers begin to enter the economy as consumers of leisure and the bourgeoisie is keen to control leisure's 'moral misuse'. Dignity began to display its limitations and was gradually marginalised by a more sought after nodal attribute – *authenticity*. This is an individualised attribute which encourages political engagement based on the notion of *identity*. The ability to be *oneself* in public now becomes an ideal only available to a handful of clowns, method actors and 'mad' individuals who require neither dignity nor honour since they know no shame. The rest of us are reduced to purchasing tourist-authenticity in far off, 'uncontaminated' lands in the form of Nicaraguan coffee, Turkish whirling dervishes and the occasional divine miracle.

This historical chain of signification (honour – dignity – authenticity) is roughly aligned with pre-capitalism, formal capital domination and real capital domination. However, this schematic association breaks down on closer inspection. Raymond Williams, for instance, talks of three types of cultural artifacts: the *dominant*, the *residual* and the *emergent*. [3] All three usually co-exist in any one period of development. For instance, the dominant cultural node in contemporary India is dignity which corresponds to the formal phase of capital domination. But India is a complex society which also evolves around residual cultural artifacts like honour and emergent ones such as authenticity. Most Indians require a mixture of honour-dignity-authenticity for obtaining respectability but depending on their specific cultural-economic status, they prioritise this chain of signification differently. But, and here is the key question for us, what happens if you are a caste member who is denied access to this chain of signification? In other words, what if you are not considered a full citizen with a delineated set of rights and duties? How do you then seek self-worth and social status as a prelude for interaction with the rest of society?

'Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth.' Albert Einstein

The proletariat has historically employed three main strategies for overcoming the problems cited above. These three strategies correspond to varying degrees of proletarian empowerment:

1. Re-accentuation of respectability

The first strategy re-accentuates the meaning of nodal values when the proletariat does not feel strong enough to reject them (Bakhtin). For example, in the 1960s US ‘blacks’ defined dignity according to class markers. Bourgeois blacks, such as Martin Luther King, understood dignity to mean upright citizenship and demanded equal employment and educational opportunities. Under their scheme black dignity was to be guaranteed by enlightened leaders and enshrined in the law. The law may not be able to police racist prejudice but its admirers believe it is capable of changing discriminatory behaviour and that this in time might lead to cognitive alterations.

Other blacks, such as the Black Panthers, were also seeking reforms although in their case extra-legal actions were used in order to pressurise legislatures. Black Panthers understood dignity as full citizenship and since blacks were only considered three-fifth citizens, the strategy aimed to obtain the remaining two-fifths of rights denied them by the Constitution. Meanwhile, black welfarism would restore dignity to black lumpenproletarians left out of the circuits of capital accumulation.

Lastly, proletarian blacks had a simpler and more radical conception of dignity which was shaped by their everyday confrontation with racism. Proletarian dignity confronted both racist *behaviour* (e.g. discrimination in the shape of Jim Crow laws or segregation) and racist *attitude* (e.g. personal prejudice). The stable dictionary ‘meaning’ of the term, dignity, remained the same but the personal ‘sense’ in which it was employed had shifted dramatically (Vygotsky). Proletarian dignity, therefore, cannot simply be ignored or dismissed as bourgeois. It must be understood in its concrete context and as part of a dialectical supersession of all values.

It is essential to understand that proletarian demands for dignity, whether expressed by black American workers in the 1960s, Russian workers in 1905 or Palestinian workers crossing Israeli check-points are not a static entity, for they can fast evolve in one of two directions. Dignity can either solidify into reactionary *pride* or evolve into *proletarian respect*. Examples of the former include the notion of black pride promoted by fascists such as Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam, Ahmadi-Nezhad’s Iranian brand of Strasserism or perhaps even the BNP’s opportunistic slogan of ‘rights for whites’.[4] Examples of the latter include the solidarity amongst British black proletarians during the 1970s and 1980s centred on respect. A similar phenomenon was witnessed amongst Native Americans in the 1970s during their struggle for land and an end to poverty, or during the first Palestinian Intifada when fighting both the Israeli army and Palestinian leaders simultaneously generated mutual respect within and between refugee camps.

2. Collective rejection of respectability

There are occasions when due to strength or sheer desperation, we manage to go beyond mere re-accentuation of bourgeois respectability and a deep seated rejection sets in. A minority faction within the anti-war movement in the run up to the war on Iraq achieved this in some measure (the rest, be they secularist or religious, remained within the bounds of bourgeois respectability). The honour and glory of war was rejected sometimes through rational arguments and sometimes through collective laughter and irony; the dignity of anti-Saddam victims who were opportunistically paraded in the media was exposed as a propaganda ruse and nullified. The authenticity of evidence put before us to justify the war was also queried at every turn. Some further examples of rejection of respectability may concretise the point: during a one-minute silence in a demo against the First Gulf War, bourgeois respectability was compromised when a group of radicals insisted on shouting, ‘No War but the Class War’; at the beginning of the Second Gulf War an American protestor whose husband was killed in Vietnam said, ‘I learned the hard way there is no glory in a folded flag.’ Similarly, a sizeable minority of Iranian proletarians have rejected the concept of martyrdom and warfare as a route to heaven as is

evident in the struggle against the burial of the ‘unknown soldier’ within university campus grounds. ‘Queer carnivalesque’ would be another instance where we have witnessed a break with heteronormative notions of sexual respectability as well as gay/lesbian essentialism.

[IMAGE]

Proletarian resistance creates a gap between reality and official ideology. This gap has to be filled by rhetoric. The further decomposition of the art of rhetoric in the speeches of Bush, Blair, the Pope, Ahmadi-Nezhad and Bin Laden is itself an indication that the chain of signification is losing its shine everywhere. The first canon of classical rhetoric as practised in ancient Greece was ‘invention’. With the demise of the Sophists, invention was eclipsed by one or more of the other divisions, namely; ‘arrangement’, ‘style’, ‘memory’ and ‘delivery’. Today’s politicians have conveniently dispensed with memory and delivery, leaving arrangement and style as the only two vehicles for rhetorical discourse.

There are also moments of desperation which lead to a frontal assault on bourgeois respectability. Refugees and asylum seekers who are being forcefully removed have been known to go on hunger strike or strip to their underwear at airports as a final act of defiance against immigration authorities. Here, *respectability* which works through raising the threshold of shame (Goffman) is marginalised by the *grotesque collective body* (Bakhtin). Similarly, prison revolts undermine in a matter of hours the systematic work of chaplains, social workers and prison staff whose programme is to instil prisoners with etiquette and dignity.

3. Creation of new concepts like respect for by-passing respectability

When the balance of class forces is in our favour and we have the luxury of time and space, use value may temporarily eclipse exchange value. These preconditions not only make possible a rejection of bourgeois respectability but also foster proletarian respect. Moments of social rupture are usually preceded by a preponderance of mutual respect amongst the proletariat. This is not simply a case of positing our *morality* against theirs as Trotsky would suggest. Rather it is a case of rejecting exchange value and morality as the regulator of the private-public split in favour of a qualitatively different form of immeasurable value based on human need and solidarity. For instance, the term ‘respect’ finds its origins in Jamaica as part of the ‘rude boy’ slang subculture and is transported to Britain where it is picked up by the ‘white’ working class.

‘Nothing is more despicable than respect based on fear.’ Albert Camus

So far, we have postulated that respect is foregrounded among those sections of the proletariat traditionally denied access to the rulers’ chain of signification. We have also suggested that its appearance is a sign of proletarian strength since it is generated from below.

Conversely, if proletarians today are not creating autonomous, organic concepts such as respect (strategy three) and if they are not effectively rejecting capital’s nodal values (strategy two), and if re-accentuation of honour-dignity-authenticity (strategy one) is usurped by reactionaries and turned into pride, then it is logical to assume that capital is enjoying unprecedented hegemony over us.

Yet things are not as hopeless as they seem. In recent years, the two ideologies that have most effectively shackled proletarians world-wide have been *fundamentalism* and *multiculturalism*. Significantly, both emerged at times of massive structural crisis for capital. Fundamentalism (and we beg the reader’s forgiveness for over-generalising here), whether in its early 20th century US manifestation or its late 20th century Middle Eastern variety, was suitable for overseeing the transition from formal to real capital domination. However, it failed in both arenas. At the risk of oversimplification we could state that religious fundamentalism in both the US and the Middle East

emerged partly as a response to the failures of modernism and yet instead of replacing the latter, it ended up forging an uneasy alliance with modernism (especially in places where fundamentalism gained power). In the US it was military Keynesianism that ultimately completed the transition and in the Middle East a kitsch cocktail of military Keynesianism (in industry) is being employed in conjunction with neo-liberalism (in finance and banking), and populism (in agriculture), to bring forth the real phase of capital domination.

Both fundamentalism and multiculturalism prefer winning the cultural battle in the domestic sphere prior to restructuring the production of values in the public sphere. However, whilst fundamentalism is proudly monologic, multiculturalism is *falsely* dialogic (Bakhtin). It pretends to take the addressee into account, respecting difference and heterogeneity. In truth secular multiculturalism is as haughty as religious fundamentalism. It listens but does not hear. And now that its project of *integrating* the foreigner-within has reached an impasse, it has left the western bourgeoisie without a recognisable strategy for continued hegemony. The crisis of multiculturalism reflects the failures of both secularism and postmodernism. The so-called separation of the Church from the state was always a mirage. Secularism took the hibernation of religiosity for its destruction and lulled itself into a false sense of security. Marx observed this bourgeois self-deception with uncanny clarity:

even when man proclaims himself an atheist through the mediation of the state [...] he still remains under the constraints of religion because he acknowledges his atheism only deviously, through a medium.[5]

What Marx is saying is that ideological atheism (or if you prefer bourgeois humanistic atheism) is merely the negation of theism. The synthesis is something else which is yet to emerge. This 'something else' we have characterised as *organic atheism* since it will be a product of everyday proletarian self-activity and not secular legislation or rationalistic discourse. The crisis of the (western) secular state is tied in with the falling out of favour of postmodernism within academia and also with the failure (so far) of western capital to complete its transition from real domination to what we have provisionally termed *surreal* domination.[6]

The slow death agony of fundamentalism and multiculturalism has left bourgeois respectability devoid of efficacy. The slowness of this process and the absence of new proletarian values may have obscured this tendency but the stench of bourgeois values is becoming harder to ignore everyday.

'We may not pay Satan reverence, for that would be indiscreet, but we can at least respect his talent.' Mark Twain

Satan may be worthy of both reverence and respect but the bourgeoisie has lost the plot.[7] In this final section, we will provide examples related to our masters' inability to maintain respectability over us.

Let us take the 'naming and shaming' campaign against paedophiles initiated by *News of the World* and taken up by the British government to tackle *disrespect*. Note that whilst the *News of the World*'s crusade was (largely) against white working class men, the government's Anti-Social Behaviour Orders campaign is (largely) against children wrongdoers who in the past were not usually named for legal reasons. Shaming, as we have seen, is traced to pre-capitalism. Its modern bourgeois version never possessed the impact it needed for controlling proletarian behaviour. Today, this inappropriate usage of shaming has the ironic effect of granting *disrespectful* children a badge of honour amongst their peers. One final irony is that 'naming and shaming' was a tactic used by the radical plebeian press in the 18th and 19th centuries against the ruling class. If an impropriety (usually of a sexual kind) amongst the rich and famous was discovered, the radical press would blackmail the culprit for a hefty sum. Once the ransom was paid, the next issue of the paper would carry a titillating account of

the sordid affair anyway in order to undermine bourgeois respectability. The *News of the World's* campaign seems an exact reversal of this original impetus.

Our next example is even more ominous for British capitalism. The inability of both Labour and Tory parties to reanimate a sense of modern nationalism has alienated a sizeable minority of the population who now voluntarily identify themselves as the 'other'. The *other* consists of two main camps: firstly, the alienated and atomised proletarians who attempt to regain their self-respect individually and, secondly, proud and self-righteous 'Muslims', 'Asians', 'country warriors' and 'White fascists'. Ex-Home Secretary David Blunkett and his faithful sidekick Trevor Phillips clumsily attempted to impose British values on people only to expose this 'imagined community' (Benedict Anderson) for the sham it has always been. Gordon Brown's recent call for a 'British Day' indicates his thinking runs along similar lines. Their new citizenship deal is an American rewriting of the social contract: once British values have been sufficiently inculcated and citizens have been coached in public displays of patriotism, the liberal state will graciously shower them with *tolerance*. [8]

The fact that a once secure sense of Britishness increasingly relies on ritualistic displays of patriotism is a sign of weakness not strength. Ironically, the state is relying on a colonial strategy for internal control at a time when that pernicious species of vultures known as *community leaders* are no longer in charge of their constituencies because they have lost the respect of the proletariat. It is arguable whether this atavistic cadre of vote-hunters ever enjoyed any genuine *community* support. Meanwhile, vacuous old multiculturalists are still harping about 'equal dignity under the law', 'recognition of difference' and the finer distinctions of 'integration' (which is good) and 'assimilation' (which is not). Multiculturalists are still in denial, they will need time to acknowledge the gravity of their defeat. Poor, pitiful hacks are still 'multi-ing' and 'hybrid-ing' our cultures in the hope of covering up the fact that an increasing number of us already feel *trans-cultural*.

[IMAGE]

One final example will suffice. The case of the Danish cartoons revealed cracks in both multiculturalism and fundamentalism (see Benedict Seymour's article in this issue of *Mute*, p.88). Danish capitalism demonstrated the thin line separating tolerance from intolerance when Danish racists were given the green light to provoke their Muslim counterparts. Over a number of months Muslim hate-mongers were in turn given carte blanche by Saudi Arabia and Iran to whip certain sections of their constituencies into frenzy. Once a number of scores were settled and political points underlined, the furore died down as mysteriously as it had been initiated. [9] In the process, European multiculturalism exposed its inherent intolerance and the might of Islam shook with trepidation before a few second-rate cartoonists!

'They cannot take away our self-respect if we do not give it to them.' Mahatma Ghandi

Official ideologies in the form of fundamentalism and multiculturalism have fought (old) proletarian values to a stand still. Community generated respect has been marginalised in the process. Organisations such as George Galloway's Respect Party and New Labour's 'respect campaign' based on ASBOs have discredited the very term. This much we grudgingly admit. But significantly, both religious and secular respectability have lost their momentum, partly due to individual and collective proletarian resistance and partly due to their own inherent contradictions. We are, therefore, in a face-off situation with the ruling class over values. Old monologic (exchange) values have been shunned and new dialogic (use) values are yet to emerge. Since proletarians from different parts of the globe will generate these new values from within different linguistic and cultural environments, our task is to make sure their commonalities are made recognisable to all. Meanwhile, we should remain vigilant against reanimated versions of bourgeois respectability and expose their anti-working class

agendas before they have become embedded within culture.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] 'The concept of honour implies that identity is essentially ... linked to institutional roles' P.L. Berger et al., *The Homeless Mind*, Penguin Books, 1973, p.84. Once premodern institutions gave way under the relentless march of capitalism, honour became embourgeoisified and emptied of its substance. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* captures the demise of the knight-errant and his chivalric code magnificently.

[2] F. Palinorc, *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, 3, 2003, p.183, Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University.

[3] See Raymond Williams, 'Base and superstructure in Marxist cultural theory', *New Left Review*, 82, 1973.

[4] Whilst hating the Nation of Islam and the Iranian theocracy, the BNP is happy to learn strategy from them. The BNP's recent success in infiltrating the anti-Jerry Springer Opera campaign has prompted them to try to set up a church in Lincolnshire, under the name of the Christian Council of Britain. The head of this new church is a 'reverend' Robert West who believes that 'The mixing of races challenges the glory of god',
http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/content/news_syndication/article60316bnp.shtml

[5] Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', p. 218, *Early Writings*, Penguin Books and New Left Review, 1984.

[6] The surreal phase we have postulated will come to replace the real phase of capital domination. What is interesting about this emerging phase is that it consists of four methods of surplus value extraction thus giving both capital and labour more flexibility. The two common forms of surplus value extraction (formal and real) are now becoming sandwiched between two more, provisionally named the pre-formal and post-real methods of extraction.

[7] You want to know how badly the stupid bastards have lost the plot? Get a load of this: Kevin Roberts is a high ranking bureaucrat with SAATCHI & SAATCHI. Recently he gave US Defence Intelligence Agencies a talk where he argued 'brand America' is failing because it is a 'High Respect, Low Love' kind of product. In contrast, he argues, there are brands that have 'High Love, High Respect' quotients such as Harley Davidson, Apple and JFK! So the trick is to make 'brand America' more like Harley Davidson and Apple and the rest of the world will fall in love with the USA (See M. Grimshaw, 'Religion, Terror and the End of the Postmodern: Rethinking the Responses', *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, 3(1), Jan 2006).

The conspiracy nut may interject here that the Sa'atchi (literally, clock-maker) brothers are originally from Iraq! Could theirs be a long-term Sufi strategy of undermining the efficacy of the US military 'intelligence' through subtle counter-productive spin? Are the Sa'atchi brothers Iraq's revenge on US colonisers?

[8] Regarding the generation of a British identity it is worth noting that outside the country various agencies, such as embassies, train prospective refugees in British culture before accepting them. Perhaps myths about British identity are easier to fabricate at a distance; in Africa, Middle East and the

ex-colonies.

[9] The comparison with Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* is instructive. Then Khomeini's fatwa found an immediate and widespread echo, the reverberations of which are still with us today. The Danish cartoon controversy only managed a partial mobilisation of the Islamic *ummah* and even that needed months of preparation by 'flying mullahs'.

Following the recent acrimonious split within Melancholic Troglodytes, the splitting minority have formed themselves into the outfit Sad Cave-People. The majority can still be contacted at <meltrogs1 AT hotmail.com>