The Ministry of Nostalgia

Review Number: 2008
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ISBN: 9781784780753
Date of Publication: 2015
Price: £13.48
Pages: 224pp.
Publisher: Verso Books
Publisher url: https://www.versobooks.com/books/2032-the-ministry-of-nostalgia
Place of Publication: London
Reviewer: Charlotte Riley

Owen Hatherley’s latest book is a compelling exploration of one way in which the British political establishment and the British public (mis)interpret, (mis)remember, and (fail to) engage with history. The history with which Hatherley is concerned is the Attlee government of 1945–51, set within the wider era described mostly, vaguely, as ‘post-war’. Hatherley's book is partly concerned with this history itself, specifically by working to draw a comparison between the Attlee government and some of the politics of the Conservative-led coalition government from 2010, as well as undoing some of the myths that have arisen on the left and on the right about this moment in British politics. More broadly, the book seeks to explore the way in which one specific history of Britain has been adopted and adapted, and the effect that this has had on British culture and society. The book is blurbed, in fact, as a text that ‘explodes the creation of a false history’.

For Hatherley, the (false) history of austerity serves a number of different functions in British society. It is used to sell a political message (indeed, multiple conflicting political messages), to underpin an economic policy, to create a sense of identity among a political movement and among national or local communities.

The material remnants of this past – from council houses and municipal architecture, to Ercol chairs and vintage dresses (which Hatherley somewhat confusingly labels as ‘burlesque’) – underpin these functions whilst simultaneously creating a de-historicised way for a wider public to ‘engage’ with the past. In this way, in contemporary British society the past functions both as a justification of an ideology and an aesthetic to which to aspire.
Importantly, the original message of austerity is distorted when it is transferred to contemporary politics: the austerity of the post-war period was a personal austerity, experienced by the British public through rationing and the privations of reconstruction, at the same time as the government was building the new Jerusalem, the welfare state (which included within it a goal of full employment, virtually achieved by 1951). In the ‘austerity’ of the 2010s, however, the government made significant cuts to public services in a series of ‘spending reviews’, which led to the loss of a large number of public sector jobs, and made working class life in Britain ever more precarious. ‘Austerity’ does not hold its meaning across time – in fact, the meaning is entirely subverted – and so understanding the various meanings of ‘austerity’ and the aesthetic construction of the concept is key to any wider argument.

The hardback book is itself designed to mimic the ubiquitous poster that is the target of much of Hatherley’s wrath; beneath its title, the red cover has a subtly embossed ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ slogan under the familiar Crown symbol. Hatherley takes this poster – which, for a period of time in the 2010s, could be seen printed on everything from mugs to t-shirts to protest placards, and which was adapted and subverted in support of a thousand contradictory, disembodied messages – as the ‘tip of an iceberg of austerity nostalgia’ (p. 22). The first chapter focuses on this poster, and on the moment when both the aesthetics and the message of this artefact were so enthusiastically embraced by the British public. In this chapter, entitled ‘Lash out and cover up’, Hatherley explores the creation of the original poster and its discovery, decades later, by Barter Books in Alnwick, after which point the slogan and its stylings became ubiquitous in Britain and overseas (Hatherley recounts seeing the imagery in a department store in Warsaw (p. 22)). He points out that this poster was never mass produced until 2008; it was designed by the Ministry of Information in 1939, along with two other posters (‘Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution Will Bring Us Victory’ and ‘Freedom is in Peril, Defend it with All Your Might’) but was never used, and most of the stocks of the poster were pulped. Hatherley argues that is therefore ‘a historical object of a very peculiar sort’, although it is unclear why he feels that the fact that the poster was not displayed in the past makes it any less valid as a historic artefact today: is popular exposure or reception so critical in making a piece of material culture ‘real’? If the poster had been displayed by a British population that is mostly now dead, would contemporary engagement with its imagery by people who could not remember its original purpose be any more meaningful?

Hatherley uses this poster as a lens through which to explore how this ‘austerity nostalgia’ has informed media, politics and consumption in recent years. This ranges across the Jamie Oliver Ministry of Food TV series, cookbook and campaign, the twee consumption of bunting-and-brutalism in museum gift shops (where Hatherley’s book can now often be found), and, most uncomfortably, the adoption and adaption of the poster and similar imagery by Transport for London, a number of private utilities companies, and the Metropolitan Police. His work on the use of this imagery in shaping and controlling the behaviour of the British public – especially the way in which the stylistic approach of the poster serves to soften and disguise authoritarian language or rapacious capitalism – is interesting and persuasive. He does not engage with the history of Second World War propaganda in itself, which is a shame; he gestures towards Rebecca Lewis’s work in his footnotes, but her research, along with the work of propaganda historians such as Jo Fox, would have contextualised the poster both in terms of theory and against a body of work surveying reception of these materials at the time. Hatherley’s failure to engage with this work and wider scholarship on the beginning of the Second World War means that at times his treatment of this poster as an artefact is frustratingly shallow – for example, he claims that the poster was ‘for some reason discarded’, and theorises that this might have been ‘because it was considered less appropriate for the conditions of the Blitz’ than the apparently expected German ground invasion (p. 20). In fact, we know that the British government was expecting a massive aerial bombardment at the start of the war, and that the poster was held in reserve for this event; as the Blitz was not forthcoming until autumn 1940, the poster was pulped in line with paper rationing measures.(1) Jo Fox has shown that propaganda produced by the Ministry of Information was ‘volatile’ and risked provoking quite different reactions among the public than those intended; publics were capable of contesting official government messages and defining their own appropriate responses to wartime. (2) Some sense of this context – beyond the short exploration of the topic in chapter four – might have
deepened the analysis of the reception of ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ in Britain today, beyond Hatherley’s assertion that it represents ‘a nostalgia for the state of being repressed’ (p. 21). It might also have helped to explain why the style and format of the poster has been so readily subverted by anti-austerity protestors.

The second chapter of Hatherley’s book picks up this theme and tries to understand how left-wing campaigners have adopted their own form of austerity nostalgia. In this chapter, he explores how Ken Loach’s The Spirit of ’45 (2013), Skip Kite’s Will and Testament (2014) (a biopic of Tony Benn) and Luke Fowler’s innovative exploration of E. P. Thompson in The Poor Stockinger, the Luddite Cropper and the Deluded Followers of Joanna Southcott (2012), use a type of historical narrative to tell a political story. Again, this is skilfully and interestingly done, especially the juxtaposition and fundamental tension between ‘political radicalism and … aesthetic cosiness’ (p. 55) in the first two examples. At times, the chapter does not completely distinguish between clumsy attempts to use history to political ends and the more subtle ways in which all political movements are rooted within a rich and lively past. For example, it is true that attempts by the Left to claim that ‘tolerance and multiculturalism’ (p. 46) are somehow inherent to British (or English) identity, however attractive this idea may be, involve a wilful rewriting of British history to date. But that does not necessarily mean that there is not a history of ‘real popular radicalism’ in British history (p. 46), or that British socialism is not rooted within as clear a historical trajectory as British conservatism. It would have been good to see more engagement with existing writing on the topic of left-wing nostalgia for, and use of, the past; Emily Robinson’s work, for example, would have usefully contextualised and explained the apparent irony of left-wing political movements trying to manipulate the past to tell their own story. (1)

Chapter three explores how ‘benevolent, Fabian-nostalgic-democratic-modernism’ (p. 79) shaped London’s urban design and architectures in the inter-war and post-war period, which Hatherley terms ‘the architecture of the imperial twilight’ (p. 91) (perhaps this is a reference to Attlee’s memoir Twilight of Empire, as the inter-war period to which Hatherley is referring here actually saw the empire at its greatest territorial extent). This chapter showcases Hatherley’s expertise in architecture and the history and politics of urban design, and provides an example of how historians might engage with the material histories and lived experiences of urban life. His work on the London Underground, in particular, tells a lively social and cultural history, as well as an architectural history, of London and its suburbs. His work on the Empire Marketing Board (drawn in great part from Scott Anthony’s book) is at times less coherent. His argument that austerity nostalgia has been ‘ruthlessly scrubbed’ of any connection to British imperialism seems on the surface to make sense – if Britain’s past is to be viewed through the rose-tinted spectacles of nostalgia, imperial violence and oppression must surely be elided. It is certainly true that imperial subjects, and the history of their migration from periphery to metropole that characterised so much British imperial history, are omitted from this nostalgic reimagining of the British past, which is set somehow in a 1940s or a 1950s that did not include the Windrush migration or the refugees from the chaos of Indian partition. But there is, nevertheless, a whole wave of imperial nostalgia in British society seen in politics (Boris Johnson, Britain’s newest Foreign Secretary, has been one of its biggest cheerleaders), in culture (for example, Channel 4’s 2015 and 2016 series Indian Summers) and in popular consumption (what is gin and tonic if not an imperial artefact?). Instead of simply ignoring the empire, this memory constructs an imagined past, which simultaneously celebrates Britannia’s benevolent rule over a vast imperial population, whilst entirely erasing imperial people themselves – and the attendant anxieties of race, ethnicities and citizenship – from the picture.

Hatherley’s fourth chapter attempts to ‘check the hazy romantic picture’ of both right- and left-wing austerity nostalgia against the ‘historical record’ of key events and ideas (p. 115). His work on Mass Observation, which he describes as an ‘archaeology of the present’ (echoing their own assertion that they were creating ‘an anthropology of ourselves’), and which is drawn from Tom Harrison’s book Living Through the Blitz, reiterates some of the critical arguments about the myth of Britain’s ‘blitz spirit’ made first by Angus Calder and Sonya Rose, among others. In this wide-ranging chapter, Hatherley writes about the Blitz, Orwell’s English socialism, the Festival of Britain, the Attlee government’s imperial policies, Nye Bevan and the NHS, and British foreign policy in the 1940s and 1950s. When this works – such as the material on the ‘folk memory’ of the ‘Spirit of Nye Bevan’ (pp. 159, 156) – this is a clear and critical analysis of the post-war British world and its place in British political memory. At times, however, the
analysis is frustrating because, in covering so much ground, the argument becomes a series of assertions; it isn’t always clear how the different pieces of the argument fit together. It is also, at times, confusing in its assumption that there must be a ‘real’ history that can be uncovered, rather than simply reinterpreted from a different perspective; Nye Bevan can quite legitimately function as a left-wing hero and a Cold War warrior depending on interpretation (as, indeed, Arthur Creech Jones was simultaneously a Fabian reformer and an architect of imperial rule). The contradictions that Hatherley critiques are, in fact, no more or less part of the historical record than the story that he is trying to tell.

The final chapter focuses on ‘building the austerity city’ and modern architecture. This chapter covers a number of topics, from new housing development, to the redesigned Imperial War Museum, to the ‘embalming’ of modernist architecture (for which, he ruefully admits, he is partly responsible). From a historian’s perspective, the work on the redevelopment of the Imperial War Museum – which Hartherley derides as ‘cheap and flimsy’ (p. 194) is especially interesting; as practitioners who are typically more comfortable in the library or the archive, historians probably do not consider enough the architectural context of how the wider public engage with the past. The work here on the way in which the material culture of the past, in the form of municipal modernism (and especially housing, such as Goldfinger’s sister buildings Trellick Tower and Balfron Tower) has been commodified and fetishised by new consumers, is also strongly argued and critically engaging. These arguments have wider implications for our understanding of how the public interacts with ‘history’ and how this interaction refashions the past, both materially and ideologically.

At times, the book’s genesis as a series of individual essays shows in its construction (and indeed in the structure of this review); the chapters do not always speak to one another, and some of the historical examples feel a little forced compared to the fluency of the writing on politics and urban planning. But the book is an interesting approach to a period and topic that has been studied by numerous historians, and the comparative angle is refreshing and adds a sense of urgency to the material. Hatherley critiques ‘those who would tear the brief, aberrant achievements of social democracy out of their historically untypical context and flog them as another great moment in our heritage’ (p. 202), because the 1945–79 welfare state was so profoundly at odds with the assumptions and attitudes in British politics, both before and since. In taking this stance, Hatherley berates people who try to uncritically celebrate Britain’s history, and their nostalgia for an imagined past.

Fetishising the past ignores its blemishes. For the post-war period, these include the blemishes of imperial oppression and violence, disease and poverty in the empire and at home, and the lack of rights for women, people of colour and LGBT* people. When people choose to engage with the past in this celebratory, cherry-picked manner, they are choosing to ignore the darker elements in Britain’s past – or, worse, to deny the extent or the existence of that darkness. The book is a rebuttal of any rose-tinted memory of Britain’s past, through both a refusal to forget or ignore its darker elements and a rejection of the way in which this message is used to sell an idea of British progress, marching ever forward, from the Magna Carta to the Blitz Spirit. Hatherley argues – rightly so – that those entirely lacking in historical knowledge might be more fittingly celebrated as ‘true defenders of the welfare state’ (p. 202); better, in other words, to know no history, than to twist and mangle history to fit your agenda.

In this way, Hatherley’s book tries to unravel an interpretation of history that simultaneously aestheticizes and dehistoricizes the past. Like Raphael Samuel in Theatres of Memory (which Hatherley engages with at the beginning of the book), The Ministry of Nostalgia concedes that history might be best understood as a ‘social form of knowledge’. (4) Samuel celebrated this wider understanding of history, which is based in ‘popular memory’ and is acquired ‘higgledy-piggledy, in dibs and dabs’; he argued that any popular engagement with the past was positive, even if people only picked out what they believed to be ‘amusing or pretty or bizarre’. (5) In contrast, Hatherley is critical of the idea that history might be a way for people to ‘console (themselves) with the iconography of a completely different and highly unlike era’ (p. 12). He is suspicious of ‘austerity nostalgia’ as either facile, or manufactured – either the public is not engaging deeply enough with the past, or their engagement is negated because of its mediation through political and
consumer culture. But Hatherley should also acknowledge that his own understanding of the past is itself partial, and subjective. Historians are all, as E. H. Carr would have it, beset with our own bees; we all, when we read other histories, listen out for the buzzing. The image that Hatherley seems to have of a perfect history that could be uncovered if only people would set aside their political agendas is a chimera. However, his attempt to root out what prejudices are behind this particular historical narrative is useful, entertaining, and compelling.

Notes


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