

## Shouting at the Television

### Introduction

Before starting on this examination of the relation between politics and myself I urge readers to take notice of the following caveat. What follows is overwhelmingly written for the author, me. Others are welcome to look over my shoulder just so long as they bear this in mind.

I want to explore a life long unease that has always been part of my dealings with politics and to do this I will revisit those 'revolutionary' times when the elation I felt seemed always to be infused by doubt. No matter how much of this work are memories I'm not trying to put together a cure for this political unease. This is not meant to be a psychoanalytic exercise no matter how difficult it proved to avoid those echoes coming from Freud. I wanted to *discover* more about this unease at work in my political engagements and why it has been such a troubling part of my life. This exploration of my political unease happens between two boundary posts that can be found at the end of the story.

### The Camps

There has always been a degree of arbitrariness where to begin my story. I have chosen the memory of an event that, with hindsight, could be described as something that placed me on the edge of 'adult' politics.

I was ten (eleven) years old, shortly after Mum and Dad could finally afford a television set. One night we were watching a documentary about WW2 and unannounced there was a sudden edit to footage of the concentration camps. It

was not the truly horrific scenes of corpses piled high, what I saw were scenes of emaciated men and women penned in by barbed wire. I had never seen anything like these people and I suspect it took me awhile before I understood that something dreadful had been inflicted on them. My tears were a recognition that something horrible must have happened. At some point I have a memory of turning to my parents and asking them 'Did they do that?' It was my father who replied 'Yes they did'. He had served in the navy throughout the war and my mother had test driven tanks. The camps were never mentioned again.

I don't want to make this into a primal scene but there 's no doubt that it was the place where many of the political threads of my later life became apparent. What I had seen had torn a rent in my being, a gap, or a space that I struggled to repair for the rest of my life. The gap had multiple meanings, none of which were comforting. The 'jaws' of this tear signalled the arrival of an adult politics where right and wrong are part of an attempt to close the jaws and so abolish the political forever. When I looked at the wretched figures hanging onto the barbed wire I must have also been looking into the rent and I was frightened, frightened of what could happen to me and ashamed that I belonged to the same creatures who could inflict such misery on one another. It was not until some time later that I learnt that it was the Jewish people who were the major target of the Nazi death machine.

### Obedience

My years at grammar (High School) school were times of tranquil obedience. The disturbing encounter that had so unsettled me at home never had any repercussions on my school life. The Holocaust was still only a subject raised in

specialised circles. Quite without intention I seemed to have alighted on obedience as the best way for me to steer a way through the rotation of classes. Latin, French, History, Woodwork, Latin again, etc. I became what was expected of me. The only activity where I lost my reserve was sport.

### Marching

Significant political events only happened when I moved to London and began studying at the London School of Economics, a place where politics was the *lingua franca* of any kind of student gathering. Given this pan-political situation I decided to align myself with the Anti-Apartheid movement that had already established a considerable presence in London and several university cities.

As this was the first time I had any kind of context for my political actions some outline of the Anti-Apartheid movement might help to understand what happened to me during the time I participated in its activities. The backbone of the movement was made up of a number of South African political refugees based in London. They were superb organisers of marches, as well as relentless lobbying that drew attention to what was happening in South Africa under the apartheid regime. They put pressure on the Conservative government to organise sanctions against South Africa government. Fat chance.

I paid a small fee, received a badge and with my friend set off to join the next march. Despite knowing little about what was happening in South Africa I made little effort to widen my understanding of why I was marching other than the South African government bad, Anti- Apartheid movement good. For the first marches I felt safe, cocooned within my political naiveté and the hundreds

of other marchers that surrounded me. It felt barely political at all, closer to a pleasant Sunday afternoon stroll. I was marching for only the slightest of political reasons. Very soon doubt and boredom began to eat away at my political calm and so there came a time when the marches couldn't hold me. My actions no longer carried any personal force and I drew no strength from the sense of injustice that should have been at the heart of my political action. Drifting away from my first political action was never a rejection of the aims of the Anti-Apartheid movement. I had become 'fed up' with the tight political orchestrations as a whole. My absence from the marches led to the arrival of what would become a familiar friend, guilt. My participation in the marches had been driven by the strength of my political commitment, and that was fading fast.

By the time I had drifted away from the Anti-Apartheid movement I could do little more than cover the cracks that had opened up in my political commitment with boredom and with guilt. Guilt kept what I was wishing for at a distance. It was frequently 'covered' with 'avoidance actions' that were all strategies to participate in political action at the same time as wanting to remain safe. My participation in the Anti-Apartheid marches lasted for about a year by which time the friend who had been my early companion on the marches started on a commitment that would last for years. We finally fell out over my shrinking attendance at Anti-Apartheid events. The doubts I had glimpsed in political action I saw in myself and the tear that seemed to have remained shut was opening once more.

Spontaneity

At the same time as I was losing interest in the Anti-Apartheid movement I got involved in a very strange political action that was the antithesis of the politics of the Anti-Apartheid, indeed it was the antithesis of a great deal of the politics that was the rule in LSE. Political activity was nailed down to particular struggles so that there was little free floating political energy. Political 'struggle' was how politics was overwhelmingly conducted. How, what I shall call our political gesture, came about at the LSE still remains a mystery.

What happened was that a group of four friends decided to destroy the ballot papers for an election of a minor position in the Student Union. Our political rationale was little more than a vague anti-bureaucratic sentiment. The four of us were very different from one another. There was myself who was not only sliding away from political action in general, but was terrified by the prospect of engaging in something so exposed. Perhaps the oddest member of our group was my Anti-Apartheid friend who seemed to have, temporarily, turned his back on the conventional politics of marches and banners. Then there was 'Greek' George. He was already a member of one of the many Trotskyite groups active in the LSE. George possessed an extraordinary amount of energy and could always be relied on to keep everyone charged up and ready to go. Finally there was my friend Duffy. Nothing seemed to knock him off course. He relished any public action and would terrify those nearby who lacked his daring.

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Supplies of black ink were stored away until the day the ballot papers were to be counted. We parked ourselves in the front row of seats close to the table where the ballot boxes were placed. At a given sign we jumped up and poured the ink into the boxes. Unfortunately we had not assigned the boxes to

individuals so very soon ink was flying everywhere. When we had emptied our supply of ink we made for the exit and then for the local pub. After a few drinks we all dispersed and that was it. There was no follow up or political aftermath to our action. The only exception was poor George who had been hauled up in front of the Central Committee of his political group and warned that if he did anymore-extracurricular activities (Adventurism I think it is called.) he would be expelled. Many years later I bumped into him at The Academy cinema in Oxford Street and it was clear that he remained a loyal member of his Marxist group. Later, there were many brave actions he undertook that must remain silent.

Looking back on the events of that day I have some very contradictory feelings. *Objectively*- (a word and an idea that later would terrify) the assault on the ballot boxes had no consequences. It failed to bring the bureaucratic arm of the LSE administration to its knees. The election for positions in the student council was completed despite the black ink and there had been no general uprising of the student body. It failed to make any kind of mark. But *Subjectively* the action was filled with portents of what was to come.

My most immediate recollection of that day was that I had enjoyed every bit of it. The planning, the execution and the satisfaction I felt when it was over. In those five minutes of destruction of ballot papers I experienced elation so strong that it swept aside any consideration of what we were doing and why we were doing it. As the inks were poured I was introduced to the pleasures of destruction. The destruction of the ballot papers was strong enough to sweep away, albeit temporarily, my congenital timidity. The events of that day convinced me that the circumference of legitimate politics, such as the Anti-

Apartheid movement, needed to be drawn much wider and encompass the many different urges whose aims were to bring about change. But belief, for instance, in a politics of destruction – in this case diverting the ink for non-functional ends-was always accompanied by a fear that I would be caught out whilst ‘transgressing with the ink’. I took political delight in instances of revolutionary destruction but only those examples I came across during my reading. For instance the Watts riots in Los Angeles in 196 where the looting was used as a way acquiring commodities that were denied them. I was far too timid to participate in the minor criminal acts that were to break out later in the unfolding of this ‘dialectic’. The destruction had the thinnest of theoretical justifications. It was never – like the Anti-Apartheid movement – freighted down with altruism. Where it did have consequences for me was that I was convinced that the destruction of the ballot papers was a legitimate form for politics, not just a student prank.

### Drinking with Marx

It was through the generosity of a friend that we came to rest in Dalston, an area of east London, a part of the city that neither of us had lived in before. It soon became clear that we were just one of a number of households that shared radical political affiliations. Although there was a general allegiance to Marxism it seemed to me that Marx acted as a kind of placard enabling them to be differentiated from mainstream politics. This identification with Marx and Marxism acted as a fuel to power their critique of the existing social order, especially the denunciation of the British class system, the one thing they all agreed on. I must stress how important this period was in my political life. It was the first time I was able to share my ideas with those of a like mind. At the

same time the ideas of Women's Liberation were beginning to circulate within the same network of households, but more of this later.

This was a time of intense and lengthy conversations. I had started to make friends and so in time-honoured tradition we would meet in a pub favoured by local left-wing groups. (Friday night saw the place heaving with revolutionary potential.) These evenings allowed me learn much about historical figures such as Trotsky, as well as the many casualties that were a consequence of the Russian Revolution. (Not surprising from a Trotskyite group) But no matter how excited I became by my reading, and conversations, I could never overcome my disinclination towards the forms of collective action that were regularly took part in by my friends. Avoidance of Boycotts, Pickets and Demonstrations were all evidence that my skill at evading any form of action was as sharp as ever. At the same time I discovered the vast inter-wars literature associated with European radical movements. I began to read some of the texts of western Marxism, as well as writers such as Victor Serge and George Orwell in Spain, and most important of all were those accounts of why the Russian Revolution had gone off the rails, perhaps in the hope of inoculating myself against the Soviet disaster. I formalised all this reading by signing on for an M.A. on Nazi Art and Architecture, something that had impeccable radical status and which I hoped I would be able to slide into those future conversations that I might have with my friends. Unfortunately Nazi Art and Architecture was rather too obscure subject for informal conversation and would stop conversations rather than start them. But a series of connections had been made. Reading radical texts, thinking about contemporary reality in the light of these texts and launching me as an occasional lecture at the many Art Schools in southern England. This, to my mind, was political action, equal to



a street demonstration, or a picket. So the tear in my world had almost closed but not quite.

### Women's Liberation

At the same time that I was exploring the pre-war history of radical European thought the political ideas of Women's Liberation began to arrive and soon made themselves felt among the very same households where my Marxist friends and I were living. It was soon evident that the political presence of Women's Liberation was quite different to the traditional Marxist way of doing things. Its true that there were a number of historical texts that had argued for the collectivisation of child care and house work as a means of freeing women from domestic drudgery. Whilst these texts were well respected they provided little in the way of practical guides relevant to contemporary reality. New ideas and a new way of doing politics were needed so as to understand how power was distributed differentially between modern men and women.

The 'point of entry' for the politics of Women's Liberation went a long way in re-shaping the transactions between male and female. Often there were no rigid separations between politically active women and men. (Gay households followed this pattern.) Individuals of either sex could be friends or partners who shared a bed or who sat around a kitchen table. Hence there was a different political landscape to the one encountered in the previous ways of political organisation. The message of Women's Liberation was just as likely to appear as a shadow on the bedroom ceiling as in a tightly worded pamphlet. I always felt that the most successful actions carried out at this time were those that threw into relief what habit had previously rendered invisible. It was in the ways in that the daily lives of men and women crossed over meant that

made it made it difficult for men to evade the radical ideas that Women's Liberation were trying to get listened to, and understood. It was their exploration of the micro-politics of gender relations that made sure their ideas would arrive with the morning toast. They were especially effective in bringing to light the ways men benefited from the unequal place women occupied in the world of work, as well as the labour expended from them in the daily round. In general it was a time of study groups. Consciousness Raising Groups'. Groups to explore the history of women's radical politics, Groups to explore women's literary imagination and many more. Some lasted for a short while others outlived the circumstances of their birth by many years.

It is all too easy to be cynical about the micro-politics of this period, especially the male responses to the 'upendings' that followed on from the emergence of a much firmer political programme of Women's Liberation. Whether it was guilt, shame or just curiosity was, in my opinion, of no consequence. What was significant was that so many men signed up hoping to shed light on those opaque areas of their masculinity, in particular what shape men's behaviour takes when dealing with women. The arrival of the Men's Groups signalled, perhaps, a desire to step off our personal styles of masculinity. Did it bring about lasting change? Perhaps not, who knows. Once again here was a politics that felt as if I were getting somewhere.

(Note- the individuals, and groups of individuals, constituted a homogenous, Middle-class, University educated and already inclined to liberal sentiments.)

## E.8 to W.11

Another move, this time to the other side of London where all the postcodes began with W. Notting Hill Gate and Ladbroke Grove Again we landed in a politically oriented group but it was very different to the one we had left behind in Dalston. It was a small, informal group who met in the pub and occasionally in each other's flats.

I quickly realised that politics in W11 were different to the politics of Dalston because of conversations about the actions in 'the Squares'. A number of people I was getting to know had hatched a plan to liberate some waste grounds that were of no use but had been made were off limits to the locals by the Council. The day came to spring the locks of the gates blocking the targeted areas. With the gates open the liberators entered the forbidden territory. There was one further element of note and this was that they were all dressed in animal costumes. When the police arrived-alerted by the council- they found themselves arresting 'animals'. There was a famous photograph of a gorilla being arrested and pushed into a police van. I loved the genial politics that pursued its target with absurdist ammunition. The 'action' was not simply pantomime. There was a thread of social justice that secured its political credentials. The assault on the squares, and in particular, the carnival of animals, gained wide press coverage and very soon, shame worked on the Council who dropped their bans and opened the squares up as children's playgrounds. It seemed to have been fun, something that had been absent from my political experience so far.

The first few months in our new habitat were exciting. We met people coming from France (Escapees from the crack downs post '68.) Others were stopping

over en route to the US. I had never encountered such a depth of learning. Poetry, Art, music, in particular I had my introduction to the extraordinary flowering of the arts in the years immediately after the revolution. It was a time when I learnt about historical individuals, most of whom I had never heard of, certainly not in the context of radical politics. One of these was Charles Fourier, about whom I knew nothing other than his name. After a few trips to the library I discovered that Fourier had laid out a plan that was nothing less than a way to bring about a complete change of life. Despite being utterly eccentric, Fourier's plan drew into its orbit all of those aspects of life that seemed resistant to change. It stretched from the abolition of work to the reorganisation on sexual relations. The 'impossible' could now take its place on the political agenda. Once more this was a time of conversation, books and names that needed to be followed up. My first thing on visiting the flats of friends was to scan their bookshelves looking for the names of new individuals who appeared to have radical potential. In those days it would have been very uncool to whip out a notebook and pencil so I cultivated a bookshelf memory

This accumulation of knowledge was exactly the kind of politics I loved and with such a heavy programme of study little time was left for political action even though few suitable 'targets' rarely presented themselves. At the same time a change started to happen to what I thought I was doing. My reading had become *theory*, and *theory* meant the end of the genial politics of the invasion of the squares and the arrival of a 'theoretical militancy' meant 'a no fun zone' to quote from a character in *Absolutely Fabulous*.

Under the rule of theory my love of study began to shift into a desire to pass political judgements on everybody and everything. It started with a suspicion

of any form of advancement, personal or in the world at large. Ambition was dangerous because it could easily further capitalist aims. These judgements could take the form of a class based condemnation, or were judgements on those considered to be 'selling out'. Little in the outside world escaped servitude to an all-embracing capitalism and the alienation that accompanied it. A cruel version of the idea of alienation could be used as an index of the intensity of the suffering inflicted on individuals, both historical and contemporary, by capitalism. The greater the suffering the more that individual was held in esteem. (My favourite amongst these 'saints' was the Romantic poet Coleridge, who had he not suffered a miserable life addicted to opium, he would never have been so attractive.)

The tragedy of this political period was that a deal of my previous study was jettisoned under the banner of theoretical militancy and so further study ceased. It had closed shut elbowed aside by self evident 'pamphlets'. My relation to politics had vanished beneath a heap of vacuous militancy along with a politics of condemnation that permeated every aspect of my thought. In the end my politics was compressed into a belief that any successful revolution would have to take the form of an armed working class uprising. Little, or nothing, was left of the concern over social justice that had guided my steps into the Anti-Apartheid march where I began my political journey.

Looking back on those years I'm puzzled as to what it was that gave these militant radicals such intense emotions, emotions that drove them down such sterile pathways? To be sat next to one of us was to have to listen to the world being forever put to rights, never enjoy it as it is. My politics was light years beyond that of conventional political parties. The only explanation I have for

this disjuncture is that there was no steady, external action such as that I had at least had some during our stay in Dalston. We had to internalise political action into a combative mental form whose result was a theoretical shouting match where the two jaws of the tear were demanding absolute dominance over the other. At times, it must have been like living with an unbearable political screech.

And so my marriage collapsed and I collapsed with it. The brand of politics certainly helped to bring about its end its and nothing in the politics was of any help to alleviate my misery. What followed was a slow, but irreversible journey, until I restricted my political activity to reading the newspaper and voting- it is Australia where voting is compulsory. Oh! I forgot, also shouting at the television.

The first is the rather torn advertisement inviting passers by in the inner west of Sydney to attend a political meeting. Dated October 2022 and the second is a quote I've lifted from Colm Toinbin's biography of Thomas Mann

'A Faust of the study ...who does not seriously desire to leave it, that is to translate his aims into deeds.'

Thomas Mann.



Meet,  
Learn,  
Discuss,  
Debate,  
Get Active

For George, a friend and true radical.