

The Victorian Age, the Imperialist Mindset and Neo-liberal Corporate Capitalism

A History Lesson

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I don't remember much about my high school years. Some of the highs (few in number) come back to me but it was mostly lows which probably explains why I don't remember much. It's not that I was dumb, I just had no motivation, but I was interested in history, jazz and politics (thanks to my parents) and even won a prize for a history essay as well as starting up the school's first jazz appreciation society (not appreciated by the school I might add, the head of music tore down my posters).

But after a few years at school, I gave up trying at pretty much everything except building a working model of a steam engine, which I inherited from who knows how many previous generations of students. I added some copper steam tubes to the boiler and then left Wandsworth Comprehensive, at pretty much the same time as the steam engine all but disappeared from the British landscape.

For obvious reasons some aspects of life at school do stand out. I remember for example that our one official 'history' text book ended at 1914 and I wondered why (after all, it was the 1960s)? Revealing inadvertently perhaps, just how deeply imperialist thinking is embedded in British culture. 1914 was if you like, the 'official' date on which the British Empire ended.

The Imperialist mindset is not confined to just one sector of British society, it exists even within what passes for a left here. It's why successive so-called Labour governments have continued to carry out imperialist policies without missing a beat and found large segments of the Left supporting said Labour governments (with 'reservations' of course).

Hence there has always been something of a 'continental divide' between the Left's domestic policies and the reality that made life as it is (was?) possible in Britain. But perhaps (hopefully) it was the Blair government that spelt the end of this history for the Left in Britain. Though unfortunately, I have yet to see a new one begin, one that has shed its imperialist past and is prepared to deal with the reality of Empire, past and present. The reality that without a vast 'them' toiling away in far-off places, there would be no 'good life' in the heart of Empire.

Which kinda brings me back to steam engines. The English have a love affair with them, it's why there are dozens of railway preservation societies restoring old steam engines and running them on some of the lines Beeching axed in the 1960s, a move that heralded the (possibly short-lived) Age of the Automobile. A decision no doubt regretted in these days of

gridlock and rocketing fuel prices, let alone permanently scarring our unique and once quite beautiful landscapes, shaped by thousands of years of continuous occupation on this small island.[1]

My father used to take me to the Science Museum when I was kid and in those days they had working models of machines in glass cases with a handle on the outside that you could turn and watch the machine doing its thing. I'm not sure I knew what they did, I just liked to see all those whirring cogs and levers, working in such precise harmony. One can see why there is such a fascination with those wonderful, intricate machines and the skill involved in building them (my father was for a period of his life a scientific instrument maker and one of his brothers invented synthetic aniline dyes for the printing industry).

But why do we have this love affair with the Victorian Age? A simple answer would be nostalgia for yet another invented past. But there is no doubt that the Age of Steam represented the high point of British Imperialism, where industrial capitalism not only ruled the world but expressed its pride in its power through its machines and buildings. Even humble sewage works were decorated in elaborate, expensive and totally unnecessary profusion, expressing the pride and skill of the foundry-men who made it possible.

But underlying this love affair are the tens millions of industrial workers who built and ran Industrial Capitalism. So when the steam engine ended its 150-year reign, it also meant the end of 400,000 jobs and 150 years of *their* history and culture.

The history of capitalism is the history of continuous revolutions in production: from the rural to the city; from cottage industry to factory; and finally from factory to 'outsourcing', the rise of the 'service' industry, de-industrialization and the financialization of capital. The end of an economy based on actual production and along with it, the jobs, skills, experience and cultures of a dozen generations of working people.

This I contend explains the current fascination with our past, reflected in the dozens of television programmes and 'heritage' projects up and down the land. If only they were peeling back the layers of our history papered over by capitalism. The histories of how we have been forced to change the way we live by transforming the means of production which in turn has reshaped the nature of society in the most fundamental of ways.

No such luck. Instead the transformations are presented to us as though they were acts of nature; unstoppable and inevitable, powered by the magic words 'competition' and 'progress'. But clearly the national obsession with the past tells a different story even in its gutted form. A past literally stolen from us.

Thus the mechanics teacher at my old high school who chose the steam engine as a means of gaining an understanding of how things work, was reflecting the way we used to be. Just as today, the craftsman or woman reflects the way we used to work even before the Age of Steam, when things were hand-made and importantly, when workers owned their own tools.

In order to justify the continuous destruction of successive working class cultures down the ages capitalism has appropriated our histories and transformed them into 'heritage', a fancy word for commodifying the past. Our past has to be transformed into 'history-lite', de-politized, ready for consumption by a population that has had its real history photoshopped out of the picture.

It was the Victorians who were the first to not only rewrite our history and invent 'traditions' but also to reconstruct our landscape to reflect a fake Medieval past, replete with fake Gothic architecture, the most infamous of which is the Houses of Parliament, itself the embodiment of a fake 1000-year history of 'democracy'. Build things to make them look like they've always been there. Brilliant!

This is why for me, and for the rest of us at school, history ended in 1914.

The industrial working class fought for their rights at the point of production and in doing so triggered the demand for political rights given as how the two are so intimately connected. Winning the right to vote was seen as the path to true economic as well as political democracy. But can there be true economic democracy under capitalism? The organized working class gave up asking this question over a century ago, contenting themselves with a replica Gothic parliament instead.

The resurgence of a rapacious neo-liberal corporate capitalism has thrown this issue into sharp relief after an absence of almost a century as the gulf between words and practice widens. Increasingly, 'democracy' is being abandoned not only by the ruling elite but also by the electorate, who hopefully one day will realise that democracy embodied in a Gothic building is as fake as the building itself is.

Note

1. Paradoxically? the thousands of miles of rail track built over the last two centuries have 'settled' quite comfortably into a landscape already totally transformed by thousands of years of rural occupation, just as they have in India for example. In any case, few if any areas of the UK can be called natural. Looked at in this way, the UK is an entirely built environment, the question is, what kind of landscapes do we want and what kind of relationship do we want with them, urban and rural? Our obsession with the rural reveals the deep divide that exists within our society between urban and rural life, with only the distorted memory to remind us of whence we came and how we got here.

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