BOOK REVIEWS

POWER, CORRUPTION AND LIES

Sheriff and Outlaws in the Global Village. By Dan Plesch. London: The Menard Press, 2002. 47pp. £5 pb.

The Age of Terror: America and the World after September 11. Edited by Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda. Cambridge MA: Perseus Press, 2001. 232pp. £8.99 pb.

In the Name of Osama Bin Laden. By Roland Jacquard. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2002. 292 pp, £14.50 pb, £41.95 hb.

Welcome to the Desert of the Real. By Slavoj Zizek. London: Verso, 2002. 154 pp, £8.00 pb.

On 17 December 2002 Macdonalds announced its first ever trading loss. Just a footnote to the financial news but also a significant sign of our times. The times they are a changing, as Bob Dylan said. America is currently busy earning itself the status of world's most hated nation while teetering between swaggering complacency and uncomprehending panic. Russia is rearming. China is taking a long-term view. Europe is organizing. The great mass of humanity is feeling increasingly powerless. Behind all this, however, the craving for authentic life – for something worth dying for in place of the 'anaemic spectacle of life dragging on' (Zizek, p. 90) is as imperiously demanding as ever.

These four books about 11 September, all informative, differ deeply in perspective. Plesch offers a well reasoned political analysis emphasizing what needs to be done to re-establish international trust and confidence in law, emphasizing the imperative need to contain the risk of nuclear conflict. Talbott and Chanda's eight contributors are all set in the American perspective. Jacquard is more dispassionate, offering a wealth of detail and concluding that Western policy must become more generous 'if the cycle of despair, hatred and revenge is to be broken' (p. 161). Zizek's five essays provide psychological depth and tell us how 'the choice between Bush and Bin Laden is not our choice; they are both "Them" against "Us"' (p. 51). Plesch agrees that the current US approach is as serious a danger to international law as the rise of terrorism (p. 22).

Talbott and Chanda's volume is understandably titled, but the terror in question is not really the dominant political phenomenon of our age, merely one reaction to it. The dominant phenomenon is, as Plesch senses and Talbott and Chanda fail to see, the US's desperation to prove its potency whether through economic domination, rocket programmes, or the erection of a monstrous replacement phallus in the groin of New York city. As 'the man

who revived pan-Islamism' (Jacquard, p. 99), not to mention as patriarch of several wives, many children and a legion of devotees, Osama bin Laden, despite his hate-figure status for some, appears for many others as a self-assured counterpoint to such consuming anxiety. Terror, in his hands, is a tactic that relies for its effect upon its symbolic significance, throwing the impotence of the mighty into glaring relief. What Americans cannot bear is looking ridiculous. Even their aggressive attempts to reassert normality by, for instance, attacking the rubble of Afghanistan, end up as embarrassments, having the appearance of futile tantrums (Zizek, p. 35). On the other hand, international terrorism orchestrated by an Arab millionaire looks like the 'obscene double' of the international corporations (p. 38) rather than a truly different culture. It is precisely because OBL's acts have a sophistication of significance within, not outside of, the universe of Western discourse that they are so effective.

Nobody can any longer be under the illusion that politics does not matter, even if there still does not seem to be much point in voting. History had not ended, it merely slept. Nor is the clash of cultures thesis more than half the story; and that half might be better appreciated as the clash between the parent culture of the old world and the would-be potent infant culture of the new. Indeed, the most likely denouement to current developments – and I will stick my neck out here – is the emergence of a new cold war between the two Western blocs – America and Europe – themselves, since Europe, when it comes to it, is of the old, and is the only power that has the capacity to challenge American hegemony seriously. This would be an ironic replay of the beginning of the last century when Germany was the superpower that had recently overtaken Britain. Britain remained Germany's seeming best friend right up to 1913, just as it now seems to be America's. How long will the fiction that European and American interests coincide be maintained? Probably not more than 20 years; possibly a good deal less. When things change, however, whether the change is marked by the falling Berlin Wall or the tumbling twin towers, they change fast. Political psychology is complex. Ideology and personal feelings interact in an intricate chemistry. Jacquard does a good job of illuminating it in the complicated history of Bin Laden showing him as a determined and astute idealist whose self-chosen mission acquires additional fire from the sense of betrayal he feels at the hands of others, such as Saudi royalty.

People do not fully control their own destiny but we influence it through the conditions we create and the means we select. Selecting military means to deal with problems that are moral and psychological yields only very short-run gains and stores up calamity. The Americans have evidently forgotten Vietnam. The most fundamental conditions are ethical. Both Bush and OBL realize this. Unfortunately each mistakenly believes he has right on his side and therein lies the core of today's tragedy. Yet in commitment people find life in the very act of abandoning it to a cause. Is the suicide bomber more alive than the commuter, asks Zizek (p. 88)? Has terror come to purge our souls of tedium?

One key political dynamic is the rise of an 'oligarchy of economic and military interests using new technologies to establish global supremacy' (Plesch, p. 5). A second is the emergence of weapons of mass destruction as 'fundamental sources of power' (ibid.). A third is the relative absence of non-military strategies that could reduce the need for such weapons. Since the fall of the Soviet Empire, there has been no nation

both willing and able to challenge and rival the US, a circumstance that has tempted the latter into actions arrogant enough to win it so many, as yet, for obvious reasons, mostly covert, enemies that this circumstance itself cannot endure long. America takes the envy of others as evidence that it is superior and justified and that its culture is the world's future. The number of times that nations whose supreme talent was military have similarly deluded themselves has, of course, been legion. Arrogance breeds opposition. We are, as yet, however, only at the beginning. Guerrillas like Bin Laden may make their protesting mark and carve out a constituency that will be significant in the long run, but only another multi-state conglomerate can offer serious resistance to American hegemony. The age of terror or 'clash of fundamentalisms' (Zizek, p. 52) described in these four diverse volumes is only a prelude to the major struggle to come. During this pre-storm lull all players in the great game will manoeuvre for starting positions and nothing that politicians pronounce about undying allegiance should be relied upon.

Talk of World War III is misleading (Talbott, p. 135) but Bin Laden's declaration in February 1998 that a war was already under way, waged by America 'against God, his messenger and Muslims' was not empty. Americans see this as rebellion and not the first. According to Charles Hill (in Talbott) the first one ran through the 1970s and 80s and was led by secular Arabs like Quddafi and Arafat. The fact that 'The first war against terrorism was left unfinished and unwon' (p. 86) further confuses current events. Thus, to Westerners, Iraq is simply another Islamic country, but in fact Saddam Hussein's regime is secular and for long, therefore, anti-Al Quaida (Jacquard, p. 26). The new retort, grounded in the certainties of Islamic fundamentalism, is both more formidable, ambitious and provocative, especially to America's own fundamentalists. It could unite the Islamic world within an identity rooted in tradition – especially if the West, following priorities established in the first rebellion, inadvertently assists by continuing to destroy whatever secular forces remain in the Islamic lands. In its supreme self-confidence, the current US political class acts as though it were already ruler of the world, lumping together all who stand in its way and, thereby, creating common cause among those who have no other natural affinity. Osama bin Laden can now make capital out of the millions of children dead in Iraq and Palestine as a result of US-inspired action even though he has no fraternity with either Arafat or Hussein and it may even be, as Jacquard (p. 112) suggests, that some tentative co-operation between OBL and Iraq has now begun to take place on a basis of expediency.

Modern technology has come close to making the world into one society and simultaneously provided fairly cheap weapons of mass destruction (Jacquard, Chapter 13). The US as 'the only superpower' has quickly come to consider itself natural leader of that world. However, 'The prevailing US approach in world affairs is an unabashed pursuit of US interests buoyed by a supreme sense of self-confidence in American values and indeed in America's "manifest destiny".' It is not so much a 'unilateralist' approach to world security as an anarchistic one, an anarchist being somebody without respect for law. 'In the defence of security policy, the US sees little value these days in international law' says, Plesch (p. 11). Nor, it seems, in human rights. Clive Stafford-Smith, a British lawyer, has been attempting to represent two British citizens, Asif Iqbal and Shafiq Rasul, both from Tipton in the West Midlands. He writes (*Observer,* 1 December 2002):

> Our proposition sounds a modest one: that they should not be held forever on Cuba without being charged, without a lawyer, without a trial, and without a semblance of due process. Perhaps they should even be allowed to see their mothers once in a blue moon . . . The steps the US is taking are extreme, and the rule of law seems to have been the first casualty in the war on terrorism. Our legal team has demanded to know how democracy is threatened by telling our clients what the charges are against them.

The US controls events at the Guantanamo Bay base but, it seems, there is no means on earth whereby what they do to people there can be brought under legal scrutiny. Stafford-Smith concludes: 'In plain English, this means the US asserts the right to roam the world committing crimes with impunity.' He goes on to bring home tersely the hypocrisy of demanding arms inspectors for Iraq but not for Israel; supposedly propagating the rule of law while not recognizing the International Criminal Court; talking about democracy while refusing to pay its contributions to the UN unless it gets its own way; and supporting non-democratic regimes whenever it suits. As he says, 'hypocrisy breeds hatred' and 'hypocrisy makes it much more difficult to sell the positive aspects of the American agenda.' It also stops people buying from Macdonalds.

Whether we are, as yet, at war is a problem of semantics that would not have troubled Machiavelli. Dominant institutions of statedom are, however, at stake. Hill (Tabott, Chapter 4) argues that the economic and social failure of the Arab world is attributable to its non-acceptance of the state as the basic legitimate unit of social organization. Islamic ideals call for pan-Islamic institutions inimical to the Western concept of statedom and this tends to legitimize rebel groups that are thus endemic throughout the region. However, the force that is currently most corrosive of statedom internationally is surely American refusal to act like a state itself by arrogating pan-global rights and duties, sometimes exercised directly as in the long list of countries illegally bombed or indirectly through, for instance, forcing open markets for US-controlled economic corporations and supposedly international institutions in ways that many now see as piracy. United States' pan-globalism and insurgent pan-Islamism mirror each other with US 'anarchism' and Bin Laden 'terrorism', each oddly concordant with the current fragmentation of states. Much of the world today is characterized by 'fractured polities racked by internecine war' (Fergusson; Talbott, p. 134).

John Stevenson (International Institute for Strategic Studies) has expressed the opinion that an aim of Al-Qaida is to 'neutralize' American and Western influence in large sections of the world – Africa, the Middle East and south Asia. How is one to know who is winning the 'war on terrorism'? One indicator will be the willingness or lack thereof of Western citizens to travel to those lands or of Western businesses to invest in them. There is an attempt being made to roll back the American empire by creating a large Western-free zone. So far, it is fairly successful. International tourism has been severely hit. As numerous commentators note, a tiny group of extremists, using the most basic of technologies, have effected a startling paradigm shift.

Meanwhile, back in the Western world, America can rely upon the unflagging and unquestioning support of its vassal states in Europe, and especially its most loyal friend Britain – or, so it seems, for the time being. Just why, many people are asking, does Britain give the US such uncritical support even for courses of action that really are anathema to most of what British govern-

ments of all political colours purport to stand for? Certainly prudence bids one not openly offend the all-powerful. Britain talks tough on Iraq and Al Qaida, but does not always act so. After all, London is 'the principal Arab city in Europe' (Jacquard, p. 58). Britain will avoid having to choose between the old world and the new for as long as possible. Challenges to American dominance are, however, likely to increase rather than slacken. After all, 'no country has managed it forever' (Talbott, p. 71). However, the time is not right for Europe yet. The EU is still at the stage of gathering and organizing its forces and so is introspectively preoccupied. This stage will pass, but, for now, Europe must bide its time. If Britain, or Britain in Europe, did have ambitions to challenge the US, then, undoubtedly, the best strategy at this stage of the game would be to pose as America's best friend.

The war on terror will tax and exhaust the US. It has already sharply eroded its claim to be an open society at home. Abroad, the US will find itself wastefully entangled in unproductive engagements. A more recent report by Plesch (*Guardian,* 19 December 2002) details the impotence of US actions in Afghanistan. European powers may also suffer in the war on terror, but less so, and they are, in any case, much more used to coping with this kind of thing without costly overreaction. All predictions are risky but, if pressed, mine would be that by the middle of this century, the West will have been pushed out of much of what used to be called the Third World and a new Cold War will have set in with the iron curtain running along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. By then some degree of Islamic unity may also be in the making. Let us hope I am wrong.

The contributors to the Talbott Chanda book are all people who gathered at Yale University to discuss globalization just as the news of events in New York, 11 September 2001, came in. Their attempts to 'understand the unforgivable' are all couched within the American perspective that continues to seem naive from this other side of the Atlantic and at times offensive, as when glorifying past CIA manipulation of European trade unions to keep communism at bay (p. 178). You will learn that what America did wrong that led to the attack on New York was to fail to defend itself adequately and you will learn just how talented the Americans are at creating new weapons, spying, and infiltrating and subverting other countries, and what a good thing it is. You will read that killing innocent civilians in peacetime is unforgivable. You will not read that the US has been sponsoring such killings in many countries year in and year out for decades, let alone that such actions might have anything to do with the willingness of hijackers to give their lives in retaliatory violence. You will read critique of American foreign policy, but its basis is debate about what would most effectively further American interests. You will read that 'America can afford formal empire' (p. 140) and that it must make 'the world safe for capitalism and democracy' (p. 140) without much appreciation of how capitalism looks from elsewhere or of the fact that 'Western support for democratic values [in the Middle East] is at best muted' (Plesch, p. 25) because 'in order that these countries can be counted on for their oil reserves they have to remain undemocratic' (Zizek, p. 42).

The Age of Terror is a book for patriotic Americans, for those who think Bin Laden is a 'grotesque anomaly' (p. 26) and who know not what the US itself gets up to. It is precisely this blindness that makes a calamitous future likely. In December 2002 a spokesperson for the government of South Africa, of all places, was asked, in

connection with an increase in defence spending, who the country had to be prepared to defend itself against. He did not name another African country; he simply said 'America'. This was probably not reported in US daily newspapers. Of course, history often proceeds by reaction and America may undergo an unforeseen sea change yet. Nothing is inevitable. Perhaps it will sign up to the Kyoto Protocols, start honouring the Geneva Convention, give up trying to rig other countries' elections and change their regimes coercively, stop funding its own favoured terrorists and dictators, and do at least some of these things free from heavy overtones of self-servingness. Perhaps it will consider the possibility of 'becoming a "normal" country' (Talbott, p. 78). Perhaps.

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RECOVERING DEMOCRACY

Equals. By Adam Phillips. London: Faber & Faber, 2002; 246pp. £12.99 hb.

As I journeyed to Tilos the world was nearly 12 months into the 'war on terror'. I was taking Phillips to the Dodecanese as the prospect of poolside pulp seemed more than usually wearying in temperatures of around 35º and, like my insouciant indolence, he invariably delights. Meanwhile, George Dubya and Saddam's frenetic sabres rattled the afternoon air as I detoured to drop an old telecaster in Tooting. Round about the time Bush Senior was leaving the Kurds and the Shias to Hussein's macabre devices the fender had fallen silent as I'd quit studio and stage to become a shrink. Then as now, everyone who felt right seemed dead set on choosing my friends and enemies for me and, as can so often be the case in a dictatorships and democracies, there would be no vote, merely decisions and announcements in the name of our national interests. As usual, this would beg questions about who 'we' are, something that seems vexed in a global village where increasingly we're them and they're us. After all, if the bad guy is always the other guy, doesn't the same guy keep getting burned? So often it's what we have in common that seems hardest to bear.

As I drank tea with my guitar's recipients, we mused that from certain perspectives the groups controlling the arsenals had so much in common they made curious adversaries. Each forced their way to power, had global networks, an empire-building zeal, and a theistic or secular religion deployed in conjunction with a litany of grievances to justify genocide, both now and then. Bush had even slipped into Ben Hur's skimpy ol' toga to declare, 'you are either with us or against us', a psychological position that one can't help but observe also underpins that of suicide bombers. However, Rome wasn't making an ironic declaration of civil war and Senator Ronald McDonald wouldn't be opening his wrists before Congress reflected on the wages of cultural imperialism; and certainly not before Baghdad was flame grilled.

I have dwelt on Bush's split injunction as it can be so sharply contrasted with one Phillips has chosen before and repeats in *Equals* – John Dewey's statement that: 'The value of ideals lies in the experiences to which they lead' – presumably because it continues to be worth thinking about. Indeed, perhaps as a result of their quantity in this work, it has become more than usually obvious that you can read Phillips as intriguingly by what he chooses of others' words as what he makes of his own. The forms he borrows and through which his