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Introduction

More reactionary times: culture

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The New Reactionaries controversy can easily seem to be a typically French, or, to be more exact, Parisian affair. Certainly the press response in Britain reinforced this perception, taking a certain enjoyment in the spectacle of French intellectual conflict and the fact that this controversy knocked stories such as the NATO summit in Prague off the front page of *Le Monde* (Lloyd, 2002). This smacks of Freudian denial, as Britain itself has been the site of similar controversies concerning taboo-lifting gestures that question the established discourse of liberal democracy. One example concerns the legal proceedings against the Manchester-based publishers Savoy in the 1990s (see Petley, 2004). These turned on the disturbing avant-garde representations of anti-Semitism portrayed in novels and comics which featured the character of 'Lord Horror' – a heavily fictionalized version of the wartime fascist and traitor William Joyce (aka 'Lord Haw Haw'), who was executed by the British in 1946. Part of the strategy of these works was to challenge post-war anti-fascist consensus in Britain, and they raised disturbing questions concerning the limits of public debate and the illiberal tendencies of contemporary British culture (see Noys, 2002). The legal repression and the lack of public discussion stand in contrast to the more self-questioning, if slightly hysterical, nature of the New Reactionaries controversy in France. This incident suggests two elements on which this special issue focuses: first, the resonance of reactionary themes across cultural forms, particularly popular culture, including literary works which are difficult to classify through traditional analytical concepts; and, second, the possible extension of these themes outside of the immediate context of France.

Condensing both these elements, the 'Savoy affair' suggests another influential cultural moment for tracing the New Reactionaries controversy – punk and 'post-punk'. Savoy's aesthetic was shaped by this cultural milieu, which brought avant-garde shock tactics into popular cultural forms. While Lindenberg's pamphlet focuses almost exclusively on the contestation of the legacy of May '68, he ignores the equally, or more, ambiguous contestatory effects of 1976 and the emergence of punk in the UK, and then its spread across Europe.¹ As Douglas Morrey has demonstrated in the previous part of this special issue, punk was influential on the anti-liberal provocations of Maurice Dantec (Morrey, 2007: 295–312). Punk itself, as we want to briefly sketch here, played deliberately and ambiguously with anti-liberal cultural politics in distancing itself from the post-war consensus. It also suggests that such controversies are not only the matter of a hermetically sealed-off high cultural or intellectual realm, but that they permeate across a range of cultural forms. In the case of punk the most obvious point of ambiguity was the flirtation with Nazi iconography, especially the swastika. This owed something to the *mode rétro* in film, especially such works as Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974), Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972) and Visconti's *The Damned* (1969), which focused on decadence and sexuality in relation to Nazism (see Savage, 1991: 241). In Britain the use of this iconography was also a protest against the conventions of the Second World War generation, especially their pride in victory – 'an anti-mums and anti-dads thing' as Siouxsie of the group Siouxsie and the Banshees put it (in Savage, 1991: 241).

Despite the roots of this gesture in a mix of popular culture, generational contempt and avant-garde art tactics, the context of the period made such ambiguities particularly disturbing. As Jon Savage puts it, '[o]utside punk's playpen, unpleasant forces were stirring' (1991: 242), such as the National Front and the rise of violence against new influxes of immigrants. Roger Sabin (1999) has made clear how the ambiguities of punk explorations of everyday racism shaded all too easily into being taken as actual expressions of racism, and segued into the tactics of the Conservative party at the time to co-opt such sentiments from the radical right. In the American context the writer Richard Meltzer noted, in his 1981 article 'Belsen Is No Longer a Gas' (its title a reply to the Sex Pistols' song 'Belsen is a Gas'), that the really shocking punk use of a symbol would be to wear the hammer and sickle (Meltzer, 2000: 310).

This sort of provocation was not only a matter of punk figures either, with David Bowie giving what appeared to be a Nazi salute on his return to England in 1976 and Eric Clapton making a speech in

favour of Enoch Powell at a concert in Birmingham (Savage, 1991: 243). Recently, Brian Ferry, ex-lead singer of the 1970s group Roxy Music, reawakened this sort of controversy with his remarks endorsing Nazi aesthetics. We can probe beyond this use of imagery if we consider the 'post-punk' milieu. This term does not only refer to those bands trying to develop beyond the musical primitivism of punk, but also to a wider experimental context that pre-dated punk, accompanied it and developed after it (Reynolds, 2005). The American band the Residents had already connected the spectacle of rock 'n' roll to the mass spectacles of Nazism in their album of deconstructions of 1960s pop and rock *Third Reich 'n' Roll* (1976). Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1990; see also Sontag, 1996: 92–4) has analysed the Nazi regime as operating through the deployment of a 'national aestheticism' that regarded the state as a total work of art. This Nazi use of spectacle and mass techniques of control exerted a fascination for many groups in the period, and the link to rock suggested the persistence of 'fascist longings' in post-war culture (Sontag, 1996: 97). For example, Manchester's Joy Division took their name from the term for women used as sex slaves in the concentration camps (taken from the 1955 novel *The House of Dolls* by a camp survivor). Their lead singer Ian Curtis, who was to commit suicide in 1980 aged 23, had an interest in the Second World War and Nazism. After his death the band changed their name to the hardly less controversial New Order. Of course these gestures do not simply imply reactionary or Nazi sympathies; rather they demonstrate the necessarily ambiguous exploration of taboos denied by the post-war consensus.²

Punk, and post-punk, were also Europe-wide movements, and their provocative interrogation of the past continued in these contexts, particularly the complacency assumed by the defeat of Nazism. The band Laibach was formed in Slovenia, then part of Yugoslavia, in 1980 and takes its name from the German wartime renaming of the city of Ljubljana. Like other post-punk groups that deployed imagery associated with both the extreme left and the extreme right, Laibach deliberately courted accusations of political extremism. Their work formed a complex multi-media project, linked with the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) (New Slovenian Art), which deployed nationalist symbols and a totalitarian style of art and practice in an endeavour to drain them of their malign power (Monroe, 2005). In their manifesto they announced that 'All art is subject to political manipulation ... except for that which speaks the language of this same manipulation' (1982). Laibach remain in existence, and retain their controversial reputation, with their 2006 album being titled

Volk. Although highly ambiguous, provocative and disturbing, these various strategies are also indicative of the constraints of the post-war consensus in the US and Europe, especially in the 'anti-totalitarian' form of Cold War ideology. The very exclusion of the radical left and right from political and cultural space, in both their past and present manifestations, denied or limited critical interrogation of this consensus. What punk, and especially post-punk, recovered were these limit-points – precisely the totalitarian features mainstream culture occluded.

It must be added that the very same Cold War ideological consensus was repressive of the voices of former victims of Nazism. In reacting against this consensus punk and post-punk often repeated the same error, especially with their tendency to focus on, and to glamorise, the persecutors while maintaining silence about the victims. This is a problem that is especially pertinent in states which had themselves formerly collaborated with Nazism, or, as in the case of Britain, that had fostered fascist movements, adopted lines of appeasement, and then during the war proved reluctant to witness the Nazi genocide as an issue to be confronted during the military campaign. Again the words of Siouxsie of the group Siouxsie and the Banshees are telling, for in asserting the reference to Nazism as an 'anti-mums and anti-dads thing' she reveals a generational hatred that turns a blind eye to the Holocaust. While provoking the war generation through the adoption of the signifiers and images of Nazism, what remained absent was any lifting of the repression around the voices of the victims of Nazism. Indeed representatives of survivors were often horrified at these spectacles. For example, the British Jewish Board of Deputies protested at the pre-punk punk-style film, *It Happened Here* (1965 directed by Kevin Brownlow). The young director staged a fake counter-historical fantasy, the Nazi occupation of Britain, and even cast current members of the extreme right wing to play fascists (see Tibbetts, 2000: 229–36). Although supposedly directed against a silence about Britain's own possible vulnerability to fascist or Nazi discourse, the ambiguities played with suggested a dangerous level of complacency as to the effects of this counter-discourse.

Of course we are no longer within this Cold War consensus and it may be that Lindenbergs' pamphlet is another sign of the revision of the dominant consensus in the context of the 'war on terrorism' and the new debates concerning American and European identity. Rather than the freedom to re-interrogate the experience of the Cold War we now find that a new division has been put in place – such as, notoriously, in Samuel Huntington's (1996) 'Clash of Civilizations'

thesis. These constrictions have constantly been challenged from elite and popular cultural positions; hence the sense of recurrence when analysing New Reactionary-type controversies and affairs. In contrast to the kind of sledgehammer characterizations practised by Lindenberg, a far more complex picture emerges when we try to trace the particular cultural politics of such controversies. As we have briefly tried to demonstrate in the case of punk/post-punk, these involve connections to previous cultural works, cross-national pollinations, and interactions between different cultural forms and types ('popular', 'high', etc.). Of course, if we decide that anyone who breaks the *cordon sanitaire* around political 'extremism' is, de facto, a reactionary (new or otherwise), then political condemnation replaces analysis. At the same time we must be aware that this is not a warrant for revisionism or a carte blanche for neo-fascist artists, intellectuals or others to peddle their wares without intellectual challenge.

As we will see in this issue, which is primarily concerned with writers and literary culture, ambiguous gestures similar to those of punk and post-punk recur. Like punk, these gestures often involve the deliberate scrambling of high and low cultural codes, and draw on popular cultural forms such as science fiction, the thriller and fantasy. The writers discussed often show a punk taste for media provocation, and are often attuned to audiences beyond the confines of high literary culture. J. G. Ballard, for example, was a favourite of many punk and post-punk artists, who were inspired by his visions of alienation, fragmentation and new forms of psychopathology. However, before Noys examines J. G. Ballard and this possible case of a New Reactionary from the British scene, Ralph Schoolcraft and Richard J. Golsan offer an analysis of the work of Marcel Rio and Michel Houellebecq. As the authors demonstrate, Rio, who works at the margins of popular forms such as fantasy and detective fiction, is something of a forgotten reactionary, while media attention has been focused on the provocations of Michel Houellebecq. Continuing this kind of exploration of the undergrowth of French literary subcultures, Hugo Frey examines work from the sometime novelist and historian, Paul Sérant. A close reading of his work in the 1950s demonstrates how the study, and ideological use, of esotericism supported the extreme right-wing rearguard assault against Gaullism and communism. The esoteric texts that Frey considers, especially Sérant's novel *Le Meurtre rituel* (1950), are classic examples of what J. G. Ballard calls 'invisible literature' (his example is science fiction) – work that is profoundly influential but regarded as outside the

mainstream. The final article considers a possible parallel case of a 'New Reactionary' writer in Europe. Benjamin Noys returns to the British scene to offer his reading of J. G. Ballard's recent work, drawing on recent developments in psychoanalytic theory. In particular he focuses on the politics of Ballard's fiction in relation to his articulation of new psychopathologies in Western capitalist culture.

Continuing the lines of inquiry developed in the previous part of the special issue, these articles show the need for nuanced and wide-ranging critical work that can attend to the diverse elements involved in such controversies. The taking-up of polemical positions, acts of condemnation, and the policing of intellectual boundaries often only serve to feed into them. Although ambiguity can be disturbing, the closure of debate often reinforces the existing limits of debate. What is required, we hope to have demonstrated, is the need for precision and critical vigilance in the analysis of political and cultural controversy.

Notes

1. The origin of punk is a matter of some controversy, but it is certainly true that many of its features, including the use of fascist or Nazi iconography, had already been circulating in the early 1970s music scene in the United States (Savage, 1991: 135).
2. There are numerous other examples of this exploration within 'post-punk', which was most heavily undertaken by those involved in 'industrial music'. This was an extreme form of experimental music that reflected the techniques of industrial production, in both its subject matter and form. Begun by the British band Throbbing Gristle, it also deepened the punk interest in the techniques of Nazism. The tendency was parodied by the American band Culturcide in their song 'We're an Industrial Band' (1987), which featured the line 'we just talked about child abuse and Hitler's SS'.

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