

Capitalism Cut Adrift: Looking Sideways

Part II

By [William Bowles](#)

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

'Self-sufficiency, do-it-yourself, 'green' technologies, raising vegetables, crafts, 'heritage' projects, history, archeology, genealogy, all manner of 'community' projects like cleaning up neighbourhoods or restoring poisoned rivers, the list is constantly expanding in what can only be described as a headlong flight from the shopping mall to the allotment and hence from corporate 'culture' in all its vileness and mediocrity. I kid you not, our 'winter of discontent' has been transformed into a 'reality show'.'

That's how I ended [Part 1](#) but this is by no means the first time that capitalism has caused such revulsion as the inexorable march of accumulation destroyed traditional communities across this 'green and pleasant land'. In fact we now live in at least the third version of capitalism to blight this England.

The first occurred around 1750 with the arrival of factory system, the second with the Enclosures Act in 1832 that saw the forcible removal of millions of workers from country to city and the third, the enforced deindustrialization that began in the Thatcher years. The fundamental effect of these transformations was to break the links with the past. What remains is a hollowed out 'heritage' version of our history, aka Walt Disney's theme parks.

And of course, every time this happens, history, as the programmers would call it, has to be 'recompiled' or perhaps reconstituted, and there are plenty of 'professional' historians only too willing to do the makeover on behalf of capital, let alone the role of the mass media in selling the myths. And without a past, we truly lost.

Looking sideways

Awhile back I wrote about [News From Nowhere](#), William Morris's future history of England. Morris takes us two hundred years[1] into the future and given that it was written over one hundred years ago, that would put the setting about one hundred years in our future. So for Morris it took one hundred years to bring about a successful revolution.[2]

In Morris's version, he looks back not only to the age (the Change) that brought about the end of capitalism but also to that earlier, pre-capitalist, medieval rural England, bits of which he incorporated into his rural socialist 'utopia'. So Morris was actually writing four histories in total. He was writing about his own time, the end of the 19th century; Medieval England as he saw it; the intervening years that led up to the Change and then from his imagined future that looks back on Morris's other histories.

If you think this is complicated, consider what our ruling culture has done with our history, for the fact remains, cliché though it is, that history is written by those who rule.

But the dominant culture's grasp on reality grows weak and as it does so it gets dangerous, lashing out in all directions against invented enemies. This is illustrated for example by the Labour government's plea some while back that more should be done to promote 'British values' (like invading foreign lands and slaughtering people?), the British 'way of life' and 'citizenship' tests designed to reinforce capital's grip on what's left of our culture.

The art of substitution

But something else has happened: Television has become the major propaganda weapon of capital, serving not only to 'entertain' but to transform our understanding of where we came from and crucially, how we got here.

This is manifest in the slew of programmes I referred to in Part 1 that reflect the deep dis-ease we feel about the state of our existence.

Parallel to this, over the past few years and led by the historian Niall Ferguson and now Andrew Marr and David Dimbleby, who pick up where Winston Churchill left off with his '[A History of the English-speaking Peoples](#)'. These 'new and improved' versions have only one objective: to rewrite history once more, replacing one myth with another, more palatable version (given Churchill's emphasis on Kings, rulers and Empire).

In Britain, historian Niall Ferguson has for years conveyed a revisionist view of colonialism, describing British colonial rule in Africa and Asia as "nation-building."

Ferguson has said that the British empire succeeded in transforming "the institutions of failed or rogue states and lay the foundations of...rule of law, non-corrupt administration, and ultimately, representative government."

Among such "failed or rogue states" Ferguson included India.

He also claimed that the British empire succeeded in giving rise to a lengthy period of "relative world peace" and a global order within which economic development was unquestionably easier.

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He has even claimed that an "imperial gene" exists - which apparently would be of Anglo-Saxon origin. — '[Recasting Colonialism as a Good Thing](#)' By Julio Godoy[3]

It's a full frontal assault on our perceptions that on the one hand reflects the deep unhappiness so many Brits feel and on the other, an attempt to supplant our real, lived history with a nostalgic and sentimental vision of the past that plays up the state's emphasis on 'fair play' and 'tolerance' that are allegedly so fundamental to 'Britishness'.

Thus the 'class war' is unfolding on television but without the participation of working people who have been relegated on the one hand to passive consumers and on the other as active participants in 'community' as entertainment.

None of this would be possible without a complicit intelligentsia perhaps best illustrated by our tabloid press, the so-called Red Tops that directly target working people, playing to their fears and insecurities. The pages of these 'weapons of mass distraction' are written not by

working people but by the same university educated specialists who write for The Times and Guardian, the only difference being the language used, a facsimile allegedly of how the working class think and what concerns them.

And in fact, the media is brazen in its manipulation of reality. For example, crime ‘statistics’ which occupy so much of our public discourse, reveal that crime has steadily dropped over the past decade. But as far the mass media is concerned it’s people’s perceptions that are important.

‘A survey conducted...by pollsters Mori found that 20% of elderly people living in inner cities had a greatly reduced quality of life because of fear of crime.’ — [‘Fear is as devastating as crime’](#), BBC News

But these fears emanate from the very same media that dished up the piece above. Thus it’s not reality that is dealt with but our perceptions of reality. Were it not for the endless references to crime that headline almost every ‘news’ report, these perceptions would not exist in the first place!

And this kind of warping of reality applies to almost every aspect of our lives: ‘the war on terror’, ‘Islamic extremists’, ‘radicalisation’, ‘anti-social behaviour’ or Iran’s assumed drive to acquire nuclear weapons, weapons we are told that will be aimed at us.

‘Iran’s announcement that it will further enrich its stock of uranium adds to suspicion of its ultimate intentions but leaves the United States and its allies as confused as ever.’ — [‘Iran confuses again with ‘further enrichment’](#)’, BBC News, 9 February, 2010.

It is not necessary to offer proof, “suspicion” and Iran’s “ultimate intentions” are all that’s needed to reinforce the illusion, leaving us understandably “confused”. After all, would the BBC lie to us?

Notes

1. There’s some disagreement over the actual timespan that Morris imagined as he changed the dates in the book version that came after its initial serialization.
2. See also [Looking Backwards](#) by Edward Bellamy, a highly successful future history published 1888, some eight years earlier, and undoubtedly it influenced Morris, though he had serious problems with Bellamy’s urban-only, vaguely socialist vision.
3. See Ed Vuillamy’s review of *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the Great American Empire*, [‘Let’s free the people – as long as there’s something in it for us’](#)

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