

The “Ruthless, and also Destructive” Primacy of the Market and the Legacy of the “Third Way” in Jonathan Coe’s “The Closed Circle”

Denisa DUMITRAȘCU

The Romanian-American University

Abstract

*The present paper explores the consumerist zeitgeist, which represents the social rejection of the new ideology of “Globalism”, combined with echoes of the “Third Way” in Jonathan Coe’s *The Closed Circle*. I shall focus on the ideological debates in which the key focaliser is Irene, an old woman, who has lived all her life in Birmingham and has experienced the dismantling of the values of the socio-democratic consensus, and the demise of the welfare state. Irene is filtering the new socio-political context through her devotion to the old-gone, communitarian principles. The difference between the England which took care of its citizens from “cradle to grave” and the globalized England, in which consumerism becomes “the norm”, even the very definition of normality, reflects not only Irene’s perplexity, but turns the once familiar places into “breeding ground for displacement and alienation” (Coe 2005: 167, my italics). The paper analyses Coe’s novel with the interdisciplinary methodological tools provided by Cultural Studies, combined with concepts from Political Theory, Anthropology and Sociology.*

Keywords

consumerist zeitgeist, globalisation, “Third Way”, alienation

The present paper begins with Sophie’s reflections, which sometimes turn into verdicts about what has become the “norm” in the post-2000, globalised British society. Sophie is the narrator in *The Rotters’ Club* (originally published in 2001), and a key focaliser in the sequel, *The Closed Circle* (2004), and she gets to define the new “normality” in children and teenagers in a discussion with her uncle, Benjamin. Her observations are important as she is training to become a “therapist.” She protests on behalf of “Powerless children subjected to the whims of parents who won’t let them do anything for a whole week except ... make tapestries and sing madrigals” (Coe 2005: 216).

Her description of what children should be doing instead, describes and re-defines the new “normality”: “Whatever happened to

Game Boys and Playstations? Don't any of these people do anything *normal*, like watch television or go to McDonald's?" (Coe 2005: 216, my italics). Thus, "normality" has become the state of a politically ignorant, passive consumer, formed since childhood by means of the three defining co-ordinates: Game Boys, Playstations and McDonald's.

Michel Foucault proved that "normality" is a concept that has suffered multiple transformations, which has come to be contested and subverted in a series of ways, over the last decades. Moreover, as it becomes clear repeatedly, throughout Coe's socio-political fiction, in contemporary times, the concepts of "norm" and "normality" can be attached, arbitrarily, to a multitude of signifieds, which have lost their intrinsic meaning and are defined in a relational way.

The text suggests clearly that, since the future "therapists" believe this should be the new state of normality, the future generations are more likely to perpetuate the passive consumer state rather than contesting the authority of future dominant discourses.

The only ideological contestation in the text comes from older generations. Doug's mother, Irene, protests over an article in *The Sun* which "used to be a socialist paper," a paper with values and a committed readership, but has become a corporation itself, in search of profit, "breeding" ignorant generations, defined by bad-taste and superficiality.

'This used to be a socialist paper,' she said. 'Until Murdoch got his hands on it. Look at it. It's a disgrace. Soft pornography and ... tittle-tattle.'

'Spirit of the times, Mum. Spirit of the times.'

'Yes, but you don't write stuff like that, do you? Nobody *has* to write it.' (Coe 2005: 115, italics in the original)

The easiness with which Doug confirms this is the new "spirit of the times" makes his mother ill at ease. As she educated him in the spirit of "old", consensus-based values, she intends to make sure her son will not debase himself as the other journalists do. His mother's reaction weighs heavy on Doug's consciousness, and generates his most important moral debate in the novel. As his mother is the epitome of old values and common sense, he seeks her advice on whether or not he should expose a Member of Parliament (who the implied reader guesses it is Paul, his school friend's brother) and his

infidelities: “It’s to do with his marriage, and sex, and ... you know, the *usual* sort of stuff” (Coe 2005: 115, my italics). The adjective “usual” is another subtle allusion to what has become the “norm” in modern times, where common sense is sacrificed in the name of sheer profit and superficiality. His mother’s verticality is expressed “without hesitation”(Coe 2005: 115).

‘Politicians should be judged on their politics. Anything else is just gossip and nonsense.’ She pointed at the newspaper lying on the table between them.

‘You don’t want to end up like them, do you?’ (Coe 2005: 115)

In her mind, the two aspects are absolutely separate. The novel subverts this “old”, commonsensical stand, since in *The Closed Circle*, politicians make successful careers on image, on “sheen over substance”, when they have no coherent political strategy whatsoever, but sheer ideological opportunism. To her son, however, the acceptable “borders” seem to be more flexible, since, at the beginning of the novel, he does not find any contradiction between his socialist rhetoric, his “proletarian” uniform of jeans and having lunch with the power elites at exorbitant restaurants.

Irene is also the one who tells her son, in the most explicit way possible, when they are having coffee in a Starbucks, that socialist ideology does not go well with the new ideology of “globalism”.

She looked around her and said, brightly: ‘*After all, as socialists, we shouldn’t really be drinking in a place like this, should we? Isn’t globalization meant to be the new enemy?*’

‘Apparently,’ said Doug. ‘It’s May Day on Monday. There are going to be demonstrations all over London. They’ll probably be targeting this place.’” (Coe2005: 116, my italics)

As a true socialist, Irene is supporting such an event of protest against globalisation and encouraging her son to participate: “There you are, you see: the people are on the move again. It was bound to happen, sooner or later. Will you be joining in?” (Coe: 2005: 116). The “truth” of the novel is that actually, the people are not “on the move again” and this anti-globalisation demonstration will pass almost unnoticed, just as the two environmentalist demonstrations, briefly dismissed by Paul. People can no longer be motivated to join

coherent, impactful social action, as it happened in the late 70s, although paradoxically enough, they now have all the means to do this.

In *The Closed Circle*, Paul is the key focaliser who gets the most important lesson of power in contemporary times from Rolf, now one of the members of the board of BMW. Rolf, whose picture Paul finds in the newspaper, turns out to be the German boy he saved from drowning in Denmark, 23 years ago. If in pre-millennial times the decision of power elites affected the people in their own country, in post-millennial time, globalisation made it possible for international power elites to control the livelihood of 50,000 people hundreds of miles away (or thousands, if we think of the arms trade, as indicated in the novel *What a Carve Up!*, first published in 1994).

Since Paul's own reputation is beginning to shake, and he is starting to become "dispensable" he feels he can use Rolf's influence to save his own position in the Labour party. His thoughts never take into consideration the factory his native city depends on, the factory for which his own father used to work, but his own, mean interests, the same reasons which made him vote in favour of the war with Iraq, against his own consciousness.

Rolf answers promptly and agrees to meet him in Denmark, at the very place where Paul saved his life. As Rolf is considering "the alternatives" for avoiding "a public relations disaster" (just as Michael Osborne, before bankrupting Meniscus Plastics), Paul begins to argue with "sudden passion and sincerity" (Coe 2005: 135) that there is "a much simpler solution", namely that they should "keep Longbridgegoing" (Coe 2005: 135). However, Rolf manages to read between the lines – it is not about the interests of Longbridge, or of his city, or of his country. It is about a man trying to use his influence for making himself "the hero".

You want me to persuade the board to change their minds about this – to perform a complete U-turn, in effect – so that you can go home and tell the news to your Mr. Blair and present yourself as a hero. The man who saved Longbridge. (Coe: 2005: 135)

And here Rolf delivers the most important lesson in post-millennial power, by reducing everything to what is "not worth saving" (Coe 2005: 139). Since Paul is asking Rolf to save Longbridge, in exchange for having saved his life, Rolf protests that the comparison

does not hold: “Even if you don’t believe that applies to human beings, it certainly applies to ailing companies” (Coe 2005: 139).

Rolf’s explanation describes accurately the primacy of the market over anything else, as an elemental force, with a ruthless and destructive potential on anything and anyone.

We’re not talking about pulling somebody out of the sea, Paul. *We’re talking about something stronger than that, actually, something even more elemental. The market. Which can also be ruthless, and also be destructive.* You believe in the market, don’t you? You and your party? Then you should be honest with people. *You should make them aware that sometimes it sucks men under and tosses them back lifeless on the shore and there’s nothing that you or anybody else can do about it. Don’t lie to them. Don’t encourage them to believe that you can have it both ways.* (Coe 2005: 140, my italics)

At the same time, his speech evinces the hypocrisy of the “Third Way” ideology since it induces in people the illusion that they can “have it both ways”, that whatever happens, their interests are going to be protected. The proto-Marxist “false consciousness” view upon ideology applied by the “Third Way” politics becomes obvious and is being criticized by Rolf. The supremacy of the market does not leave room for social protection measures or for welfare rhetoric. Being fair, according to Rolf, is making the people “aware” of all these elements and contradictions.

Moreover, Rolf’s implicature is that the ruling classes knew from the beginning the effects of the supremacy of the market over everything else, its social and human costs. Therefore promising people they “can have it both ways” has not been a collateral effect of these policies, but a conscious, deliberate and programmatic attempt at “fooling” the masses and keeping them ignorant, and thus, obedient.

As Stuart Hall has shown, any dominant discourse performs a “positioning” of the implied reader or listener, with their own participation (which includes either involvement or passivity). The “Third Way” rhetoric has managed to position “the people” as political “consumers”, just as advertising techniques have done, in Hall’s analysis (See Hall 1972).

The focaliser who makes the explicit connection between this idea and political “marketing” in *The Closed Circle* is Steve Richards,

during Philip's visit, after he shows him the racist CDs he has found in his mailbox. Although their initial discussion is about racism, it develops into another topic, which was presented in *The Rotters' Club* as well: the fact that in such situations there are bound to be parties which do not hesitate to make political capital out of this kind of societal "unrest". Steve even discusses how the BNP organises their political "marketing" (a practice that has expanded from economy to politics) to target what they deem the more fragile, more easily maneuverable part of the population.

But then, look what's been going on in the north these last few months. Not just the race riots, but the number of council seats the BNP has been winning off the back of all that unrest. Now, the way the BNP's marketing itself at the moment is very interesting. They've been watching New Labour, I reckon, and they're targeting women voters, and middle-class voters. Half their candidates seem to be women, these days. What's different is that you only have to peel back the marketing and you come bang up against something *really* ugly – like that CD." (Coe 2005: 199, italics in the original)

However, most people would never venture to "peel back the marketing", to look beyond the surface. Just as Bill Anderton has remarked in *The Rotters' Club*, racism and inter-ethnic hatred and violence actually keep the members of the ruled class segregated and easier to manipulate by the power elites.

Starting from this reality of racism, which he experiences every day, despite the "tolerance" rhetoric of the dominant discourse, Steve extrapolates on the fact that in recent times, all people have become "*consumers of politics*", confirming in this way, the legacy of the "Third Way".

We've all become too used to taking things at face value, you see. There's no spirit of inquiry any more, we're just *consumers* of politics, we swallow what we're given. So it's actually about the way the whole country is going, the whole *culture*. Do you see? (Coe 2005: 199, italics in the original)

Steve's opinion confirms not only the fact that the situation has generalised, that the masses have become voluntarily obedient and do not even realise they are being manipulated, but that this has

become an unchangeable, inexorable political destiny, which marks the way the whole country is going, the whole *culture*.

Coe's socio-political fiction substantiates Steve's views. *Resistance*, in this context, cannot aim for something as radical as "overthrowing" governments, and bringing back social policies and the welfare state, but in rendering people aware of ideological patterns of manipulation exercised by the ruling "bloc", as Gramsci put it.

On his way back from Steve's home, Philip analyses this new area of blocks of flats, in Telford, a "New Town", the legacy of the "great experiments of the 1960s" (Coe: 2005: 166). Even if the place looks organised and "standard", it is this very feature that strikes Phil as giving the part of the city it occupies a characterless quality. In his view, such characterless places ruin the city and de-personalise the country.

This militantly new, characterless town had so recently arrived, unannounced, without preamble, without *history*, and simply dumped itself into the middle of one of the oldest and least-known, most mysterious and recondite counties in the whole of England. It didn't belong there, and it never would. *It was a breeding ground for displacement and alienation.*" (Coe 2005: 167, my italics)

At a first glance, this observation might seem totally unimportant in the political economy of the novel. However, at a closer look, it has a direct importance for any study of power and resistance. This de-familiarised, characterless place becomes "a breeding ground for displacement and alienation", creating equally de-familiarised, characterless people. While most of them will obediently position themselves as political "consumers", the few of them who become aware of manipulation cannot possibly hope for anything more than this awareness in the way of resistance.

To conclude, *The Closed Circle* contains arguments to the Foucauldian thesis of the fluidity and arbitrariness of modern power, its lack of any coherent set of principles which can describe any ideological foundation. Successful politicians seem to have unprecedented ideological flexibility, moving unencumbered between left and right, and the ISA, the "ideological state apparatus" (to use Althusser's term) represented by the media has itself become just as inconsistent as the establishment. If the objectiveness of the media has transformed and eventually, disappeared, succumbing to market-

driven, profit oriented “principles”, it remains the modern individual’s role to identify and react to the modern manipulation and control techniques, used by power structures. Ironically, it becomes clear in the novel that only if a certain situation can be used for a politician’s selfish interest of becoming the “hero” , he steps into action for the good of “people”. The insistence to tell the people the truth about the supremacy of the “elemental force” represented by the interest of the market, comes in the novel from outside.

The novel seems to point to the temptation of the individual of positioning himself/herself rather as a passive “consumers of politics”, instead of a militant for any ideological/political/social set of principles or for any cause. Displacement, alienation, de-familiarisation seem to be defining the new “normality” and have rendered problematic any coherent, collective social action. At the same time, the novel also marks the generation gap both from the point of view of ideology, and also the different representations of social resistance and involvement.

Coe’s novel from 2010, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, continues the idea that what constitutes the ideological “legacy” of the “Third Way” has been successfully taken over by “globalism”.

References

- Coe, Jonathan (2005). *The Closed Circle*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Foucault, Michel (1978). “Governmentality”, in G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. London: Harvester.
- Foucault, Michel (1980). *Power/Knowledge – Interviews and Other Writings*, Brighton, Sussex: Harvester.
- Hall, Stuart (1972). “The Social Eye of *Picture Post*”. *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 2. Birmingham: University of Birmingham. 71-120.
- Hall, Stuart (1977). “On Ideology”. *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 2 (Spring): 9-32.
- Hutcheon, Linda (1988). *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge.
- Jameson, Fredric (1991). *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mills, C. Wright (2000). *The Power Elite*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.[republished]

- Newman, Saul (2005). *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought: New Theories of the Political* : London: Routledge.
- Tew, Philip (2004). *The Contemporary British Novel*. London: Continuum.
- Wrong, Dennis H. (2002). *Power: Its Forms, Bases and Uses* (3rd ed. with a new introduction by the author). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Žižek, Slavoj (ed) (1994). *Mapping ideology*. London [etc.]: Verso.