

Erosion of the “Centre” of power- towards a Foucauldian Perspective in Jonathan Coe’s “The Rotters’ Club”

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Abstract

The Rotters’ Club constantly proves two points: that contemporary man in Post-modern times has access to partial truths, or rather limited insights, and at the same time, the fact that since the 1970s, society became deeply fragmented/ segmented, even within the same social and political class. The limitedness of the insight appears to be intrinsic to human nature, and accentuated by the contemporary context, not necessarily bound to class and education, as it used to be the case according to the Marxist analytical perspective. In this light, the 1970s seem more a time of dissolution and nostalgia than a time of genuine pastoral power, connected to “welfare” ideology. Moreover, it becomes a breeding ground for subversive fragmentarian ideologies, which in their extreme manifestations, come to reach ethnical hatred, Fascism and Racism. The article follows an inter-disciplinary methodological approach, combining cultural studies with political and sociological theory.

Keywords

power, microcosms, socialist-liberal ideology, Foucauldian views.

1. Introduction

The present article starts from Bill Anderton’s observations. This main character will be the key focaliser for the study of power, resistance and ideology in my analysis. His personal ideological “filters” or his *personalised ideology*, becomes the prism through which the omniscient narrator depicts what is happening on the British political scene of the 1970s. Among the scenes dominated by Bill’s voice, as the main focaliser, Coe sometimes adds his own, omniscient observations, or, he gives more or less ideological credibility to certain characters, whom he presents in different contexts.

2. Erosion of the “Centre” – towards a Foucauldian Perspective

Bill starts from the correct observation that the 1970s are a time of transition and crisis. What he fails to see is that the dream of *community action*, the community spirit in general and sacrifice for a better future no longer belong to the contemporary society.

In Post-Enlightenment manner, he remains faithful to his approach on life through the filter of *reason* and he attempts to identify a possible cause for the present situation. He pinpoints the crisis, which triggers a generalised fragility of

the socio-economic context and personal feelings of vulnerability which act as a catalyst for *aggressive-defensive tendencies* in society, most of them directed towards *exclusion*, mainly grouped under the category of Racism and Fascism. He knows that racism is endemic and this is exactly what he is trying to fight against.

Because racism is endemic. In this day and age a worker's job is very vulnerable and his livelihood is very vulnerable and it's very easy for someone to play on that and to sow discord among people who would otherwise be standing together in a common cause. (Coe 2001: 240)

He clearly realises that such circumstances can be used in order to gather political capital, which is the key to political power, and that this is the ideal environment for would-be leaders lacking scruples, who would not hesitate to spread discord among people, in order to control them easier. Thus, Bill seems to maintain his belief throughout the novel that the history of power relations seems to rely on the "divide and rule" technique. He sees this technique perpetuating in politics (principle which he expressed at the beginning of the novel, during the dinner with his boss, Jack Forrest), and Coe's political fiction confirms this lack of scruples which defines the opportunistic line in contemporary politics.

At the same time, he realises that dismembering the working class according to ethnical differences is extremely easy, while uniting the working force and making them aware of their common interest is an extremely painstaking, difficult enterprise, with extremely fragile results. In a moment of self-analysis, in which he contemplates his efforts, Bill reaches the conclusion that "It was so easy, so stupidly easy, for the workforce to find reasons for hating each other when they should be uniting against the common enemy. For all that effort to mean nothing". (Coe 2001: 39)

The classical example of using the unethical, racist card for political capital, which comes to his mind is the "bastard Enoch Powell" (Coe 2001: 240), in the context of a speech to his Tory friends at the Monday Club "suggesting that Africans and Asians should be given a thousand pounds each to go home" (Coe 2001: 240). Bill's comment is prompt and sympathetic to the situation of the minorities, exposing the falseness, the lack of any common sense and moral opacity of anyone who professes such views: "What he calls their home, anyway. I just find that sort of thing contemptible." (Coe 2001: 241) His attitude reflects a defence of the consensual, *inclusive, socialist-liberal view* which constitutes the official discourse at the time.

If, at a political level, *resistance* means for him a *defence of the consensus-based*, welfare system, this also triggers efforts to counter-balance those tendencies in society which could endanger this delicate balance/ status quo. According to the socialist ideals to which he remained faithful throughout his life, Bill knows he has to counteract the elements which keep the working class apart, manifested under the form of xenophobic/racist tendencies in society. This is why, he gives particular importance to the strike at Grunwick, the film processing plant in West London, which he sees as an opportunity to develop and apply a collective "strategy". He attempts to organise the members of his union to show support for the 140 Indian

workers of Grunwick, who were all fired because they went on strike over working conditions. The differences between these groups which are supposed to unite are however, huge and, as the novel proves, insurmountable. Bill's most honest attempt at unity for the common goal, a unity that will "cut across national borders and [...] through the different races" (Coe 2001: 241) is eroded from within, through a myriad of social mechanisms which are outside his (or any individual's) control.

The notion of *class*, which in true Marxist/socialist theory should unite the various fractions, proves to be extremely heterogeneous. What Bill intends to unite is already very segregated, already multi-layered. He himself and his English colleagues are definitely in a better social situation compared to that of their Indian co-workers, and while the purpose of their action is to maintain the "existent" status quo and their own rights, the Indian workers do not even have this basis to start from.

Coe's representation of the general category of "working class" includes very rare glimpses of the real underprivileged, the real marginalized, defined by Nicola Allen as those "who are not permitted for some reason to express their authentic voice within mainstream discourse" (Allen 2008: 30). This is the main reason why I object to Allen's inclusion of Coe's novels into what she calls "novels of marginality", in the above-mentioned sense. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in Coe's political fiction, which deals with the 1970s, marginalization is, indeed, usually equaled with ethnical minorities, but they are not given extended space and "voice" in the novel. Although the Indian workers are such an example of marginalised minorities, they are not central to the novel (no ethnical or racial minority is ever given such place in Coe's socio-political fiction). Their presence is effectively used to reinforce the main characters' position of conscious (sometimes even, aware and guilty) privilege.

However, Coe is Foucauldian when he proves that no context can be completely separated from the "mainstream discourse". The dominant discourse defines itself permanently by opposition to the subordinated one, and the other way round, and this becomes an extremely dynamic, fluid relation. The relation can never be one-sided – there is usually an attempt at "negotiating" positions of power. Power can be exercised, socially, up to a certain extent, even from the subordinated side, and there are very refined and complex networks of power, at every level. Even if we perceive a certain class or a segment of it as subordinated, there are numerous power relations and hierarchies within it, which define its structure and its dynamics.

The Rotters' Club seems to accommodate the following paradox: even if in the 1970s, in Britain, the state still had an important role in the public consciousness, it appeared to be losing the "centre" position in the fluid, complex power relations of the new socio-political context, which go both ways: upwards and downwards. Moreover, as the social-democratic consensus is dismantling, the "centre" position the state used to hold is depicted as being slowly eroded from within. As this becomes a reality, the omniscient author and his focaliser, Bill, seem to focus increasingly, on the "micro" power relations, meaning the power

relations of “microcosms”, in this case, the trade union of Longbridge (defined as a “microcosm” by Bill himself – Coe 2001: 239).

The world of the dismissed Indian workers, dominated by complex power relations, both inside their group and with the main group of British workers inside the trade union, on the one hand; and the fact that Bill is so preoccupied with organising support demonstrations in their favour on the other hand, constitute other proofs of the Foucauldian orientation Coe’s text takes at certain points. The union leader of the Indian workers, Jajaben Desai is portrayed in Bill’s admiring words as “a wonderful woman, really tough, really inspiring” (Coe 2001: 242). What is remarkable is that the omniscient narrator supports Bill’s view, creating this iconic female “power figure” among a poor working class-minority (underprivileged therefore, twice: both materially and ethnically). The narrative voice gives credibility to Bill’s view, in a context in which the majority of local English women would find nothing but secretarial jobs in industry in the 1970s (Claire emphasises this aspect in *The Closed Circle* – Coe 2005: 255).

However, the text only includes a cameo of Jajaben Desai, and it seems to be the narrator’s deliberate decision to offer these characters a limited space and role, which makes it hard to substantiate Allen’s marginality claim. Moreover, Allen’s definition seems to regard marginality as a given, fixed role, which depends on some sort of “permission” granted by the dominant discourse, apparently in a permanent manner, in/from which the individual cannot move. I argue this does not apply to Coe’s political fiction, in which even the poorest members of the immigrant working class are highly aware they should fight for their rights, just as much as their British colleagues and negotiate their role and place within the system. They never place themselves willingly and defenselessly, outside it. Bill’s admiration is supported by interventions from the narrator, who describes Jajaben Desai in terms of a hard-earned and long-established authority. During the strike, she proves that kind of personal authority which earlier in the novel has been labelled simply as “power”, and which also characterises Bill. This personal attribute, in extraordinary situations, can motivate and move masses and it is also supported by a combination of charisma and experience.

Somehow she could make of herself an amazingly charismatic focus of attention. Perhaps it was the brightly coloured sari, in a black sea of overalls and donkey jackets. But Bill thought it was more than that. It was her hurried eloquence and still determination and restless, inquisitive, laughing...Yes. It was the mantle of authority the long months of this dispute had draped on her. (Coe 2001: 270)

Moreover, she turns out to be a symbol of power in extremely tough, confrontational situations, which even male representatives of middle management desperately avoid (such as Colin Totter). The fact that her “mantle of authority” is doubled by “eloquence” gets us back to the “power of words” invoked by Bill repeatedly throughout *The Rotters’ Club*.

All Bill’s efforts of inclusion of “the other” will have a totally different outcome than the ones predicted by him. While it takes Bill some time to understand the reasons why, the reader already knows, as the signs have been there, in the novel,

all the time. On the background of the social-liberal dominant discourse, society has been already eroded by subversive fragmentarian ideologies for a long time, which in their extreme manifestations, come to reach ethnical hatred, Fascism and Racism. The following sub-section analyses some of these tendencies.

3. Ethnical Hatred, Fascism and Racism

Robert Leach has euphemistically questioned whether Fascism and Racism can rightly be termed *ideology*, considering “their degree of intellectual sophistication” (Leach 2002: 119). Yet one cannot deny their capacity to stir people (or as history has repeatedly proven – entire nations) to common violent action against a certain group, which becomes subjected to various “scape-goat” theories, particularly in times of socio-political crisis. However, Leach claims that, unlike Hitler’s Third Reich, “in contemporary Britain, by contrast, overt racism has been long-excluded from elite political discourse”. (Leach 2002: 119)

The Rotters’ Club seems to be an extended application of Leach’s views and reflects many of the tendencies enumerated by Philip Tew in his anthologies. However, the novel contradicts one important element which Philip Tew mentioned in the introduction to *Writers Talk. Conversations With Contemporary British Novelists* (2008)⁷⁶, namely the claim that the literary spheres, starting from the late 1970s completely lacked any “memory of the Second World War” (Tew 2008: Intro: VIII).

Thus, Coe diverges shortly, and only apparently, from the ideological battlefield of the 1970s, defined by the co-existence of socialism, liberalism and at the opposite pole, right-wing tendencies, which we are going to explore further. Although apparently irrelevant for the plotline of the novel, the “story within story” device has obvious ideological functions, the second element related to the *ontological stand* revealed by the novel.

The Trotters’ trip to Denmark and Marie’s story point to another form of totalitarian regime which pushed ethnical hatred to the level of state policy, with deadly consequences for millions. Marie is a Jewish woman, who lived in Denmark at the time of the Nazi occupation, during World War II.

Just as in the case of the comparison with, and (respectively) dismissal of Communism as a valid ideology, the same happens with Fascism/Nazism. Moreover, Marie’s story, in which her own family’s lives were at the mercy of a young Nazi officer, strengthens the “*here-and-now-it-is-better-than-then-and-there*” ontological position which permeates Coe’s political fiction. Both extremes (Communism and Nazism) function to make the distinction, symbolically, between the British society and the power relations in a “free”, anti-totalitarian space on the

⁷⁶ In the Introduction to *Writers Talk. Conversations With Contemporary British Novelists* (2008), Philip Tew states: “From the late 1970s Britain changed in many ways, with a generation emerging in the public and literary spheres with no memory of the Second World War, a set of economic and political changes brought about in the Thatcher era, with successive waves of migration from both the ex-colonial possessions and later Eastern and Central Europe. Together, these changes brought new visions and traditions to the novel and reinvigorated it as a site of challenge and dissent”. (Tew 2008: Intro: VIII)

one hand, and power relations under any form of totalitarianism, on the other. The scale and the intensity make all the difference in both cases, and these comparisons serve to reinforce the idea that in Britain power games can never get to these horrific, dystopian extremes. Both the distance towards the contemporary countries in the communist bloc mentioned in the text (Romania and Russia), or towards the German-occupied countries in World War II, reinforce the belief that things can never get out of control at that level in Britain.

However, *The Rotters' Club* draws attention to a very important aspect: just because a democratic and a totalitarian system are not comparable, this does not mean that fascist or racist tendencies do not exist in any liberal-democratic context, and the British society makes no exception.

At this point, it is useful to get back to Stuart Hall, who argues that Racism in Britain also managed to install its own binary opposition, from which all forms of discrimination spring – a perceived difference between “us” (always on the superior end) and “them”. In *Racism and Reaction* (1978), he argues that Racism works in Britain through a “profound historical forgetfulness [...] the loss of historical memory, a kind of historical amnesia, a decisive mental repression – which has overtaken the British people about race and Empire since the 1950s.” (Hall 1978: 25) Hall’s explanation for this phenomenon is an attempt to “wipe out and erase” everything connected to Britain’s colonial history. (Hall 1978: 26)

In *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (1976), edited with Tony Jefferson, Hall talks about the “moral panic” created inside the dominant culture by the intruder, the minority, the “other”, which is called in his essay either the “folk-devil” or “scapegoat.” Yet, on the other hand, Hall himself admitted that society needs its own scapegoats, and anticipated the cathartic function which the dominant culture looks for in its scapegoats. As he put it, “dominant culture... seek[s] and find[s].... the folk-devils to people its nightmare” (Hall: 1976: 74).

At the same time, it becomes also obvious in *The Rotters' Club*, through the juxtaposition of Bill’s earnest hopes and efforts and the actual social phenomena such as Racism/ ethnical hatred and their consequences, that even in a “free” world, the situation may reach dangerous peaks, with dramatic consequences for some individuals. Bill’s tragic mistake is that, in his pursue of the “socialist dream”, and due to his devoted belief in reason, he does not realise the extent which these tendencies can reach. He sees them as mere tendencies, and treats them accordingly. According to a Post-Enlightenment reasoning, if there are effects, there must be a reason, and if this is the situation, somebody must receive “disciplinary measures”. Once the culprit has been found, Bill hopes that the situation can return to normal, and workers to their ‘socialist dream’. In the interview with Claire, he recalls such an incident, and how he acted under the respective circumstances.

“A couple of years ago we had a shop steward – I won’t mention his name, he’s left the factory now who was putting Nazi pamphlets around the shop floor. Disciplinary measures had to be taken”. (Coe 2001: 242)

However, as the novel makes it clear, the phenomenon did not stop with the firing of Roy Slater, because there are three reasons which limit any coherent, impactful action, out of which I have explored so far only one. Roy Slater's opportunism and lack of scruples or empathy, when, in fact, he was supposed to represent the workers, becomes eloquent of the fact that the 1970s were already eroded by detachment and individualism, both in theory and at a practical level.⁷⁷

The second reason is the fact that any class (including the working class), is a very amorphous entity, constituted of a myriad of personalities, and an associated myriad of visions upon (and attitudes towards) ideology. The sources of division might come from two directions: either from a peer trying to weaken a movement or from the ruling bloc, trying to cancel such attempts, as Hall has shown, through *consent* and *incorporation*.

In "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'" (1981), Hall explains a mechanism that has been extensively used by Thatcherism. This mechanism proved particularly effective in weakening a whole category: the general public, or as it appears in Thatcher's speeches – "the people" – by rendering it extremely vague, hard to pinpoint, and thus, easy to integrate in any general ideological statement, which appears to be conceived so as to protect its best interests.⁷⁸ (Hall 1981: 239)

Using the microcosm of King William's College as an ontological schema for interpreting how the whole society functions, Claire explains, without realising it, this mechanism which Thatcherism will use and abuse in the 1980s.

CN: You say that as an elected representative, you're just standing up for your members' interests. But there's a general perception that many of the strikes at Longbridge aren't in anybody's interest. That they're bad for productivity and bad for the company's image.

BA: Well, I don't know what you mean by a 'general perception'.

CN: I was thinking that we had a Debating Society meeting, where the motion was 'This House believes that the unions have *toomuch* power', and it was carried by about ten to one". (Coe 2001: 240, italics in the original)

Bill realises that the "general perception" is itself highly *interpellated* (to use Althusser's term), the result of partial (or lack of) information and that unfortunately, this is not simply "a game", which happens only inside the microcosm of the college. The "motion" teenagers play with, in which power is seen as social attribute this time (related to the collective structure – the trade

⁷⁷Terry Eagleton criticizes the *Mayday Manifesto* of the New Left by Williams, E. P. Thompson and Stuart Hall arguing that the "totalizing tendency", the ideas of "connecting" and "co-operating", were "politically sterile from the outset". (Eagleton 1976: 18)

⁷⁸In "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'" (1981), Hall states: "It is made problematic by the ability of Mrs Thatcher to pronounce sentences like, 'We have to limit the power of the trade unions because that is what the people want'. That suggests to me that, just as there is no fixed category of 'popular culture', so there is no fixed category to attach to it – 'the people'." (Hall 1981: 239)

union), is more than a simple game. Sadly, it is a “societal” power mechanism (to use Dennis Wrong’s term) which will be reflected, “replayed” at a higher level, in “real life”, in the sequel, *The Closed Circle*. Paul Trotter, now just a right-wing teenager, will be involved almost 30 years later, in an essential vote, as the youngest Labour MP, which he will take in a manner which is as arbitrary as this college game.

The third reason connects *societal power* with the idea of *resistance* along a very different line than the one I have explored so far (namely, the connection between the state and the defence of the status-quo), but along the slippery, binary-oppositional relation of *terrorism – reaction/resistance*.

Terrorism is the ultimate manifestation of unleashed violence in *societal power*. The beginning of *The Rotters’ Club* unfolds along the ethnical line manifested as a consequence of the IRA pub bombings in Birmingham. Consequently, even in the most anti-totalitarian of nations, a type of *resistance* will manifest itself under the form of xenophobia, pushed, with equal violence towards fascist tendencies. Racism is captured in this tendency as well, although, ideologically speaking, it has no motivation at all.

4. Conclusions

In Coe’s *The Rotters’ Club* the plurality of these conflicting ideologies, makes it almost impossible for direct indoctrination due to the number of ideological alternatives (while the mainstream discourse reflects the dissolution of the centre), yet makes it clear that each member of a class lives and transmits his/her *personalised ideology*.

In Bill’s case, he chooses to ignore in practice these differences and to strengthen the unity and solidarity of the “group”, understood in its widest, most inclusive meaning. The essence of this combination of ideologies, Bill’s own “ideology” – which he, however, labels as *socialist*, consists in inclusion, moderation and tolerance, the only way in the classical Marxist sense, to “unite for the common goal”, a goal to which Bill remains faithful throughout the 7 year-span of the novel (1973 – 1980).

However, the sings of the times, seem to be working against him and the “socialist dream” he represents. His actions are meant to counteract, both ideologically and in practice the ethnical and racial hatred discourses which have begun to show their ugliest face, in the context of unprecedented foreign emigration to Britain from the former colonies, which the 1970s experienced.

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