

# PROVOCATION & PREDICTABILITY

AN ACCOUNT OF

## SOUTHAMPTON BLOC

A RED HATHO OUTING IN SOUTHAMPTON, SATURDAY 6TH JUNE 2015



“A mental disease has swept the planet: banalization.”

from *Formulary for a New Urbanism*

Gilles Ivain, 1953

### Introduction

Nonists, Comrades of the Phalanx and the rest, a spectre is haunting the more select areas of town—the spectre of mass produced versions of originals hand-made by genuine (and that means middle class) designer-makers. Gone are the days when being radical meant you might be involved in something that could result in events that might possibly sometimes be slightly unpredictable and even involve encounters with what you'd generally these days treat as a kind of porn (detached and demonised, those vehicles of disgust and desire, and jealousy too, sometimes—I'm referring to the poor, of course). I mean for fucksake, we aren't talking artisans here, nor autodidacts with their moral codes, there is nothing attractive about the lower classes these days . . . No wonder those with the value automatically added and their gimps (or aspirational pleb admirers) feel more comfortable when sealed within a virtual body bag (the politics, the lifestyle, the lovely little place on the Dordogne, etc.), and the only peculiar thing is that some of them still wish to appear concerned for those still said to breathe the ordinary air, regardless of the quality, although if you'd expect them to wonder at the concept of an everyday life that includes everything and everyone all together, well I can tell you they jolly well will when everyone else pays their fair share and not before.



Albion Towers

### 1. Incident report

The fact is that when you buy something these days you often don't know what you will get until you see the horrified expression on the face of your boss as the van driver hauls the parcel through the door and dumps it on your desk. And so it was. When I booked my Marxist teenager from the ad hoc agency I was expecting someone who'd know their lines and be at ease with the role. He'd steam in spouting Marxian discourse as per the product spec. He was also supposed to have his own red collection bucket. I paid extra for an orator and was expecting him to shame the faux lefties and socially curious poshers and then, draining off the cash they might otherwise have given to the no longer 'right-on' bookshop (who'd thus make nothing from their exploitative wheeze), hand the dosh to me to off-set the sum I'd paid to the agency. My ragged trousered artiste was meant to be self-funding (and lumpen couture was promised). I even hoped to make a little bit on top and he, an out of work thespian, would get paid too. My plan, simple in its elegance and verging on the inspired or magical, was on course to produce perfect operative theatre. And it was ethical too, everyone said so.



I'd envisaged a communist skinhead bent (if possible) on overthrowing the status quo and thus presenting a source of terror to the flimsy radicals, professorial rebels, etc.. I'd unfurl the flag and the drama student would do his stuff. He had, I was assured, played a minor role in an episode of *Casualty* and was highly recommended for his vocal projection and timing. But given the way that these days every useless tosser is described as 'award winning', I wasn't expecting much from the sales pitch.

The crowd had already gathered and I unfurled my red flag and, as per the arrangement, headed straight for the burgermeister of October Books; I was as surprised as anyone at what then occurred. My Marxist wunderkind had gone AWOL and, unbeknown to me, a wageless mate of his from down the pub was standing in. Gobsmacked (almost literally), I saw what I thought was a demented smack-head where my revolutionary laureate was meant to be. He twitched in that special way that can only mean he'd

had no drugs for days. He climbed aboard the middle class walking tourist bus like one who was about to rob its terrified occupants.

I figured he would either grab the megaphone or deck people randomly. Instead he improvised a prolonged rant against Zionism. *Nobody was expecting that.* As Ian from OB began to blub the rent boy from hell addressed me directly; referring to my USSR flag (which was at that point wrapped around the reactionary bookseller's head), he said it was an Israeli flag. I got it at once. He was telling me that whilst in the officer training cadets of his posh school, Ian the unconvincing Marxist had been curated by MOSSAD. The bearded bookseller had been institutionalised in more ways than one.

Seeing that I'd got the message, the crazed youth lunged forward and held me in a firm embrace and, whilst the bourgeoisie cowered, he whispered into my ear that he couldn't remember his lines. "Extemporise," I replied, "you're doing fine." And so he did. And he was bloody brilliant, worth every penny, actually. And what he made up in the moment was so much better than what I'd had planned. Always frightening, he hovered convincingly in the hinterland of violence and, speaking with considerable force, opened the event to the contradictions of those attending it. In doing so he zapped the red flag full of energy so that it shone more brightly than before. The Guildhall Square was no longer the scene of a deracinated corporately inspired 'Cultural Quarter', and for those few moments it ceased to be a giant suburban patio; Southampton briefly became a city.



The boy, lacking time to learn any dogma, and in need of direction, fell back on a part he'd played before, that of a stereotypical prime-time TV crack-head. Torn between self-parody and gritty realism, he almost gave the game away when he switched from incoherent shouting about the Israeli government and started telling everyone present to film him. *Très fishy.* As it was, his reversion to lovey self-obsession and media-whoredom ended when blokes from a nearby bar - the October Books Special Branch minders as it turned out, laid on especially for their big day - took him off to calm him down with some tactical communication.

This got us all off the hook and, although more expensive than it might have been, the actor's eloquent incoherence had monkey-wrenched the self-assurance of the well-heeled voyeurs, many of whom were trembling visibly, and their discomfort grew as we set off for the first council estate with flags flying and no notice being taken of their perfectly reasonable mutterings.

And so the crowd of around 100 proceeded on its way with various ex-lefties scowling at the red and black flags the Phalanx displayed. I chuckled at the thought that none of those lording it, or trying to, had the faintest idea of what was going on. Up theirs I say. Bloody wankers, the lot of them. It was like escorting a crowd of amateur Prince Charles impersonators into the hermetic realm of utopian collectivised space.

## 2. Wild acting

It is not the meaning - perceived or otherwise - of any sign or symbol that *causes* subsequent events that appear to be associated with it. It is an aspect of the realm of signs that both 'cause' and 'effect' are in fact random. We might say, tho', that the breakdown or absence of any symbolic syntax is sometimes revealed in how that chaos is expressed.



These days, we have exchanged meaning for predictability. Cognitive dissonance must be avoided and choices prefigured. Radicalism comes with or without fries. Whilst no criticism of the flag of the USSR was received from passers-by (some passing motorists, up for a laugh, beeped their horns), hostility was encountered from within the bourgeois pedestrian swivel-neckers' bus.

When predictability becomes utopian it is also reliably unachievable; hence the anxiety surrounding anything that unsettles the internalised suburbia of social self-consumption. In the consumerist utopia one

needs to know what will happen next, responses and exchanges must be seen as a kind of map. It stretches before and behind. Unscripted encounters distort the mirrors through which one moves backwards or forwards, using memory or foresight. The transactions stretch into infinity in either direction. All else is perverse or criminal. One cannot be hip out of context.

To counter the chaotic *without*, those within conform to clearly defined notions of what being unorthodox means. To be within, one must continually gain the approval of surveilling networks, for without this the individual is a threat to the already predicted patterns of transaction that form the shared reality of the collective unorthodox. One no longer misbehaves to be a rebel, instead one subscribes and this is the source of much countercultural blandness. Technology has largely universalised what was previously a weakness of character in some people.

When a symbol displayed 'unsettles' a landscape, the reactionary impulse is to restore order by going back to the immediate past in which exchanges were mediated, and safely so, by the syntax of exchange; images seen about you and internalised, felt rather than seen, when disrupted, generate nausea and - within a whole system contraction - an actual or metaphorical gag-reflex. This occurring as the totalised system, internalised, bonded to the self, seeks to expel the offending symbolical matter. It must be rendered more than invisible, it must be unfelt; even the appearance of its image in memory disrupts predictability. And so, at intervals, individuals approached me as I wandered along with the communist flag and told me to bloody well put it away.

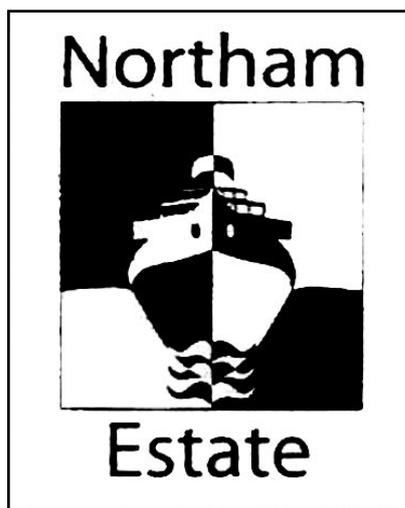
One striking feature of how these individuals presented their pleas for a return to nothing happening, nor likely to, was their (ironic, given the middle class credentials on display) denial of their own individuality; emotional forces, internally felt, were concealed behind an implied consensus uttered on behalf of "people in the group" who were "not comfortable with the flag". As one young hipster woman, quivering with fear and resentment put it, "I know this will antagonise you more, but we think you should stop displaying it." "I'm not antagonised," I replied brightly, and I gave the People's Flag a jaunty wave.

### 3. Image and ideal

It was apparent that those familiar with the insides of a council house or flat move differently through a space like the Northam estate than those to whom such housing and its occupants are exotic. It is in the nature of things that those at ease with a symbol will be largely unaware of it. "... we think the flag is rather provocative," said one proprietorial creative, reasonably, of course. At this point, waxing rhetorical, one might query the assumptions concealed behind such a comment. Provoke who to do what? Did 'they' think that the proles in their not so social as it used to be housing were going to see red and come out fighting? Gag reflex. Not 'underclass' but unclassifiable. Subject and object. There were those who got off the walking bus as it passed through the danger zone and those who did not.



Millbank House, Northam Estate: The day after we walked here the local Orange Lodge marched with their banner



It seemed possible that those flags, the red and the black, disrupted what might otherwise have been a group of middle class people gawping at where the poor people live. That was, to an extent, true, but outside the gates there are forms of wealth not counted within. And who knows what or how much those mysterious dwellers in the utopian past accumulate. Matter wants to settle but energy moves it about. "The people who live on the estate don't like the flags," she said, hopefully, losing wind as she went. "What people?" I queried. And so came the increasingly detached clarification: "A woman said she thought the black flag was racist . . .". And so I guffawed at a comment disowned. "It doesn't bother him," I laughed, pointing to the man I was in conversation with. "Red Army", he exclaimed loudly, giving her a thumbs up. And so it went and so we walked on to Golden Grove via Northam Road.

Symbols, decaying and adrift, return through labyrinthine ways into what T.S. Eliot called 'the inarticulate', but plenty of people responded to the flags with a question or a joke and that indicates



The Orange Lodge banner shows the Bargate, symbol of Southampton, standing in an empty wasteland.

meanings other than those carried around by the po-faced preactionaries of the well-heeled walking MPV (*please* don't say bus) or bus. Also, it seemed to me that because I held aloft my symbolic monkey-wrench, I was let off the suspicion showed by some residents of those estates we passed through to the group as a whole. Whatever I might be, I was not a voyeur come to gawp. Rather than react to the flag, the provocation appeared to come from the voyeurism that I was not.

Outside Albion Towers one woman, alienated by what she saw looking, refused to listen to Owen Hatherley talking about the building and the estate, its history, etc. and she turned her back on the intrusion. Her companion manoeuvred his mobility scooter amongst the intruders to better hear the talk. Thus ignored by him, the woman turned to me and said of Owen Hatherley, "He's slagging off Albion Towers, my sister lives there." "No he isn't," I reassured her, "he likes it."

That woman was hostile to the group and how it looked and, thus alienated and not listening, projected her feelings onto what she imagined was being said, but she wasn't hostile to me. It might have been the red flag, or how I moved about the place, that distinguished me; whatever it was, I was in a different category to the 'we' and the 'some people' (the miserable Prince Charleses) who didn't like the flags. Whatever one perceives, how one looks effects how one is seen.

#### 4. A raid on nowhere

After the event had reached its bad tempered conclusion, Ian shuffled through the park. He'd one last job to do and he wasn't looking forward to it and his shoulders sagged as he recalled how, weeks earlier, the local crack heads had stopped him as he was walking home from work and, after going through his pockets, had relieved him of his cash. Since then he'd been obliged to give them money on a regular basis. But being a deft thinker, he'd seen a way of turning this situation around and he'd told them about the rich idiots who were going to walk through the working class districts. Easy pickings. Buy lots of drugs with what they have in their pockets. All he had to do was to make it plain to the throwbacks that they should wait until his fellow poshers were on one of the estates and not to attack them in the Guildhall Square. Get that into their obsolete heads and he'd have appropriated a game-changer.

Thus, with the help of his new mates, who were actually real salt of the earth blokes, he might even assist Dame History herself in disposing of the communist current that might yet be resurrected if someone didn't do something about it whilst it was on the floor and unable to get up. Kick Marxism to death whilst it couldn't defend itself, which was what the smack heads had threatened him with, that would be a real turnaround. After all, that Owen Hatherley was just the kind of well-meaning idealistic idiot who might ruin things for small-shopkeepers everywhere by setting off collectivism and the ensuing lack of choice that would end in dole queues and low productivity. In fact what's needed is a political party run by Amazon, that would lower the claimant count in no time at all.

In the meantime, how could he face his customers if they realised that he'd promoted Hatherley and had thus played a part in the overthrowing of capitalism? It didn't bear thinking about. They'd start calling him a commie, just like they had before, and they'd buy their chocolate from Waitrose. Ian knew he needed to regain the upper hand and grasp the nettle that had been stinging his arse since the nightmare of his own misguided Marxist youth had been resurrected after some bloody helpful bastard had done the bookshop a favour and put them back in touch with their now successful ex work-experience schoolboy Hatherley. You couldn't make it up. A successful left wing author? And one who'd helped-out in their bloody bookshop when he was a pinko schoolboy? But it was all true. And now, just when they'd put that hideous red past behind them and got away with people thinking they were only slightly fair trade and a very pale shade of green, and no more left wing than the editor of the Daily Echo, Hatherley was on a mission to save them.

But there it is, not only had that well-meaning idiot Hatherley gone and published an article in *The Guardian* branding October Books as left wing, but he'd then backed that up with the claim that his chocolate bookshop had things in common with gone bust enterprises run by communists, socialists and old style trades unionists, the sort that had vision. Some of the customers had read it. Everybody knew that people wanted choice not vision and October Books was quite happily providing that with an array of organic chocolate bars that beat the internet on range if not price and that was good actually because customers want charisma these days and not clicks . . . and now this had happened.





Other names have been suggested for the clapped-out collective, these include: U-Turn If You Want To, Quisling Quartos, An Edwardian Lady's Country Bookshop and The Chocolate Teapot

Pretending not to know who Hatherley was hadn't worked. He'd tried not responding to overtures from the red revenant with his incisive comments about Brutalism and total recall of Ian's liking for stinky beverages made in that sordid socialist past that has been greatly exaggerated since and mostly by troublemakers.

The more he tried to escape his youthful indiscretions, the more those bastards tried to help him and the shop by rallying the remnants of the local left and leaving the bookshop and its business plan upside down in a ditch. And going forward things really had been looking up. Comrade Ed Milliband had all but destroyed the Labour Party, and bloody good riddance to it too, it had always been bad for business and actually one felt much more at home with a mug of alternative cocoa and a Joanna Trollope novel, especially so when the evenings are drawing in and there was absolutely no chance of anything like a re-awakening of the left coming along to upset the

customers, the Milliband debacle was an absolute God-send in that sense and long over-due.

The romantics, who only ever steal books from libraries and don't tend to eat much high quality organic chocolate made by middle-class collectives twinned with our own actually, its way beyond what they can afford, and wish for it though they will, there will be no new democratic left nor anything like it, history had flushed those losers down the lavatory and the only shame was it hadn't happened sooner. The sponge-brained lunatics might think that calling the shop October Books had meant it had something to do with the Russian revolution, but what they didn't realise was that actually it was named after that poem by John Keats about the autumn and that has absolutely nothing to do with politics whatsoever and how could it? Even Keats was that much of a dimwit.

All had seemed lost, the spring turned to winter etc. and then Ian had proved his Darwinian credentials by floating to the top again. *Bingo*. There's the answer old chap, it always pops up in the end. He'd realised that fate had provided him with the antidote to all of his woes. Set the junkies up to rob the well-heeled plastic radicals, that would get the crazed druggies arrested and locked up, and it would ruin the event and scare off the fake lefties and thus provide the perfect excuse for the bookshop to say a firm No Thanks Mate to any future Hatherley events. No more blatantly left wing iconography nor the unpopularity associated with that kind of unpleasantness. He could post the odd slightly lefty book advert on Facebook for the idiots who like that sort of thing and the real customers who still got their news from newspapers would be none the wiser. It was perfect. What could go wrong? And then ahead of him he saw the crack heads and knew that they would settle for nothing less than all the money he'd collected from the poshers. And they'd be even more aggressive after his Special Branch minders had ruined what went on in the Guildhall Square. You just couldn't make it up.



The St Mary Leyline: At this point we expected the metaphorical Red Sea to part and a shortcut to Israel to appear, but the Promised Land remained out of reach