

Review

The Ministry of Nostalgia by Owen Hatherley

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READERS OF ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL CRITIC OWEN HATHERLEY, whether of his books or his articles for the *Guardian*, will be acquainted with his expertise on modern architecture and popular culture. His latest book *The Ministry of Nostalgia* sticks to his usual topics: delivering a thorough examination of a wide selection of case studies that range across architecture, urban planning, design, and cinema. Hatherley makes a compelling argument for 'austerity nostalgia' as a predominant motif within contemporary politics, as well as offering alternative ways to withstand the nostalgic jargon that softens the burden of austerity measures (in the form of cuts to benefits, arts funding, and education, the latter in my opinion directly correlated with the rise of university tuition fees).

The Ministry of Nostalgia is first and foremost an attempt to understand the results of the 2015 British general elections. Despite suffering five years of austerity measures under the political program of the coalition government between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, British voters gave victory to the Tories. This result is indebted on the one hand to the 'austerity agenda' and on the other hand to Labour and Edward Miliband's inability to offer a 'serious opposition to austerity as either concept or policy'.¹ Despite arguing that austerity nostalgia is conservative in its inception and as such is a right wing phenomenon, in *The Ministry of Nostalgia* Hatherley provides examples of the ways in which it has been seized by the left with more or less successful outcomes.

Hatherley contends that 1945 is the point of reference for the British

left because it is known as the year of the creation of social welfare in Britain. He further argues that the austerity measures imposed during the Second World War and the Blitz, as much as during the post-war era until around 1955, are utilised today as nostalgic motifs within political rhetoric to convince us that there is no alternative to overcome the deficit than to endure austerity. In an insightful analysis of the recent success of the famous poster 'Keep Calm And Carry On', Hatherley argues that 'unlike many forms of nostalgia, the memory invoked by the [...] poster is not based on lived experience'.² Bought by many who have not experienced the Blitz, it signifies a yearning for a past that has not been lived through. Rather than 'the return of the repressed', the poster stands for the '*nostalgia for the state of being repressed*' at a point in which British society founds itself more detached from political life.³ Nonetheless, the slogan has been subverted in recent demonstrations to 'Don't Keep Calm, Get Angry and Save the Lewisham A&E', and similar forms of *détournement* which according to Hatherley are representative of how the left should have utilised austerity nostalgia to its gain.

Hatherley demonstrates how the left has attempted to recover austerity nostalgia to its political advantage. For instance the war as a subject paved the way to the depiction of the emergence of the welfare state and the constitution of the National Health Service in the opening ceremony of the London Olympic games in 2012, directed by Danny Boyle. Hatherley argues that the creation of the NHS 'becomes the centrepiece of the whole performance'; and interprets the ceremony as a vivid representation of how the coalition government have been dismantling the NHS and social welfare in general.⁴ Hatherley also alludes to the Scottish Nationalist Party's victory in the 2015 general elections, greatly motivated by a rejection of a Tory-led government.

Hatherley analyses three documentaries in which austerity nostalgia is deployed by a leftist discourse: *The Spirit of '45* (Ken Loach, 2013), *Tony Benn: Will and Testament* (Skip Kite, 2014), and *The Poor Stockinger, the Luddite Cropper and the Deluded Followers of Joanna Southcott* (Luke Fowler, 2012). Following Walter Benjamin's warning about the foibles of 'left-wing melancholy',⁵ Hatherley argues that if Ken Loach's *The Spirit of '45* aimed at making people think and come to action about the loss of social welfare established in 1945 then Loach should not have used an iconography that, because so distant in the past, has little to say to the contemporary working class.⁶ In turn, the film about Tony Benn is nothing but a 'disarming eulogy' for an old man baffled by Tory-led Britain.⁷ On the other hand, Scottish artist Luke Fowler's film about E.P. Thompson rests uncomfortably with the others because it is an avant-garde film that is 'far removed from the usual nostalgic narrative' that characterises Loach's and Kite's films.⁸ According to Hatherley this might be so because the film is only exhibited in galleries; it does not have to attend to the demand for the nostalgic turn since its reception is aimed at a smaller and non-populist audience.

Following Alexandra Harris's hypothesis that English Modernism had more to do with the upper class' attempt to revitalize its national roots than a project to improve the lives of the British working class, Hatherley analyses Frank Pick's planning for the London Underground in the 1930s in detail. Here he argues that more than an egalitarian project aiming to better the everyday lives of inner city London dwellers, Pick's planning was rooted in a romanticised English version of Modernism. Hatherley exposes the imperialist interests embedded in what is understood as the 'socialist turn' in governmental planning, which he calls Socialist Imperialism, propagandised by filmmaker John Grierson, among others, while working for the Empire Marketing Board

Film Unit. Nevertheless Hatherley concludes that ‘austerity nostalgia’ today is unrelated to ‘the Empire, not only its existence and aesthetics during the period [...], but also in terms of any cultural and political input whatsoever into British culture from the descendants of those migrants’.⁹

George Orwell’s opposition to the British Empire introduces the fourth chapter where Hatherley argues that despite his criticism Orwell became ferociously patriotic during the war vilifying in particular the left wing middle classes. His book *1984* is on the other hand a significant representation of the austerity experienced in post-war 1945 in Britain, more so than a metaphor for the totalitarian states of Stalin and Hitler.

Hatherley claims that the symbolism of the ‘Spirit of ’45’ or rather the symbolic memory of the two Labour governments in power between 1945 and 1950, and again between 1950 and 1951, have ‘entered the austerity-nostalgic imagination’ because of the nationalisation of the NHS by the minister of health Aneurin ‘Nye’ Bevan in 1945 and the creation of the Festival of Britain – and the construction of the Royal Festival Hall in particular – in 1951.¹⁰

Hatherley, working closest to his expertise on modern architecture, compares two schemes representative of the architectural planning of New Labour on the one side, and the 2010-15 coalition government on the other. Both schemes were built for the purpose of private housing with the ‘usually mandated percentage of “affordable” housing’, and their differences are mainly aesthetic.¹¹ Giving the examples of Maccreeanor Lavington’s work at King’s Cross, and The Peltons at Greenwich, Hatherley identifies ‘the regular, brick-clad, rectilinear Georgian terrace’ design as ubiquitous since the coalition government.¹² This London phenomenon was inspired by the London mayor Boris Johnson’s design guidelines, particularly concerned not only with the context into which the building or scheme is inserted, but also with the aesthetic coherence between social housing and high-end residences as a means to avoid disparities of land value.

In contrast to this modernist council flats have been bought and restored by property developers and their market value has soared. Their original purpose as affordable housing is now lost. The irony, according to Hatherley, is that ‘today we are living through exactly the kind of housing crisis for which council housing was invented in the first place, at exactly the same time as we’re alternately fetishizing and privatising its remnants.’¹³ In this way Hatherley concludes that these buildings should be renovated not because ‘they are great examples of the architecture of the welfare state’ but because – as declared in the slogan of the Focus 15 Mums when occupying the Carpenters Estate in Stratford – ‘these people need homes, and these homes need people’.¹⁴ The only way out of austerity is not nostalgic motifs but our sense of ‘collective utility’.¹⁵

The Ministry of Nostalgia is a well-researched examination of the austerity nostalgia rooted in a post-war era imagination. Hatherley’s argument is compelling and witty, and his book is a great contribution to examining the ways in which nostalgic motifs have been exercised to promote the imposition of austerity measures by means of neo-liberal policies in Britain.

Hatherley’s research could support future investigations concerning the employment of this nostalgic turn in both cultural objects and political discourses; from the perspective of other national contexts that are also enduring austerity measures. His investigation is restricted to the UK, but since austerity is a global trend *The Ministry of Nostalgia* also contributes to wider reflections on the deployment of ‘austerity nostalgia’ within the discourse of neo-liberalism.

Notes

¹ Owen Hatherley, *The Ministry of Nostalgia* (London: Verso, 2015), p.2.

² Ibid., p.18.

³ Both *ibid.*, p.21

⁴ Ibid., p.48.

⁵ Ibid., p.53.

⁶ Ibid., p.54.

⁷ Ibid., p.58.

⁸ Ibid., p.60.

⁹ Ibid., p.112-113.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.139.

¹¹ Ibid., p.175. According to Hatherley affordable housing is a legal policy of value equivalent to 80% of the market rate and thus unaffordable to the great majority of the working and middle classes in London.

¹² Ibid., p.182.

¹³ Ibid., p.197.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.202.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.202.