

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Owen Hatherley, *The Ministry of Nostalgia: Consuming Austerity*, London: Verso, 2016. ISBN: 9781784780753 (cloth); ISBN: 9781784780760 (paper); ISBN: 9781784780784 (ebook)

According to Owen Hatherley, since around 2009 the “[Keep Calm and Carry On](#)” logo has become increasingly ubiquitous as part of a culture invested in garnering support for current austerity measures by harking back in romantic (and erroneous) ways to previous eras of austerity. Based on this premise, *The Ministry of Nostalgia* is a rip-roaring ride through various cultural movements, all of which, to Hatherley’s mind, can be seen as leading to the current reinvention of the logo. Hatherley’s main concern with nostalgia is the way in which it hides the painful reality of austerity, and disavows the potential for a new socialist city. He is, clearly, furious about the ease with which those politicians and policy makers who promote the current austerity measures have capitalised upon the popularity of this logo and cultivated its surrounding culture to hide the devastating and cruel impacts of austerity on those least able to cope. Yet, this elegantly sardonic, sometimes angry, other times laugh-out-loud funny diatribe steers clear of being simply bile-fuelled thanks to its nuanced intelligence.

Early on Hatherley criticises the reliance upon an E.P. Thompson-inspired image of the working classes, as romanticised poor crafts-people (the stockinger, the cropper, the hand-loom weaver, etc.), insisting that it is not helpful in understanding the actual current-day working classes, who he sees as made up of call-centre workers, single mothers, unemployed ex-miners, and disenfranchised potential Islamists. In fact, this concern over the misunderstood working classes permeates much of the book; for example, later Hatherley launches a critique of the Tube posters designed by Frank Pick,¹ that conjure images of modernist havens in what were, and are still, mock-Tudor suburbs or cramped inner-city boroughs. In fact, parts of *The Ministry of Nostalgia* are a rather beautifully written spatial analysis concerned with debunking the geographical imagination

¹ Frank Pick (1878-1941) became managing director of what was then called the Underground Electric Railways Company of London (UERL) in 1928, and was chief executive officer and vice-chairman of the London Passenger Transport Board from its creation in 1933 until 1940. Pick had a strong interest in design and its use in public life, and steered the development of the London Underground’s corporate identity by commissioning eye-catching commercial art, graphic design and modern architecture, establishing a highly recognisable brand, including the first versions of the roundel and typeface still used today.

Antipode

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of London that Pick created. Yet, Hatherley is himself somewhat enamoured by Arnos Grove tube station (as depicted by Pick) with its lack of any classical references and yet ability to feel as “serene, ordered, logical and pure” as a classic Inigo Jones-designed villa.² At first, this begs the question of whether it is the false depiction of life in such places that Hatherley is railing against, or modernism itself. It turns out that what Hatherway objects to is the way in which modernism in Britain did not go far enough, and was not as fearless as that in other parts of Europe. Frank Pick collected European ideas avoiding flying walkways and pure white “in favour of something warmer and softer”, concerned with fitting into cosy ideas of red-bricked Britain. It is this that grates on Hatherley—the hypocrisy of avoiding “extreme” forms as part of a self-congratulatory moderation in all things, whilst contemporaneously expanding the British Empire and carrying out atrocities in Mesopotamia. It is his sense that British modernism is a lie, then, that appears to be the rub.

It is difficult not to feel, though, that had buildings such as the Southbank Centre (the epitome of the modernist spirit, which aspired to create genuinely open, non-hierarchical public spaces) not been so easily and wholly taken over with current-day austerity trinket-trash, Hatherley would not be quite so inclined to critique it. His point that it was not until “Red” Ken Livingstone made all the foyer spaces open to the public in the 1980s that it became a success is a very valid one, but that spirit of modernism—even “reasonable” British modernism—is surely not so easily suffocated by the presence of an austerity-friendly gift shop. And surely the ease with which “Keep Calm and Carry On” paraphernalia has pervaded such spaces is not the fault of the form of modernism itself? Would the Pompidou Centre resist austerity policies any better? It is doubtful. Of course the critique of what this cosy red-bricked Britain was doing alongside these modernist projects is absolutely valid, but surely it is more important to attack the hypocrisy, than the built form? Attacking the socialist imperialism of 20th century campaigner Robert Blatchford,³ for example, as Hatherley goes on to

² Inigo Jones (1573-1652) was the first architect in Britain to introduce the pure classical architecture of Rome and the Italian Renaissance. In London, he famously designed the “Queen’s House”, the Banqueting House, Whitehall, and the layout for Covent Garden square.

³ Robert Blatchford (1851-1943) was a British socialist campaigner, journalist and author. His socialism had a particularly nationalistic bent—he believed the nation should be a family and supported both the Boer Wars and the First World War.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

do, is a far more valid response, as is the withering critique of the form of socialism that looks to the lyrics of “Jerusalem” for their culmination of the perfect founding myth and vision for a Left Britain. In fact, writing-out Empire is a major issue for Hatherley. Even directors Basil Wright and Harry Watt’s depiction of the working classes in the film *Night Mail* (1936) as hard-working and inherently decent, is lightly lambasted for ignoring Empire as part of a vision of Britain as a socialist family in which the white parents benevolently care for the Other children, helping them reach standards of civilisation they could not possibly have achieved on their own.

Perhaps most powerful in portraying the sheer lunacy of the current re-appropriation of the “Keep Calm and Carry On” logo is Hatherley’s discussion around the book *Living Through the Blitz* (1976), edited by Mass Observation’s Tom Harrison.⁴ It showed how the “keep calm” message was seen as patronising and infuriating by the diarists involved in Mass Observation during the Second World War, exposing a huge rift between the people and their government, with local government workers scared of those they were charged with sheltering from bombs. At the crux of this issue, as one Mass Observation diarist put it, is the blunt fact that people carry on because they have to. And this is precisely the problem with the re appropriation of the motto in the present day—it entirely negates the fact of lack of choice for many now, as then. It makes invisible the suffering that cannot be stoically enjoyed, and that one cannot simply extricate oneself from with hard work, determination, and a cheery outlook. One cannot simply sew and cook one’s way out of austerity when one lives with black-spores on the walls of a rented flat, eating powdered soups on the final days of each month before the next tiny amount of money comes in. “Keep Calm and Carry On” belies all these harsh, life-path denying realities, and it is the fury this induces that is captured so well by Hatherley.

The fury, however, is given useful focus at the end of the book, when Hatherley makes reference to case studies such as the Focus E15 Mums—single mothers who were threatened with

⁴ Mass Observation was a UK social research organisation founded in 1937 by anthropologist Tom Harrison, poet Charles Madge, and filmmaker Humphrey Jennings. It aimed to record everyday life in Britain through a panel of around 500 untrained volunteer observers who either maintained diaries or replied to open-ended questionnaires (known as “directives”). Mass Observation also paid investigators to anonymously record people’s conversation and behaviour at work, on the street and at various public occasions including public meetings and sporting and religious events. The project ended in the mid-1960s, but was revived in 1981. For more see <http://www.massobs.org.uk>

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

eviction by Newham Council after being told to leave the social housing they had been given in order to escape domestic violence—and the Aylesbury Estate squatters—council tenants who attempted to resist the planned demolition of their homes. He cites these groups as examples of those who see usefulness in buildings—not architectural beauty, philosophical appeal, or nostalgia, and who may well carve out a social and democratic city of the future. Passionately and convincingly argued, *The Ministry of Nostalgia* is perhaps best summed up by Hatherley’s own sentiments towards the end of the book when he proclaims, “I can’t help thinking that a city that is not melancholic ... is the best we can hope for”. I couldn’t agree more. No stiff upper lips, no muddling through, no blitz spirit, no idiotic austerity trinketry ... and certainly no keeping calm or carrying on.

Alison Hulme

<https://commoditytactics.wordpress.com>

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