"Debating New Times in Theory and Theatre:
Articulating Political Discourse and Theatrical Practice"

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From Philomele's Sister: Essays on Citizenship and Theatre in the United Kingdom. (If it seems that I'm starting in the middle of an argument, it's true! I was trying to come close to our page limit. Please don't distribute, quote, or paraphrase without my express permission. I'm not done with it yet!!)

. . . . The essays that follow look at the articulation of politics and theatre in specific instances of this significant cultural form [i.e., theatre]. They ask how plays embody ways that we think politics. To do this, I have set play texts in an imagined conversation with activist scholar--including Stuart Hall--who helped to reshape the political terrain in Britain. The plays in question are less polemical calls to action than deliberative presentations of imagined interactions between state and subject. They were chosen to facilitate discussion of a specific range of issues that circulated through the British Left as it strained to find a voice under Thatcher and a mission after the dream of socialism crumbled with the Berlin wall. Putting plays and public policy debates in dialogue throws the contours of the political field into relief and sheds light on those critical "sites and stakes of struggles over power" to which Grossberg refers.[1] I am particularly interested in how theatre and political theory conjoin (when threaded through one another) to produce understandings of how individuals might be constituted as subject-citizens. Such understandings may then guide the politics I live--in print, in the theatre, in the classroom. My effort aims at being thick rather than thin, although the discussion is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. Rather it begins a conversation that, like all political and theatrical processes, is open ended: it extends an invitation, with no intent of writing the end of the story.

The Benefits of the British Example

Politics

The United Kingdom presents a complex instance of a crisis in thinking about the nation state--a crisis exacerbated by the fall of soviet-dominated Eastern European governments and subsequent adjustments in international alliances and political doctrines within the larger context of economic globalization. It is both like and unlike its peer states in Europe. A single actor in its "special relationship" with the United States and in the formal alliance that is the European Union (EU), as a political entity the United Kingdom binds together ancient enemy nations, England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Its dual status foregrounds the stresses that are more generally present in Europe as a whole. Most western democracies have relinquished formal control of colonies, faced demands for increased citizen access to economic and political power, and battled to rationalize and manage distribution of national resources across classes and regions. As a collectivity, the European Union contests US financial, economic, and political hegemony in the world. Member nations have adopted a common currency (the Euro), opened national borders for the free transit of citizens, and written a common constitution. These measures, whether adopted wholly or in part by all members, have brought pressure to bear on questions of national identity and citizenship throughout the region. Indeed, in the United Kingdom political parties sharply disagree on the extent to which the UK should participate. Responding to influxes of immigrants, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, for example, have seen struggles over citizen rights; Spain and the United Kingdom have seen regional minorities press for greater independence. Such controversies correspond to policy debates in the US over public health care and education for “illegal” immigrants, voting rights for non-citizens in California, the impact of NAFTA on domestic jobs, the appropriate balance between demand for the cheap labor provided by temporary workers and anxiety over securing national borders against terrorist intrusions. In each instance, notions of citizenship are under pressure.

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[1] In Morley, David, and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996) 163.

The moment in which what came to be called New Labour confronted Margaret Thatcher’s populist Tory vision brought many of the stresses that face contemporary liberal democracies into focus. The policies and philosophy known as Thatcherism were sufficiently successful that, even after her own party leadership deposed her in 1990, the British Left could not dislodge the party she had led since 1974. Her heir apparent, John Major, continued to hold the post of Prime Minister for another seven years. Humbled by their long period of exile from parliamentary leadership, the Left struggled to rethink its goals and policies. In that process, significant elements within the Left profoundly revised their vision of socialist democracy. In 1997, after nearly twenty years of Tory rule, what had begun to seem like a permanent state of affairs ended with a Labour sweep of Parliament. Party leader Tony Blair became Prime Minister and closed the era of profound changes to Britain's economic, political, and social character that had been set in motion in 1979 by the elevation of Margaret Thatcher to the post of Prime Minister.

The long years of Conservative ascendancy gave rise to a complex of economic and social stresses. Thatcher mounted an attack on the so-called postwar consensus that had dominated political discourse.[2] From 1945 on, successive Labour and Tory governments had pursued policies to create an extensive social support system including what is still arguably its most popular achievement, the National Health Service. Thatcher began to undo the welfare state by aggressively pursuing a policy of privatization. Targets included large public companies in the energy sector (such as Britoil, Enterprise Oil, British Gas), manufacturing/industry (British Steel, British Aerospace, Rolls Royce), communications (British Telecom), and transportation (such as British Airways, British Airports Authority) (Riddell, 87-8).[3] By restructuring taxes and public subsidies the regime also encouraged council house tenants to purchase their homes. This last proved to be a popular move, but in the main, critics charged that Thatcher’s economic policies significantly aggravated divisions along lines of class, gender, race, and region (Riddell, 149-67). Thatcher attacked the trade unions head on and passed legislation that significantly curbed the range of actions they could use to negotiate wages and working conditions. Manual workers lost ground in comparison to white-collar workers. The north of England, Scotland and Wales became increasingly impoverished while communities in the south of England grew in wealth. In the widening gap between rich and poor, women and ethnic minorities were disproportionately disadvantaged (Riddell, 156).

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[2] Dennis Kavanagh reviews the consensus and specific elements of Thatcher’s response to it, *Thatcherism and British Politics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 6-14.

[3] Peter Riddell, *The Thatcher Era: And its Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, 1991).

Thatcherism was fundamentally, unapologetically, anti-egalitarian in social as well as economic policies. Sir Keith Joseph, a close advisor to Thatcher, had explicated the position in *Equality*[4] (Riddell, 149-50; see Young on Joseph and Thatcher, 83-91, 102-04, and passim). Newly virulent forms of racism greeted immigrants from the former colonies. Critics charged that the British Nationality Act of 1981 put roadblocks in the way of immigrants from colonies with predominately black populations while favoring those of Caucasian heritage. Going so far as to dissolve the Greater London Council (GLC) and several other authorities, Thatcher aggressively acted to curtail local control over local matters through a series of legislative measures that consolidated decision-making power in Whitehall (Riddell, 177-78). The effect was to degrade the quality of democracy that citizens exercised near home and hearth. Using the power of the purse to bring local governments into line, Thatcher did not hesitate to employ the same means to enforce her social views. An infamous instance was her attack on gay rights through a measure (Clause 28) that withholds funds from local authorities seen to be “intentionally promoting homosexuality” (Riddell 178; note that as of 2003 Blair has not acted to reverse the measure.)

By the late eighties, citizens had begun to view the Thatcher government as unacceptably authoritarian. Groups formed to lobby for a Bill of Rights, a written constitution, and freedom of information (Riddell 175-76; passim 174-83). Welsh and Scottish citizens reasserted their ancient national traditions against the internal colonialism of the government in London. The organized opposition to the poll tax that precipitated the end of Thatcher's reign as Prime Minister originated in Scotland. In Ireland, the continuing presence of government troops in the North was viewed by many as the continuation of centuries of British invasions and occupations. Pressure toward self-determination continued on the part of the nations that make up the United Kingdom, and within six months of the Labour victory, in September 1997, Scots voted to establish their own Parliament with limited rights to levy taxes. Welsh voters followed suit, authorizing their own Assembly. The May 1998 Irish referendum that confirmed a negotiated peace settlement designed to return home rule to Northern Ireland reflects not only the exhaustion of all parties after decades of violence, but a general swing away from the centralized government that Thatcher had engineered toward distributed power.

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[4] Written with Jonathan Sumption (London: John Murray, 1978).

Theatre

Theatre of the time bears witness to these stresses, as would be expected in a country with a strong tradition of putting the state of the nation onstage. Policy towards immigration from the former colonies was a continuing topic. David Edgar's *Destiny* (1976) linked British racism in the colonies with the rise of the National Front at home. A growing body of work by Black British playwrights dating back to Trinidadian Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (mid 1950s) addressed institutionalized racism and asserted the value of the Asian and Afro-Caribbean presence in England. Playwrights who questioned the state's overtly coercive or more subtle forms of regulating its citizens include premier writers of the time: Howard Barker, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, David Edgar, David Hare, and Trevor Griffiths, to name a few. Many texts explicitly addressed the state of affairs under Thatcher: Brenton and Hare's *Pravda* (1985), David Edgar's *That Summer (1987)*, Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* (1987), Trevor Griffiths' *Thatcher's Children (1993).* But it is important to acknowledge that many of the policies that Thatcher pursued merely intensified those initiated under a previous Labour regime led by James Callaghan. The playwrights recorded that reality. Caryl Churchill's attack on the Diplock Courts, *The Legion Hall Bombing*, was written for BBC TV in 1978 although not broadcast until 1979. Howard Brenton's *Romans in Britain (1980)* takes a harsh view of British imperialist policies towards Northern Ireland—a problem that dates back centuries. Brenton's first versions of *The Churchill Play* (1974;1978) responded to a pattern of legislation that the author viewed as having undermined democracy in the United Kingdom under Labour governments. Internment without trial in Northern Ireland (1971) and government crackdowns on trade unions began early in the seventies (Boon, 102). In other words, worries about the exercise of state power over the citizenry were continuous, but Thatcher's actions significantly heightened existing concerns. Caryl Churchill wrote that her play *Softcops* applied to Britain under either Callaghan or Thatcher:

> Softcops was originally written in 1978, under a Labour Government, when the question of soft controls seemed more relevant than in 1984, the year of its first production, when Thatcher was dismantling the welfare state. That year, audiences were particularly alive to the connection between Bentham's panopticon and Orwell's Big Brother. In 1985, as this edition goes to press, the Government are attempting to depoliticise the miners and the rioters by emphasizing a 'criminal element.' (*Softcops & Fen*, Methuen, 1986, 3.)

In 1988, Richard Boon reports, Brenton revived *The Churchill Play* for a third time because he and its director, Barry Kyle, believed "the play's time had come." As causes for their action, Boon cites: "the Conservative government's anti-Trade union legislation, smashing of the miner's strike of 1985, the banning of interviews with Sinn Fein, and the withdrawal of the right to silence in Northern Irish courts."[5]

During her time in power, opposition playwrights mounted significant challenges to "Thatcher's Britain." As indicated above, however, they also reflected dissatisfaction with Labour. Howard Brenton's *Weapons of Happiness* (1976) valiantly mixes nostalgia for socialist ideals with profound discomfort with Stalinist practice. Howard Barker's *That Good Between Us* (1977) and David Edgar's *Maydays* (1983) examined the failures of socialism that had prepared for the success of Thatcher. In this the playwrights were part of a much broader discussion. Disentangling and describing the multiple strands of social theory and economic interest that were competing to define the future of the left in the United Kingdom is beyond the scope of this project, but it is possible to identify a few important themes and ways of thinking that gained traction in leftist circles and—as revised by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown—can be seen to have supported the eventual ascendancy of New Labour. For this I will visit the world of political theory, paying particular attention to what came to be known as the "New Times project" that in retrospect seems truly to have caught the temper of the times.

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[5] Richard Boon, *Brenton: The Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1991) 114-15.

Thinking through New Times

As Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques tell the story, the New Times project developed organically out of an event sponsored by the editorial board of the long-lived political journal *Marxism Today*. An informal seminar in May 1988 sparked a series of essays that eventually appeared in a special "New Times" issue of the journal in October 1988. Many of these were republished in 1989 with additional materials in a collection edited by Hall and Jacques under the title *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s.*[6] The editors positively note the intersection of their ideas with "a series of parallel debates going on in other circles" and rebuff those who accuse them of outlining "a position" or a "new line" or a "new orthodoxy." More modestly, they claim: "The object is to make better sense of the world, and, on that basis, to realign the Left with that new world" (*NT*, 11).

The discussion that was distilled in the *New Times* collection has continued to resonate through political discourse in the United Kingdom. Angela McRobbie writes about some of its effects in "Looking back at New Times and its critics." While she focuses on the impact of the volume on the field of cultural studies, her comments suggest reasons for its wider influence. The project captured a historical moment that--from the vantage of hindsight—now clearly appears as a liminal moment. As McRobbie remembers it, the project intended "to make sense of . . . multiple movements." She identifies these as (1) orthodox left thinking; (2) a "new set of social relations," some domestic, some global; and (3) "changes which are happening in culture and in politics which are broadly oppositional" (238). That is, *New Times* was a collective enterprise that attempted to take hold of a crisis in leftist theory at the same time that it comprehensively treated a complex historical moment. As in *Marxism Today*, writers from diverse points on the political spectrum, including the right, were included. It presented its analysis in terms that were easily read and understood (McRobbie, in Morley and Chen, 240). In this, it upheld the tradition of activist scholars and intellectuals exemplified by Stuart Hall and playwright David Edgar. Gargi Bhattacharyya captured this aspect of Hall's example in a May 8, 2003, column published in the Guardian Unlimited. After pointing out (what are to Guardian readers) the well-known connections between leftist intellectuals and Blair's wing of the party, she observes that representatives of New Labour are failing to communicate with their constituency. She attributes this failure to their becoming "intellectually lazy." Bhattacharyya reminds her readers that New Labour has made extensive use of ideas from the academy, most famously, those of Anthony Giddens.[7] She observes that the discipline of British cultural studies has affected policy initiatives through the various "associates of the Birmingham center for contemporary cultural studies who, sometimes via Marxism Today [sic], transmute into party advisers and thinktank wonks." But now, she argues, New Labour has forgotten Hall's critical lesson: "Professor Hall berates the Left of the time for failing to recognize the power of Baroness Thatcher's cultural revolution. The challenge was to create a populist politics that reflected the values of social justice—a commonsense that made our way appear to be the obvious and only way." The solution she urges is for cultural studies to renew its interventions in practical politics. What she seems to have in mind is for intellectuals to engage in thoughtful, provocative public conversations that seek to "make better sense of the world" in the style of *New Times*.

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[6] First published by Lawrence & Wishart in 1989, then by Verso in 1990.

Now, what does this have to do with theatre? I propose that theatre is one of the cultural forms that create commonsense. Playwrights practice their theory in public places, staging complex views of social justice through concretely realized characters and locations. Plays (in performance especially) help to shift and even reconfigure what is taken for granted by the public at large. Often they do indeed attempt to make better sense of the world and they do this in diverse and startling ways. I'm looking at play texts in relation to an influential stream of political discourse in order to see how this might work. While there is no precise way to measure shifts in attitude traceable to theatre, it is possible to see how writers caught the winds of change. It's an undertaking in cultural history, or, rather, "a doing" of history in order to think towards future cultural interventions. Reading the stories political theorists and commentators tell about how the world works in the exposed language of political theory helps to uncover versions of the story told through densely woven narratives of character and plot.[8]

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[7] Giddens is a prolific writer on the subject of the so-called "third way" in politics and heads the London School of Economics.

So, the *New Times* authors and their intellectual companions moved the discussion of social justice forward along specific lines. My discussion will concentrate on just a few of the playwrights of the period whose work likewise staged arguments that would engage spectators and "make better sense of the world." Like the political theorists whom Bhattacharyya claims for inspiration, these writers sought to provoke public conversation about social justice. I have selected works that—set into this larger conversation--throw into high relief a series of ideas about how theatre produces and is produced by the free exercise of citizenship (my intro. 1). By reading across play texts and political theory, it is possible to isolate themes that cut across the New Times discussions and resonate through the plays: (1) The shape and role of the modern state; (2) The scope and function of citizenship; (3) The nature of work; (4) The dream of a future utopia. Other questions circulate through the texts as well: Do authoritarian states inevitably produce terror? If state socialism has not led to a classless society, if Marxist teleology has run aground, must we abandon the future? Can the Left re-imagine utopia? What are the mechanisms through which individuals become politically engaged? Can the Left incorporate activisms based in identity rather than class politics? What are the implications of large-scale shifts from heavy manufacturing to service-based economies for class-based and economist forms of analysis derived from Marx? Could consumerism have positive value for a Marxist tradition that privileges the production side of the economic equation? How will the Left address gender and racial politics now that women and immigrants are essential to the labor force? This list of topics and questions, which looks so at home as a description of political commentary, in fact inventories the raw materials in the public conversations that are picked up and woven into the stage plays writers put before us dressed up in wigs and makeup. As noted at the outset, this practice actualizes a longstanding contract between theatre and community members to engage their shared world. The profound reverberations experienced through that engagement are suggested by a brief glimpse not into theatre history, but into the conceptual world of political and social theory. The way in is through Stuart Hall and his many friends.

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[8] See Alan Sinfield on cultural production in *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1989) 23-38.

What ensues is a brief discussion of the political theory surrounding some nodal points that will matter in the following chapters.