

Wall and Bulldozer

John Berger is a British art critic, novelist, painter, and author who lives in France. The best-known among his many works are the novel *G* and his introductory essay on art criticism *Ways of Seeing* and *G*. won the Booker Prize in 1972. When accepting the prize Berger made a point of donating half his cash award to the Black Panther Party and half to support his work on the study of migrant workers, *A Seventh Man*, insisting on both as necessary parts of his political struggle. He holds left-wing, open-ended and undogmatic Marxist views. Here he comments, in the context of student protests in France, on how political leaders have abdicated from politics.

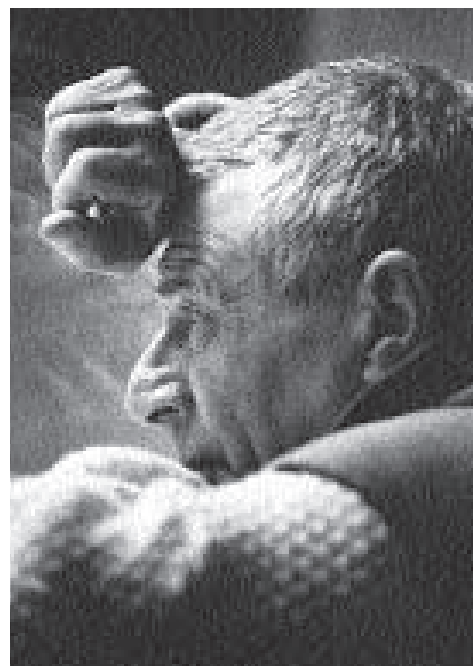
Last night I watched the president (of France) address the nation. Earlier in the week three million people – mostly students – were demonstrating in the streets against the new law which allows firms to take on and then sack young workers indiscriminately. Various commentators compared the extent of the protests – and of the public sympathy with the protesters – to the situation in France in 1968. Here I'm not discussing this historical comparison. I simply want to describe the style of President Chirac's address, for it was in many ways typical of how political leaders – at least in the First World – now address their people.

He was well rehearsed and sure of himself, yet he gave the impression of already knowing that his intervention would change

nothing. All he could do was to make the best of a bad job. He was neither reassuring nor anxious. Time, fatigue and the Forces of Order would, he assumed, finally settle the affair.

In the past political leaders, when addressing the nation, proposed construction. They might exaggerate, minimise the price to be paid, or simply lie; their projects could be as different from one another as the Third Reich, the United States of America or a Socialist Republic. Their propositions nevertheless evoked the realisation of some vision, or the creation of a society which did not yet exist. Construction.

Under other circumstances in the past, political leaders proposed the active defence of already existing institutions and practices, more or less respected by those





French students demonstrate against proposed labour laws



French President, Jacques Chirac

they were addressing, and now considered to be threatened and in danger. Such propositions often led to chauvinism, racism and witch-hunting. Yet their rhetoric encouraged and made real, however briefly, a widespread and lived sense of shared loyalties, during the saving of something.

The rhetoric of today's political leaders serves neither construction nor conservation. Its aim is to dismantle. Dismantle what has been inherited from the past, socially, economically and ethically, and, in particular, all the associations, regulations and mechanisms expressing solidarity.

The End of History, which is the Corporate global slogan, is not a prophecy, but an order to wipe out the past and what it has bequeathed everywhere. The market requires every consumer and employee to be massively alone in the present.

No electorate is yet prepared to accept such a dismantling. And for a simple reason. The act of voting, however manipulated or free the election, is a way of assembling memories in support of a proposed future programme. We touch here the profound contradiction between the tyranny of the world market and democracy, between so-called consumer choice and citizens' rights.

The new law in question, which increases the *précarité* (precariousness) of employment for those who have finished their studies, was officially presented as a

measure, in the short term, for diminishing unemployment.

The existing damage has to be officially admitted, but its causes and its long-term consequences need to be obfuscated and mystified. (Otherwise more discontent, revolts, anger, violence.)

Instead of admitting the existence of the bulldozer which is the modernising machine of today's economic market tyranny, unemployment is referred to as if it were an epidemic or a plague. A fléau (scourge), the president called it.

Consequently the process of dismantling has to be disguised and hidden. And today this is political leaders' first task. Their own role of course is also being dismantled. But they have already chosen to exercise, enjoy and exploit their albeit diminished powers, rather than confront any global truth. It is this which explains their pragmatism combined with their staggering lack of realism. As also their unprecedented shiftiness as politicians. Their task is to prevaricate whilst the broker's deal is arranged elsewhere.

Return now to the typical address of political leaders in the times we're living. Whenever they face contestation, they have to hide what is happening by swiftly erecting a wall of opaque words. The conclusion of Jacques Chirac's address was a perfect example: instead of challenging the false concept of modernisation, its brutal

dismantling is referred to as if it were some chapter in natural science. "The world of work", as the president announced, "in perpetual evolution..."

Such speeches reveal how the political leaders making them have in fact abdicated from politics. Politics are their pretence. And although they are addressing multitudes (20 million in Chirac's case) we should also note how solitary and therefore absurd their public arguments have become.

En République, quand il s'agit de l'intérêt national, il ne saurait y avoir ni vainqueur, ni vaincu. Nous devons maintenant nous rassembler. Et chacun à sa place doit agir en responsabilité. ("In the Republic, when it concerns the national interest, one mustn't think in terms of winners and losers. Let us now all come together. And let each one on his own act with responsibility.")

A verbal wall to hide what is happening. And on the other side of the wall the bulldozer continues to dismantle.

Nonetheless, wall or not, everyone except the rich or those with a good chance of becoming rich, is aware of the dismantling. Hence the three million on the streets. Hence the major national worry about unemployment, about the ever-present risk of unemployment and the increasing workload imposed upon the employed.

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