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Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia

Review by Michael Richardson¹

Introduction

Nostalgia is an aspect of memory that is inflicted by feelings of yearning, loss and grief. Originally considered a medical illness (Bonnett, 2010 see p. 5), nostalgia – which in extreme cases could lead to death from the pain of ‘longing for home’ – underwent nothing short of a re-birth within academia throughout the ‘noughties’. Professor Bonnett’s new work has added significantly to its growing pains. This brief examination of Bonnett’s ‘take’ on *Nostalgia* needs to begin by contextualising the reviewer’s own introduction to this very concept. My first knowledge of nostalgia’s usage within academia came about when Professor Bonnett² announced a research project he was working on titled ‘Urban Memory, Nostalgia, and Use of the City Amongst Ex-Residents of Tyneside’. More recently, in a ‘Geographies of Social Change’ research cluster event in November 2010 held at Newcastle University, Bonnett presented some of the findings from this work.³ He detailed not only his use of nostalgia to elicit memories of ‘ex-urbanites’ of Tyneside, but also detailed how the book *Left in the Past* came to fruition. Citing Svetlana Boym (2001, 355) Bonnett (2010, 1) states: ‘We are all nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic’.

This sentiment was borne out of the ‘pursuit of radicalism’ (Bonnett, 2010, 1) in the post-communist era. In the age of ‘posts’, Bonnett believes nostalgia to be a footnote to post-modernism; that we are uprooted from traditions and we are encouraged to re-appropriate the past by picking and choosing our ‘best bits’. But for Bonnett, as *Left in the Past* shows, nostalgia is more than play in a post-modern framework – it is intrinsically linked with loss. In this mindset, it would be wrong to see nostalgia only after modernity. Yes, modernity produces nostalgia, tradition and traditionalism; but Bonnett points to much earlier times – the early nineteenth century – as the critical period for nostalgia’s first flowering.

Left in the Past – But where?

This book situates nostalgia within a reading of radical history. But what is this history; and how does it interest and affect those within the remit of social science? Bonnett points to three particular arenas of radical left activity: early English socialism (chapter two); anti-colonialism and post-colonialism (chapter three); and situationism and its aftermath (chapter five). It must however, be conceded that, while the author advocates this threefold focus to a better understanding of nostalgia (an approach reflecting his personal interests), no alternative interpretations are offered. Bonnett argues that late nineteenth century uses of ‘the past’ are filtered through an increasingly anti-nostalgic world view. He cites the work of backward looking

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³ See www.tynesidememories.co.uk for project dissemination

socialists⁴ to: ‘explore different ways that radical nostalgia became an increasingly self conscious and unorthodox political trajectory’ (Bonnett, 2010, 11).

Bonnett’s chapter two discusses three of the aforementioned socialists in great detail. His focus is shaped by Morris and Blatchford – both ‘nostalgic radicals’ – and their awareness of the self’s sense of loss and attachment to the past. Conversely, Spence was not categorised under this banner, as the work of state socialists interpreted him in the progressive language employed for themselves. Spence’s ‘parochialism’, his narrow minded ‘traditionalism’ was replaced by a discourse of ‘proletarian’ and ‘embryonic’ communism (Bonnett, 2010, 77). However; recalling that in its introduction, the book claims to structure ‘itself with reading nostalgia against the grain of radical history’ (Bonnett, 2010, 1), an exploration of Morris and Blatchford could be considered contradictory. The author feels that the relationship between modernity and nostalgia revealed by both warrants their inclusion. It is when Bonnett places Blatchford within the wider Clarion Movement⁵ that we see ‘the last major effusion of radical nostalgia within British radicalism’ (Bonnett, 2010, 77). Blatchford claimed to have ‘never read a page of Marx’ (Irving, 2010, online); instead stating that ‘English Socialism is not German: it is English. English Socialism is not Marxian; it is humanitarian. It does not depend upon any theory of ‘economic justice’ but upon humanity and common sense’. This is an interesting notion; and possibly helps explain why Bonnett places such emphasis on the work of early English socialism as nurturing the roots of nostalgia. As Bonnett states baldly, he is ‘interested in any potential overturns and challenges to Marxism’.⁶

The author continues his theoretical and ideological critique of nostalgia in the context of anti and post-colonialism. He frames it as follows: ‘The portrait of post-colonialism that I offer by contrast [to the widely critiqued anti nostalgia], suggests that its concern with essentialism has created a new lexicon of suspicion towards attachments to the past’ (Bonnett, 2010, 12). Bonnett believes that post-colonial theorists are ‘ill equipped’ to marry the concepts of loss and nostalgia. Too often, post-colonialism mirrors the left’s ‘inability’ to deal with political realities (Bonnett, 2010, 108). Post-colonialism does though display strong affiliations with nostalgia. It is the dramatisation of the anti-colonial struggle that provokes nostalgia within post-colonial writing, and what has been coined ‘the profound sense of loss’ (Bonnet, 2010, 88). Almost by definition the author points to anti-colonial resistance as a longing for a freedom of the past, the freedom of the pre-colonial era.

Chapter three links the themes of nostalgia and colonialism, articulated within/by the anti-colonial struggle. Firstly, Bonnett identifies the symbolism and imagery of the pre-colonial ‘Golden Age’ (Bonnett, 2010, 89); secondly, there is an appropriation of socialism as an ‘indigenous tradition’ (ibid); and finally, there is the notion that politics goes ‘back to the people’ (ibid). The book does not merely cite examples from the ‘Global South’, but also from post-colonial Ireland (pertinent to the reviewer’s own research interests).⁷ In all three of these components, there is an association linking ‘the past’ with ‘authenticity’. Bonnett (2010, 89) uses the words of

⁴ Namely Thomas Spence (1982), William Morris (1894) and Robert Blatchford (1908)

⁵ See Manchester Radical History Collective at

<http://radicalmanchester.wordpress.com/2010/08/11/the-clarion-movement/>

⁶ A remark made at the Geographies of Social Change research cluster event

⁷ My PhD studies are currently titled “Irish Masculinities: intergenerationality on Tyneside” *touching* upon at times the post-colonial ethnicity of the Irish Diaspora

George Sigerson⁸ in summary of these ideas: ‘A tone of sincerity in the ancient narratives which cannot exist in imported thought’. The author astutely and fairly reminds us however, of the romanticism often intertwined with nationalist discourse, and employs the work of Smith (1999) to restore balance. Smith talks of the ‘myths’ that are evident in not only the ‘Golden Age’ but also across numerous anti-colonial movements.

Don’t look back in anger – Nostalgia as progression

Chapter five sees the concept of nostalgia being moved away from the backward looking notions espoused by many early English socialists and anti/post-colonialists, to re-settle in a discussion of situationism and what was to follow. In looking at this ‘small band of post war avant-garde Marxists’ (Bonnett, 2010, 12), he notes the challenges they faced in balancing their attachment to the past with their radical ‘new society’ ideologies. Bonnett argues that nostalgia was both ‘productive and disruptive’ (ibid) in influencing situationist political thought, and expands on this through an examination of two major themes - the spectacle, and the critique of urbanism. As a social geographer, and with obvious interest in the latter, the author has my full attention: ‘The Situationist International’s⁹ concern for the demise of the city in the wake of modernising bulldozers suggests a different tendency of nostalgic form and object, a tendency that evokes specific places and specific experiences and memories’ (Bonnett, 2010, 12).

It is at the roots of this organisation where this book points to a specific geography. The situationists’ obsession with the built environment was borne out of their passion for post-war Paris and their opposition to plans to demolish it under the name of modernisation. These road building programmes (amongst other urbanisation proposals) have overlaps with Bonnett’s work among ex-residents of Tyneside; the tension between memories of working class life and its productive and disruptive relationship with modernity. These contentions are wonderfully articulated in the book’s following chapter (six) titled ‘The Psychogeography of Loss’.

In reciting the stories of Iain Sinclair¹⁰ walking around London’s M25, Bonnett (2010, 155) describes it as: ‘a journey in and against the contemporary landscape’. Could we therefore class this as pseudo-situationism? The author definitely points to the work as central to the ‘psychogeographic turn’. It can certainly be considered an original response to the ‘crisis of the left’. Bonnett (2010, 155) explains that psychogeography ‘explores and re-imagines the forgotten nooks and crannies of ordinary landscapes’, fitting neatly then with the original situationists whose nostalgia longed for the old bohemian Paris in the face of the homogenous modernism.

Conclusion

Left in the Past adopts a usefully novel and unique approach to the better understanding of nostalgia. By tracing its roots back to early English socialism, through anti and post-colonialism, onto and beyond situationism, a well rounded discussion of the *Politics of Nostalgia* has been engendered. With research interests in memory, loss and belonging in this ever mobile global society, this reviewer has been

⁸ George Sigerson, Irish nationalist and historian cited by Richards (1991, 120)

⁹ See Situationist International (1958) “Les souvenirs au-dessous de tout” translated according to Bonnett, 2010, 150 as “nostalgia beneath contempt”

¹⁰ The British Novelist, Film maker and Poet, Iain Sinclair – see Sinclair (2003)

provided with much to ponder. Professor Bonnett's erudition of 'the psychogeography of loss' was a natural climax to my learning: 'The double mapping of modernity and nostalgia is then used to imagine a community of creative and other cultural workers who have found a way of being 'at home' and finding friendship in and against an alienated landscape' (Bonnett, 2010, 13).

Not all elements of this book (specifically chapter four and Paul Gilroy's anti nostalgia (Gilroy, 2004) have found their place in this short review. I hope however that readers across the social sciences who share an interest in the concept of nostalgia have been encouraged to pursue their studies further. Bonnett's book is admittedly challenging; not least, because of its (usually necessary) dense language and terminology. Readers of history and politics (among others) may well be better suited than myself to read it. But like Bonnett, I too am interested in people being 'at home' in an 'alienated landscape'; my academic interests have been stimulated and my learning enhanced through the reading of this book. I highly recommend *Left in the Past* to anyone interested in exploring the history of radicalism and/or the politics of nostalgia.

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