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Citizenship and the media

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This paper begins from a definition of the modern polity as characterized by the mutual embedding of politics and media. It sketches the consequences of this state of affairs for 20th century notions of citizenship, arguing that unprecedented knowledge goes hand in hand with more or less complete inefficacy on the part of most citizens. This is the more marked since the ownership of media, defended by those at an advantage as a matter of freedom from partisanship and favour, is now more concentrated than ever before. This bodes ill for citizens whose only foreseeable recourse is to keep up the good but slight work of criticism and intellectual independence.

In 1988, the BBC broadcast a wistful melodrama about a thoroughgoing socialist Prime Minister coming to power in Britain after the discovery of corruption on the Tory Government benches that was so appalling as to rouse the stolid and supine nation's electorate to throw out its rulers in a Labour landslide. During the dazzlingly high-spirited version of election night, which opened the drama (all choreographed to Mozart's C Minor Mass), a routinely bullying newspaper editor-owner is interviewed on TV and challenged for his views on the Labour election slogan, 'One man, one newspaper'.

The moment not only lent a delicious frisson to the baffled and imprisoned Left watching television. It pointedly reminded its audience of the utter failure of one elderly democracy to do anything at all about an affront to its principles as gross as the worst that the early 19th century could do. It is an agreeable gracenote to recall that when *A Very British Coup* was networked by the public broadcasting service of the United States, the programme was fronted by Sir Alistair Cooke, the honorary Anglo-American Knight, who reassured listeners that they would be watching an implausible, amusingly fantastic satire.

For two decades, the British argument about democracy and the media has turned largely upon the question of ownership, and the American one rather more specifically about the egregious omnipresence of advertisements as well as the sheer awfulness of the programmes themselves. In both versions the case has been put, if not by the supporters of socialism, then certainly by the anti-capitalist intelligentsia.

Even since *A Very British Coup* however, what Edward Luttwak[1] characterized as 'turbo-capitalism' has careered roaringly into the future, leaving ever wider depredations behind it and clearing the ground of any obstacles to its progress, like a whirlwind. In the epoch

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of turbo-charged capitalism, legislation to confine one owner to one newspaper in one country has become a lot less relevant to anyone keeping vigil for democracy. It is not without importance, of course, how few people own the newspapers of Britain. Nor how few of the same people own great slices of the television broadcasting spectrum, nor that those men themselves show a striking lack of inhibition about directing the system they own to their own advantage and to the eradication of any voices that object.

However, what really counts, and is observable over the last dozen or so years, is the advent of this new and savage version of capitalism, a creature that in becoming global has made itself capable of throwing off the never very strong restraints of liberal governments in the name of the profitable casualization of labour, and the reduction of the power of trade unions. The application of ruthless productivity criteria in this highly insecure ecology is used to dismiss as many purportedly surplus staff as possible ('down-sizing' in the revolting jargon of managerialism).

The march of this fearsome beast has been cheered on by liberal governments of a free market persuasion in the rich nations of the world precisely because of that liberalism. The principles of liberalism, whether in its tough egg or its soft-hearted versions, have put the free choice of individuals at the centre of life's values and meanings to determine the good life (or the bad one) within the space of that freedom, and without too much interruption of the adjacent space of the individual alongside.

New capitalism meets and embraces the free individual and invites him or her to define and fulfil that freedom by buying and consuming the goods it can now so freely produce unhampered by the residual and sentimental weight of welfare, overmanning, inefficiency and state interference.[2]

In the pure version of this scheme of things, individuals live to the full in their private, leisure and 'free' lives and times, where they can buy and consume what they choose. They are protected by their civil and political rights from the interference of the state and the political dangers of a totalitarianism still much invoked by populists as the nightmare promise held out by anybody of socialist persuasion.

However, the freely consuming, nucleated family is falling victim to a different totalitarianism. The new capitalism in all its sedulously 'deregulated' muscularity has moved smoothly past the merely civil obstacles to its invasion. It has dissolved the strong but unprotected bonds of class and neighbourhood, and where it found itself checked by political barriers, as was the case with trade unions, the unique power of capital itself buckled and broke those barriers until the system was satisfied it could go on its way.

As a result, home, identity, the mutuality of strangers and the meaning of civic pride and, indeed, of patriotism, have been worn pale and thin. They can scarcely hold individuals in a place to which they may belong or in a frame of activity whose narrative is continuous and intelligible. The old story of *work*, the key value of the labour culture,[3] giving menfolk the confidence and self-possession of craft, class and solidarity, and *home*, giving womenfolk authority, neighbourhood, respect, action, has become attenuated. People can see through it. But in the present blank arena of consumer life, they cannot imagine a new story with which to keep capitalism at bay. The only tale to tell at the present replays the limited plot of happy self-indulgence, cheerful consumption, and 'mobile privatization'. It is the everyday story of the folk in the advertisements and it is the endlessly iterated fiction of the soaps. One of the

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two or three unmistakable masterpieces to be broadcast on British television since 1979, *Boys from the Blackstuff*, chronicles its collapse with a wonderful truthfulness that was recognized countrywide.

'Mobile privatization' is Raymond Williams's slogan by which he sought to catch and hold that large tendency of the well-off two-thirds of the rich nations of the world to shut themselves off from social intercourse either in the home or in the car (itself a rapidly moving extension to the home, as somebody pointed out years ago). The landscapes of culture and politics are then drawn across the television screen or the windscreen, and we watch them, at a safe distance, from our sitting room on the back seat.

There is much to be said for this sombre account of what Adorno foresaw as consumer totalitarianism;[4] but it does not say everything. As Adorno also saw, consumer culture holds out the promise of happiness even as it constantly breaks that promise by staining its fulfilment first with envy, then with disappointment, finally with resentment. What used to be called, in a non-philosophical sense, the materialism of those social classes with neither capital nor savings but who bought washing machines and televisions by hire purchase was, in truth, a deep want for an ideal home, which capitalism was happy to provide for a nicely turned price. Washing machines got rid of the backbreaking labour of the women who did the family laundry. Television gave them the delights of absorbing and recognizable fiction to fill and fulfil the time once spent upon that repetitious drudgery.

Nor can these purchases be easily understood by the clumsy metaphor of 'consumption'.[5] Washing machines are hardly consumer goods; they are inexhaustible and unexploitable substitutes for domestic servants (paid or not). Audiences do not 'consume' television programmes; they use and abuse them according to a plural taxonomy of pleasures both emancipatory and regressive.

These reminders of the queasiness of some of our habitual allocations – 'consumerism', 'privatization' and the like – can only serve as momentary solace in the face of the malediction to be spoken over turbo-charged capitalism. That is, the retreat of our citizens from public life; the painful reduction of the grand aspirations of Romanticism to the trifling choices of the megamarket, whether shopping in the mall or from Ceefax.

In the absence of war, that same capitalism has not only made social life abominably insecure, it has driven the people from the streets such that they may be hemmed in at home as obedient choosers and buyers of those delicious goods they cannot quite afford but are encouraged to obtain by means of the magic card that temporarily turns debt into credit.

Beneath a sky filled with these forces, the autonomous individual keeps up some kind of resistance, of course. But without working discipline, the tradition of craft, the settlement of neighbourhood or, indeed, without even the certainty of home, the poor creature can only live for a touch of Saturday night fever or an annual package to the Balearic Islands.

The noble tradition of the citizen has been cut off. Private lives are where we must live; public life will be lived on our behalf by public figures. 'Don't you try to live in public yourself, madam; you'll only get hurt. Far better go home and watch the famous do it for you'.

It was Quentin Skinner who solitarily but vigorously pointed out[6] that, if liberal societies are to continue to justify their etymological basis in liberty, they had better look to its public defence. Liberty, as lived in private, is continuously encroached upon and diminished, and can

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only be defended and renewed by a display of public spirit. Free choice among trivial goods is not liberty at all.

If this is right, then the rediscovery of an ideal of citizenship is overdue. Liberal individuals seek the liberty to do as they wish, compatible with not infringing the liberty of others similarly in search of their own satisfaction. But where capital seeks always to define and direct wants and purposes to its own advantages, liberty along with happiness no less than virtue all become distorted in the name of profit. Society is then run for the benefit of the economy, as happened in Britain for the long duration of Thatcherism.

Beating back this pervasiveness is both a cultural and a political matter, a hard distinction to make in practice when the triumphs of new late capitalism have been to transform the political economy into the culture of domestic life. Reinventing citizenship when the space of the citizenry is confined to the audience's seats in front of a television spectacular may simply not be possible. The stirring slogans of the Situationists, long dismissed as a crazy residue of 1968, may now be read as empirical truths.

> The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images. The oldest social specialization, the specialization of power, is at the root of the spectacle. The spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image. This is the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by 'intangible as well as tangible things', which reaches its absolute fulfilment in the spectacle.[7]

If this is right, then the best we can do is diagnose the condition of our own passivity. It is no longer possible to *act* as citizens.

The lie, of course, is given to this serenely French determinism by the events of 1989. In 1989, that traditional agency of history, the *people*, issued into the streets and public squares of Leipzig, Gdansk, Berlin, Prague and Bucharest, in order to object to the 40-year old vileness, obduracy and incompetence of their dictatorial governments. It took, at first, considerable courage to turn out, watched by television audiences the world over. It fairly took everyone's breath away, the crowds in the street and the crowds at the screen, when this spontaneous gesture of moral revulsion brought *all* the relevant governments down and the Berlin Wall with them, and ended the Cold War in a few weeks.

It was a wonderful dawn in which to feel blissful. Of course, in the few years since then things have not turned out quite so well and new governments have proved as untrustworthy and as ideological as the old ones. What is now common *worldwide* is a quite extraordinary degree of contempt and suspicion of politicians as a class and government as an institution. Trust, as Locke pointed out in *The Two Treatises on Government*, is the crucial value of any non-despotic polity, and it is trust that is now seriously corroded in so many places.

This is a tricky matter to interpret. For in the wealthy societies that this brief essay addresses, it is plain to see that social structures are rock solid. The spectre of revolution, recently so familiar in the rhetoric of Europe and North America, has vanished. The unmistakable dangers of the city street, the violence of the police and the routine miscarriages of justice, threaten no social order. Yet, at the same time, politics and politicians are generally believed to be corrupt, self-seeking, remote and arbitrary. They often are, they always have been. At the same time, other corners of politics have become enlightened, generous, open and accessible.

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What has changed has been the disappearance of civil society. The rise of the new capitalism and the collapse of old socialism have together wiped out great tracts of that social life where the institutions of power and government mingled with those many configurations of sociable life as they touched upon the questions of state and upon passages between private and public life, and the easy movement of individuals.

In Britain, this change has manifested itself in the shrinking of local government and in the return to a Hanoverian version of patronage where toadies and stooges have been appointed to run local affairs with neither the endorsement of a vote nor a duty to candour or honour. In North America, the great offices of Senate and Congress are auctioned off to a rich ruling class without a tradition of class responsibility but with an ignorant, sentimental detestation of civic and collective action.

Ruling classes have rarely been any good at ruling, and have always been liable to charges of veniality, cruelty, and stupidity. The whole point of the State ever since its inception in the imaginations of Hobbes, Milton, Harrington and company, as they argued over the rights and wrongs of the Commonwealth in 17th century England, has been to hold tyrants down and prevent their being quite so tyrannical. Liberal capitalism has so cut down liberty that it has become little more than the freedom to choose the adornments of private lives. Glowing and stupendous as these may certainly be, they can hardly fill a life and they cannot animate a citizen.

As far as the ruling classes are concerned, there is everything to be said for a supine public that lives entirely in private, and takes all its pleasures at home. A vigorous civility in civic places is always difficult to manage in a democracy, and management is always eager to assert the 'right to manage', including manipulating people well away from any space they might invent in order to act in concert.

Television has taught its entranced audiences that meaning is found in small rooms and private lives, that intimacy is always to be preferred to politeness, that friends matter more than strangers; that home is the only place you can feel at home, and is alone the realm of efficacious action. As for acting anywhere else, at work, for instance, or in the street or the square, there is nothing anyone can do, is there?

But this is not all that television has had to teach. For sure it teaches that private life is best. The boredom, the horror, and the glory of our domesticities mark the place where we do our living. But television also taught (in 1968 and 1989 for instance) that unless we turn out into the streets from time to time in order to stand up for those private lives, they will not be *worth* living. Citizenship is required of us, if we are to be free in private.

Here, we collide with a deep contradiction in modern society. It is that television is now conterminous with politics. Everybody understands this fact intuitively (none more so than politicians), but nobody knows what to do about it. What *can* such a claim signify? It has four implications that make the self-reporting, self-broadcasting society historically unprecedented and in need of a quite new self-conception. It may be that this previous point leads to the conclusion that, in coming to a firm realization of this conception, a polity will conclude that it also needs a new constitution. Indeed, if my claim about it is true, it *has* a new constitution – it is newly constituted – and this conclusion will also require new kinds of legislative acknowledgement. My point for the time being is, however, about the nature of this self-conception.

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It should be said straight away that the self-reporting society is essentially the society as broadcast by radio, print and television, *and the two as mutually embedded.* The political argument, in my judgement, is not affected by all the contemporary delirium about the internet and the information superhighways. These are politically important only insofar as they subtend the terrific *authority* of broadcasting, which is a function of its public status and publicity.

This is, precisely, the first and most prominent of the four features of the self-reporting, self-broadcasting polity. The form, content, genre and detail of public communication combine in their unique authority. This public conversation, and those hired or called to conduct it, embody a strange mixture of the sacred and the profane, but those holding the conversation wear either set of robes with the spectacular, effortless aura of *celebrity*. What is said in that conversation is rarely causal or efficacious, it is never inconsequential.

The second feature of the self-reporting polity is in what it *knows*. This fact takes the measure of the contradiction between the drives of consumer totalitarianism and an unprecedentedly knowledgeable, globally aware (globally anxious also), and politically uncertain audience. It is an audience that lives, as a result of its knowledge, in a state of moral and cognitive diffusion. That is to say, it knows more than ever before about the news of the world and the state of the nation, but has no idea what to do about them. Its most obvious feature is its knowledge, especially about the present, but its membership lacks the lenses of attention with which to sort and criticize what it knows into a usable hierarchy.

The third feature of the self-reporting polity is its remarkable narrative grasp. Raymond Williams wrote:

> … we have never as a society acted so much or watched so many others acting … drama, in quite new ways, is built into the rhythms of everyday life. On television alone it is normal for viewers – the substantial majority of the population – to see anything up to three hours of drama, of course, drama of several different kinds a day. And not just one day; almost every day. This is part of what I mean by the dramatised society.[8]

I take it that the human propensity for storytelling has always been our best aid in explaining the world to ourselves. Time was the available narrative of a culture (and, as Clifford Geertz says,[9] a culture simply *is* its stock of narratives) bound its listeners by the mesmerism of the storyteller into a collective understanding. Those days have been done for by the individualism of the Romantic movement and its transmutation into the thousands of narratives now daily available with which we may probe, interpret, explain, anaesthetize, or plan for our everyday experience. As never before, the tales of film and television make available – as the useful and critical instruments of our thought and feeling – an endless supply of *theory*. Confidently, clearly, often mistakenly or mendaciously, but nonetheless always, we can offer an opinion on the way things are. Empowerment has no doubt become a cant word, but it cannot be doubted that television empowers, especially the powerless.

The powerless, however, are still powerless; and that goes for most of us. The fourth feature of the self-reporting, self-broadcasting polity, is its distancing and disembodiment. The life pictured on the screen has its lived location somewhere behind the windless spaces from which the particles of light swim up and coalesce along 625 lines irrigated by three primary colours. We know and recognize that life, but we cannot touch it and, as a result, it cannot touch us.

Writing of photographs, Roland Barthes noted that most prompt only 'the *average* effect"',

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what Barthes calls the *studium*, 'a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment … but without special acuity'.[10] This general ground of interest is split by what Barthes calls the *punctum*, literally, a small wound or puncture, which sharpens general attention into human connection. One could say it turns the calm surface of sympathy into a momentum with a clear current.[11] The movement from calm surface to clear current turns the spectator into citizen.

Citizen eh?; under which king? To speak of nation or society, to use the endearing archaism 'polity', is to seem to be blind to the transnational tides of turbo-capitalism, where the demon kings of media – News International, Time-Warner. Bertelsmann, Kirch, Packer – seek whom they may devour in an effort to break the power of lesser buccaneers. But this also applies to mere public broadcasters in petty nations, by sailing high out of their reach on the satellites, while robbing people of their very own culture in order to sell it back in a dish receiver.

There is no commonly heeded narrative of citizenship that could curb these whirlwinds in space. Citizenship as a political ideal was briefly restored to the academic idiom of Britain by T.H. Marshall[12] shortly after the second world war. In spite of considerable privations, the moment of the Attlee Government was one of overwhelming optimism. Marshall shared this feeling, and his classic restatement which Mill, poised between liberalism and socialism, would have endorsed, identified three realms of the deserving citizen's roles and of the narratives these roles betoken.

The first of these is the civil realm, in which citizens exercise the classic rights of individual freedom: freedom *from* arbitrary arrest; *from* interference with free speech, belief and thought; freedom *of* property and *of* legal access. The second is the political realm, in which citizens are free to take part in government without limit as to personal wealth or status. The third is the social or mutual realm, in which a sufficient freedom of personal being and movement is assured by a minimum share in the collective wealth of a society, and the safeties guarded by such benign features as national insurance, free medical care and social benefits promised in defence against the terrors of time and chance.

These great victories of a hard-won citizenship have found themselves in much reduced circumstances of late. Merely to chronicle them is a reminder of how soundly left and liberal progressives neglected their duties of vigilance over public freedoms during the 1980s, and slept on the watch. But with the most watchful will in the world, it is hard to see what bearing Marshall's tripartite treaty could have upon a world (not a nation) in which the media privateers have swept past such little local defences of honest citizens as rights, representation, and a modest wage.

The modern citizen is better educated than ever before, and cognitively more resourceful than any predecessor. This same citizen is also more completely without representation in the face of the viziers and caliphs of knowledge and narrative than anyone answering to the title since the revolutionaries of America and France in 1776 and 1789. He and she have been driven into isolation and helplessness by deliberate government policies and by the omnipresence of consumerism and its irresistible hypnotists, the advertisers. What then is to be done?

It is useless to list expectations of a quite unfeasible sort in present politics. A daydreaming manifesto calling for public ownership of the means of communication and for drastic limitations to be placed upon the acquisitions and distributions of the vast media empires can only command an audience among the dotty sectarians of powerless old Spartacists.

Originally, the public sphere was defined as intrinsically the realm of private citizens. When

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newspapers and journals of opinion first came into being in post-Restoration England, it was precisely their function to be the organs of critical debate for the operation of the new bourgeoisie in opposition to the calm presumption of power by the agents of old corruption. Similarly it was the *point* of the 19th century artisan press, which the State itself attempted to extinguish with the Stamp Tax, that it remain solidly in the hands of this new, self-conscious and insurgent class. Their press would name old corruption for what it was in the accents of William Cobbett and Francis Place, Samuel Bamford and Thomas Frost. It could only do so if that class kept the ownership to itself.

It was across the century and a half from the inception of Addison's *Tatler* to the extraordinary crop of pamphlets about 'the condition of England' in the 1840s that the intelligentsia was born as the voice of bourgeois and artisanal dissent. As public opinion itself came to be the Polyphemus which power must somehow mollify, the intellectuals formed themselves into what Max Weber termed a *Stand*, or status-group, whose business was to serve and sway public opinion, and to speak for it *against* the larger, protean monster that the State was becoming. Habermas wrote:

> According to the liberal model of the public sphere, the institutions of the public engaged in rational-critical debate were protected from interference by public authority by virtue of their being in the hands of private people.[13]

Belief in the liberal model held up, and *was* held up as a self-serving bit of mythology by the press barons. They kept newspapers privately owned on a vast scale, and of inestimable power, to pervade popular passions and keep reason enslaved.

Technology came to the aid of these barons. One or two nations, especially Britain and its former dominions, kept faith with liberal principles sufficiently to establish semi-independent broadcasting stations. Seventy years after the foundation of the BBC and forty after the IBA, the two corporations flounder against the sweeping energies of international capital as it strips them of content and beams its theft to satellites far beyond the control of individual governments.

The monopolizing and global grasp of new capitalism together with the communicative technology that it commands now means that, instead of informed and educated publics using these media as the arena of public debate and storytelling, the media themselves – supremely, television of course – shape debate and organize the stories for their own purpose: and that purpose is the marginal rate of profit.

In these circumstances, it is extremely difficult to imagine a picture of citizenship that is not anachronistic and delusive. Naturally, one puts one's faith, with Wordsworth, in 'certain inherent and indestructible properties of the human mind'. Naturally, also, there are active contradictions and oppositions *within* media. Mr Murdoch does not get things all his own way. There are still hosts of journals of radical opinion rising and falling. Independent film and television production companies, and even the BBC, still make programmes and dramas against the grain of kitsch and commerce. The good citizen needs from time to time to take heart from a specific example of a story capable of calling fellow-citizens back to a sense of civic duty. Citizenship must have an imaginative life as well as an institutional life, or it is nothing.

Edge of Darkness was made by the BBC and shown in 1985. I take it to be one of the most remarkable works of art made for British television. It is what Vladimir Nabokov once

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called 'topical trash'. That is to say, its subject matter was the most everyday and urgent of fears. It exuded what at first looks like pious concern for superstitious environmentalism. It was very specific about real events: its action included the very NATO commanders' conference held at the Gleneagles Hotel in Scotland in 1985, hard by the venerable golf links, at which Reagan's negotiating policy for Reykjavik was prepared. Television is nothing if not topical. In addition, however, *Edge of Darkness* settled viewers into the cold war frame of feeling and onto the edge of their seats by hanging out all the usual thriller signs – the smell of duplicity, the secret-service paraphernalia. Then it simply walked away from them, and viewers on the edge of their seats were left there, looking for the wrong climax.

The beloved daughter of Ronnie Craven, a widower policeman, is inexplicably murdered as he brings her home in the rain after a student political meeting. She is blasted with a shotgun as they walk toward their village house in Yorkshire (near the end of the five-hour-long series we learn quite casually that on the spot where she died a spring gushed out where no spring had ever been before!). Craven discovers that she had been an active member of a secret Green group that has penetrated hidden underground vaults where nuclear waste is stored and uncovered deals between US and British corporations in weapons-grade plutonium.

Through the action ran the leitmotif of a mysterious freight train carrying millions of years worth of radioactive sludge, trundling and clanking over points, as such trains do around us every day.

The police know who the killer is; a hit man from Northern Ireland, where Craven – the mute and anguished hero – had been a crack interrogator. Craven baits the killer to his house, again in torrential rain. At the moment when the killer, a shotgun poking into Craven's neck, is about to tell him why he shot the girl, he is shot himself by watcher-police above the house.

The girl, a beautiful, big-eyed, cheerful Yorkshire lass, helps her father as a ghost. Sometimes a little girl, sometimes an eerie, reassuring presence, she is ghostly in the way the dead are to those who loved them and to whom they were as familiar as breathing or loved music. She disappears only when something in her father's feeling goes wrong. Craven is joined in his pursuit of the truth by a devil-may-care CIA man, Colonel Darius Jedbergh, who is under enigmatic orders to 'break into the ball park and steal the ball'. Jedbergh has already infiltrated the Greens and helped them get into the plutonium store so that he can report to US intelligence the records of their plutonium, which the British keep so dark. But now something cheerful and attractive and anarchic breaks out in him, the duplicity in which he thrives subsides, and Jedbergh speaks as simply as Deerslayer of the war between good and evil, the future of the planet. His English ally in this special relationship, rationalist and empirical and domestic to the soles of his caving boots, wants knowledge, not revenge. In this case, however, knowledge would be as good as revenge.

They enter the labyrinthine plutonium store together, guided by an old acquaintance of Craven's, a leader of the National Union of Miners who has both secret responsibilities for the underground store and charges of ballot-rigging pending against him. The elderly miner helps them out because, as he says, he 'hasn't sold out completely'. The trio silhouette a new political alliance ranged against the reckless new freebooters of an economy run wild who will take *any* risks with the future of the world for the sake of the profits and a thin line of advantage. They are the most fearsome soldiers guarding the New World Order that will

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replace the cold war. They are the strategists of what Raymond Williams, a couple of years before *Edge of Darkness* was shown, called 'Plan X'.

> Plan X is sharp politics and high-risk politics. It is easily presented as a version of masculinity. Plan X is a mode of assessing odds and of determining a game plan… To emerge as dominant it has to rid itself, in practice, whatever covering phrases may be retained, of still powerful feelings and habits of mutual concern and responsibility. At the levels at which Plan X is already being played, in nuclear arms strategy, in high-capital advanced technologies, in world-market investment policies, and in anti-union strategies, the mere habits of struggling and competing individuals and families, the mere entertainment of ordinary gambling, the simplicities of local and national loyalties … are in quite another world. Plan X, that is to say, is by its nature not for everybody. It is the emerging rationality of self-conscious elites … [and] it is its emergence as the open common sense of high-level politics which is really serious. As distinct from mere greedy muddle, and from shuffling day-to-day management, it is a way – a limited but powerful way – of grasping and attempting to control the future.[14]

Plan X in *Edge of Darkness* is enacted by an insolent Tory minister, a cold, hard, youthful English businessman who owns the mines and drowns all trespassers, and a neat, boyish, middle-aged American who is an evangelical of the space-travelling future and the vizier of the plutonium bazaar.

The two heroes find the hot cell by way of tunnels and vaulted rooms hollowed out by miners' hands more than a hundred years before – 'Victorian values, Mr. Craven'. (They also find a nuclear war retreat and museum store built just after the Cuban crisis, sheltering a whole vintage of chateau-bottled St. Julien and the best concert LPs of the day.) After breaking into the cell, they shoot their way out and, fatally irradiated, steal two blocks of plutonium in a green Harrods bag, and escape to break the news.

Driven by their different recklessnesses, each is now doomed to die. Jedbergh goes off to Gleneagles, leaving a trail of CIA corpses behind him. At the hotel, in an effort to push the story out into the public domain and thereby to save it, he clashes his two plutonium pieces together in the face of his evangelical enemy. The generals, admirals and technocrats pile out of the conference hall in undignified terror.

No news escapes. Jedbergh primes his deadly stuff into a crude but serviceable atom bomb. ('Plutonium may not be user-friendly but as a means of restoring one's self-respect it has a lot going for it.') Craven tracks him down and, for Scotland's sake, reports his whereabouts. Craven's ghost-daughter visits him and leaves him a flower of the hardy black alpine perennial that she loved and which lives above the snowline of the unreceded ice age. Jedbergh chooses death in a bloody shoot-out; Craven sits it out with whisky in the kitchen. In the last shots, the plutonium in its improvised bomb is safely winched from the loch while the dying man watches alone from the top of a rockface. The wind whistles thinly through clumps of the black flower as the credits roll.

Maybe some improbabilities are too much: the news of Jedbergh's conjuring with plutonium would certainly have leaked out. The underground gun battle would not have been quite so crass. The Greenpeace environmentalism is a bit kitsch, and Jedbergh is too much altogether. (In one exquisite touch, we learn that his passion besides golf is watching TV ballroom dancing.) But these faults are trifles in a narrative that so masterfully gathers up the themes of Plan X and connects them with the ordinary details of British political life. *Edge of Darkness* ties together the commonplace murderousness of Northern Ireland, the arrogance of a party

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too long in power, the always faltering nature of an economy whose leaders will try anything for the sake of profitability, and the lived concerns of a new, intelligent generation convinced that the rich world must revere the authority of the planet before that authority exacts the obedience that is due.

Edge of Darkness is still shown and still popular. But it is fifteen years old and there hasn't been much like it since. Moreover, as is obvious, narratives-for-audience may rouse to action – they *are* actions in themselves – but they also offer no way of *living* the social and unequal relationship between the sparse institutions of civic life and the massive ubiquity of broadcasting.

For a long time, things have looked bleak for citizens. Our picture of the public interest is shaped by private capital. Television imagines few alternative tales for us with which to criticize the present. Civic society has pretty well shrunk to the clean, well-lighted space of consumer choice.

Some remedies are obvious: assign public events and public moments to public broadcasting. Enlarge the advertising levy to fund production companies. In Britain, turn the BBC into its own licensing authority, and remove the Home Secretary's powers to set the licence. In North America, fund PBS federally. Control press holdings ('one man, one newspaper') by the Monopolies Commission. Encourage (with cash grants) publicly owned local radio. Appoint governors and regulators by vote.

This *is* a wish-list, there is no chance of its happening. In which case, the only hope for public spirit is to support the academic intellectual (Raymond Williams); the travelling, bloody-minded journalist (Christopher Hitchens); the dissenting film-maker (Ken Loach); the determined independent producer (Phillip Whitehead); the caustically lucid television interviewer (Eleanor Goodman): the public, political poet (Tony Harrison).

The names are British: the roles are international; the moral meaning irreplaceable. The only thing the intellectual can do today is *warn*. The citizen lives a private life, keeping up his or her education as a citizen, polishing old duties in the quiet of abeyance.

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