

Erasing the Past

John Berger

Facing page: John Berger's portrait of Alexandra, the doctor from Kursk. His latest books are Here is Where We Meet (Bloomsbury, 2005), Hold Everything Dear (Verso, 2007) and The Red Tenda of Bologna (Drawbridge Books, 2007). More information about The Drawbridge, an exciting new journal, is available online (www.thedrawbridge.org.uk).

Appearances like words can also be read and, amongst appearances, the human face constitutes one of the longest texts.

Alexandra visited Paris for the first time in her life – she's 83 – this spring. Until a couple of years ago she practised medicine in Moscow. She was born in Kursk, 800km to the south of the capital. Thanks to Russian friends I met her and the four of us had supper together at a table in a suburban garden towards the south of Paris.

I asked her what had made her decide to study medicine. The countless dying and wounded during the battle of Kursk, she replied. It was this battle, following Stalingrad, which directly opened the way for the Red Army's advance towards Berlin. The conversation in the garden continued slowly. She looks considerably younger than she is, and she has a way of talking which is aerial, casual and, at the same time, considered. The light faded, we brought out candles. Listening to her could bring you to Heidegger's insight that 'language is the house of being'; she makes you at home in this house.

When she qualified as a doctor in the 1950s, she was immediately dispatched to a uranium mine in Turkmenistan. The miners were *zeks*, political prisoners, from the Gulag. The USSR at that time urgently needed uranium to make its bombs, and thus to achieve nuclear parity with the USA and establish the 'mutual deterrence' that lasted until 1989.

After a few years nearly all the uranium miners foreseeably succumbed to cancer. As I did, said Alexandra. I prayed and I recovered and I returned to Moscow where I practised for a further forty years as a paediatrician.

Whilst she spoke, ate and laughed in the garden.

How do you explain your energy?

People! It's simple, I love people.

I had an insistent urge to draw her. I caught her eye and she nodded.

Before she rose to leave, I asked her to

choose between the two drawings I'd made. She chose the weaker of the two. I think deliberately; she wanted me to keep the firmer one.

* * *

The same week in the international press there was a photo of Bernard Kon, a 97-year-old Polish engineer living in Warsaw, who risked – according to a proposed new law – to lose his small state pension because he had volunteered in 1937 for the International Brigade and fought for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War.

The expression of his eyes has something in common with that in Alexandra's eyes. Perhaps because the two of them saw some of the same things. Side by side their faces speak of personal achievements (and pain) which do not need to be acknowledged, for both of them, in their different ways, exude a sense, in part tragic and in part triumphant, of having chosen to tend to, and to pay attention to history, and thus to belong to it. And, strangely, it is this belonging that allows each of them to have such a distinct identity.

Fortunately the new law which threatened Bernard Kon and thousands of others is being declared unconstitutional, but the wiping-out-communism operation of the twin scarecrows Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski (President and then Prime Minister of Poland) continues, and is typical of many political initiatives today.

In choosing not to read the complex experiences of history, the ubiquitous aim of such initiatives is to erase the past, and thus to reduce all political choices to what is on instant display.

To put it graphically, the long text of the human face is being reduced to a mug shot.

* * *

If we had not mined the uranium to manufacture nuclear weapons, Alexandra said in the garden, we would have become an American colony.

The drawing of Alexandra was still on the table when I was reading the proofs of Naomi Klein's inestimably important book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism**. In it she studies the career of the notorious economist Milton Friedman. Considered as a theorist, Friedman is somewhat reminiscent of Dr. Strangelove: a story of dogmatism, innocence, cynicism and a dream of being seen as a saviour. (He got a Nobel Prize.) He claimed that undistorted, 'pure' economies could settle everything. He has the face of a smiley uncle, who has never, never been out of doors, and who takes you to the window to explain what is and is not important in life.

He was also, however, a practical politician whose record is ruthless. He recognized from the beginning that his 'pure' solution to the human predicament would never be accepted by those on whom it was imposed, unless they were in a state of dire shock.

For people to go along with the dismemberment of social aid, the abolition of a minimal wage and of any control over working conditions, the privatization of social services, equal taxes for rich and poor, the loss of any legal right to effective

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protest, for people to accept this deal (the polar opposite of Roosevelt's New Deal), they had first to suffer economic disaster and become panic-stricken.

This is the 'shock doctrine' which, for some time, has permeated and determined the global decisions of the G8, the World Bank, the IMF, the strategists of the CIA and – occasionally – the US Armed Forces. Sometimes the shock is totally engineered as in Chile (1973); sometimes it is opportunistically appropriated, as in Russia (1991) or South Africa (1996).

The startling revelation of Klein's book is that those who advocate and instigate Friedman's 'economic shock' were and are closely associated with the CIA teams (see the Kubark manual) working on techniques of coercive cross-questioning under physical shock – that's to say torturing prisoners.

One month before he was assassinated, my friend Orlando Letelier, Allende's Minister of Defence, made exactly the same connection between what was happening to the Chilean economy and to his comrades in prison. Orlando had the face of a singer for whom every song might be the last.

The two types of shock are different and they devastate in different ways. One is solitary and physical: the other collective and ontological. The first is mercilessly produced by electroshocks (assiduously studied by the CIA since the 1950s) and sensory deprivation. The second is produced by supervising and stage-managing an economic collapse, dismantling every previous social infrastructure, carefully timing a period of abject poverty and panic, and then cynically stepping forward with false promises. Both types of shock are applied in order to smash resistance, and this is done by first destroying the subject's sense of identity.

Those who administer the shocks – be they torturers, economists or scarecrows – have learnt, after fifty years of experiment, that the most effective way of destroying people's sense of identity is to systematically dismantle and fragment the story they have so far told themselves about their own lives, to erase the past.

The past once erased, any variant of a slogan which, despite its pretended innocence, is politically corrupt, may be used: Clean Break. Fresh Start. New Beginning. Such is the demagoguery of neo-liberalism.

* * *

Alexandra was sitting in the garden during the French presidential election campaign. The style of the two principal candidates was remarkable for its rejection of explanations. Neither explained what is happening in the world, the impact of those happenings on France, or what the foreseeable consequences and, therefore, choices are likely to be. Both were mapless. And they were mapless because they did not dare to speak about history.

Such a conspiracy of silence changes profoundly the nature of an election. The first democratic principle is that the elected remain accountable to those who elected them: how they govern will later be assessed by those they govern. To put it differently: the elector's questioning of the elected has, in the long term, a role in the process of decision making. A dialectic of argument replaces blind, undemocratic obedience.

If candidates do not outline their vision of the epoch they're living in and lay out their proposed strategy for survival, if this remains unsaid and unread, the electorate cannot fulfil their dialectical role, for there has been no dialogue about the essentials. When a candidate is, or pretends to be, mapless, the electorate is reduced to being a dray-horse.

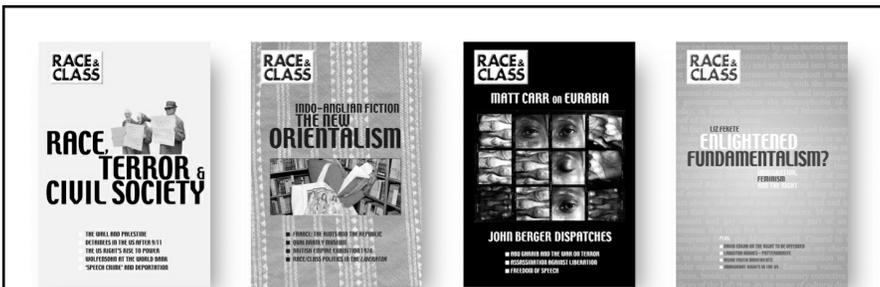
What I call a reading of history implies a shared taking into consideration of events, their causes and their consequences, a discussion about the possible margins of manoeuvre (history is seldom generous), and then the presentation and explanation of a policy. Promises made without this are all delinquent.

I suspect President Sarkozy because he has the economic shock doctrine up his sleeve.

Fifty years ago, Alexandra said, the value of human life was different.

I look again at Alexandra's face as she sat in the garden and I recall a sentence by Anton Chekhov, who was also a doctor. 'The role of the writer is to describe a situation so truthfully ... that the reader can no longer evade it.' We today with our lived historical experiences, which the political machines are trying to erase, have to be both that reader and writer ... it's within our power.

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