

The hopes of political economy

Angela Mitropoulos

Review | Ghassan Hage, **Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society** (2003)

World War returned. To be sure, wars never really ended, in that they continued to lay waste to much of the world since the Second World War was declared over and, ceremonial announcements aside, in that the war in Iraq has been ongoing since 1991. And yet, it is still I think true to say that war has returned as World War—war as the blunt instrument with which the world is given form and meaning. In the lifeless register of economics, what was staked on this war was not precisely oil but nothing less than the global currency. In other words: the proprietorship of the universal medium through which power is reckoned and made real, granted the global measure of the world market in oil, post-war reconstruction and lives. Which is also to say that war is no longer circumscribed by official declarations of beginnings and ends. The so-called War on Terrorism enshrines a permanent state of war as norm, even while its presentation on the nightly news maintains the conventional narrative rhythms of beginning, spectacular climax and triumphal finish—with gripping sequels and spin-offs promised. In the execution of such a war there is little distinction between psychic and political economy: global war—that is: total war—presupposes the affective as well as physical mobilisation of populations, the circulation of values as well as valuations. So, thinking seriously about the connections between affective states and the effectivity of particular political-economic formations is more than urgent.

Ghassan Hage's recent collection of essays, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, is subtitled as a search for "hope in a shrinking society." On topics ranging from Australian 'Border Protection' to suicide bombings to the fundamentalism of the Howard Government, Hage contends that the absence of hope or, rather, the dwindling of a "surplus of hope" has produced an inhospitable, paranoid world—a world in which each "breath of fresh air becomes imagined as the line behind which the enemy (always ready to infiltrate the nation) lurks." (p.46) Very few writers in Australia come close to unravelling the complex unions of racism, nationalism, terror and capitalism as does Hage, and even fewer are capable of doing so with both intelligence and a delightful grasp of irony. As Hage notes in the Preface, there is nothing more hideously ironic than a world in which reality is so inverted that the denial of racism begin to sound like the only acceptable version of anti-racism; where, for instance, the Prime Minister feels inclined to declare himself more offended at the accusation that he is racist than at the racism of the concentration camps over which he presides.

It is here I think, in the analysis of the “pervasive paranoid nationalist culture of neo-liberal capitalism”, that Hage is at his sharpest. But I am not sure that the correlate aim of the book is as persuasive, even as it establishes an important basis for thinking through the connections between hope, fear and the machinery of 21st Century capitalism. Hage’s claim that the nation-state is, at its best, a “mechanism for the distribution of [a surplus of] hope” sounds remarkably like Keynesianism. Hage is keenly aware that a portion of the surplus that circulated in national economies such as Australia’s was often accrued through a colonial plunder “which undermined the hope of millions of people in what became known as the Third World.” But, having recognised this, it seems to me that the additional questions this raises cannot quite be set aside in favour of implicitly assuming that social democracy, or some restatement of it, is in fact the only—or indeed *an*—alternative to misery and paranoia.

This war—and I will come back to this—obliged a rethinking of the extent to which Keynesianism has been internalised in Australia as the dream of a social democracy founded without excessive violence and consolidated without some variant of a global and national apartheid. At the very least, there is something to be said for remembering that it was the Keating Government that legislated for the concentration camps, that exacted the first series of restrictions upon the High Court’s repeal of terra nullius, and which began the ‘neo-liberalisation’ of the economy. Nevertheless, more important than any implied argument over electoral options is recalling that the post-1980s austerity emerged not because a surplus was eroded but because any ‘redistribution’ (or rather: buffering) that did occur since the 1960s was largely financed by debt. That is: the nation-state and the national economy were not machines for the distribution of hope but technologies for the generalisation of indebtedness and the garrisoning of the world market. This debt was reckoned in US Dollars since the end of the Second World War, permitted to the extent that it braced the global divisions of the Cold War and the particular arrangement of nation-states within it. There is also something to be said for recalling that the global financial collapse of 1929 and the destitution that followed was not solved by the application of Keynesian economics so much as resolved in the building of concentration camps and introduction of forced labour, and subsequently ‘solved’ through the destruction and reconstruction afforded by the mass slaughter of WWII.

This is not by way of suggesting that there is no point in hoping for something better. Rather, it is to insist that the nation-state is not a source of hopefulness. The nation-state does not grant gifts; it creates and polices the juridical terms upon which things—and people treated as things—can be exchanged, their value measured and put into circulation. It does so, has always done so, within an international financial, military and political architecture. In this world, hope and fear are indeed measured out by money; but delimiting the horizon of the possible to the calculable is to declare an end to the hope that this world might be otherwise, without measure.

The spoils of war were being reckoned long before Anglo-American troops entered Baghdad, with the only question remaining for nation-states such as Australia's being whether the serialised post-war Reconstructions furnished by the 'War on Terror' might be calculated in Dollars or Euros. There have been different renditions of hope proffered at various times: the assembly-line defined the dominant, post-WWII model of hope as an incremental progress; the Judaeo-Christian hope for messianic intercession, order and redemption; the model of hope shared by Fascism and Stalinism that the nation-state would put an end to the traumatic experience of capitalism while maintaining the capital relations of exploitation. And yet, despite all this, there remains a sense in which hope has to exceed such measurable and transcendental variants in order to be meaningful, to offer something more and other than more of the same. Maintaining a hopefulness, then, does not mean offering consoling versions of what exists now; on the contrary, it means knowing that the current shape of the world—including the ideological conjunctions of the familial, biological and national that Hage uncritically reproduces in his fable of motherland-fatherland—are neither natural nor eternal.