

9 - Aliens "Я" Us™ (not to mention U.S.) (2001)

[Source: Waterman, Peter. 2001. 'Aliens "Я" Us™ (not to mention U.S.)', *The Commoner*.
<http://www.commoner.org.uk/AliensRUs.htm>.]



Victims of 9/11. From blogswithaface.blogspot.com/2006_09_01_archiv...,
<http://www.rcfp.org/moussaoui/jpg/P200336.jpg>

Back in the days of the 'War Against Communism' in Vietnam, a US cartoon character called Pogo, said, 'I have seen the enemy and he is us'.¹

Why does Pogo have no monument in Washington DC?

Because the enemy always is, or has to be imagined to be, a not-us. And, for the US, a not-US. In this case 'we' are those who salute the flag, become Hyphenated-USAmericans, worship the Golden Calf and eat it, minced, spiced and grilled, under the Golden Arches. 'We' have our names on a beautiful monument to the thousands of our Vietnam War dead, designed by a Hyphenated-USAmerican, a monument that fails to record the millions of their dead, the fact that 'we' were the invaders and 'we' (or some weak-kneed un-American wimps amongst us) lost the war.

On TV and cinema screens across what passes for the Civilised World (or, *wherever*, so long as they worship and eat the same calf as we do) we are increasingly confronted with the aliens so beloved of the US media industry – and the passive, thrill-seeking, public it both feeds and creates. The US media is devoted to the genres of threat, disaster, the serial killer/bomber, violence from 'aliens' (whether within or without). USAmerican pages on the World Wide Web are devoted to the Black Helicopters of – guess? – the New World Order and the United Nations (a zillion entries on Google. I stopped, exhausted, at 835)! These Non-White Helicopters are, the sites scream, threatening to turn us into slaves or zombies - as if the sponsors of this populist and nativist myth do not bear the traits of both.

All this must be due to an underlying and unacknowledged sense of insecurity or inferiority, if not of collective hubris and nemesis (Overweening Arrogance inviting Overwhelming Fall). Somewhere within the national psyche, and that of Western Civilisation As We Know It, there is a nerve that twitches, telling us we are living with risk, creating dangers, and that we are thus tempting an unmentionable fate. (Also an unimaginable fate, actually, because in the movie, there was only one *Towering Inferno*).

Maybe this is a more general expression of the social relations of individualization, dog-eat-dog, rat-race competition, and fanatical Progress Through Technology that accompanies the development of capitalism. After all, the genre goes back to at least H.G. Wells and *The War of the Worlds*. Or to John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. The latter provided me with some strange sense of familiarity and comfort as I read it in Prague during the sleepless night following the Invasion of the Soviet Triffids, August 20, 1968. In the good old, innocent, days of the genre, the Aliens were, I seem to recall, eventually affected by some banal Earth disease, to which we had fortunately become immune. Civilisation, As Only We Know It, continued its usual course, if somewhat chastened.

Occasionally these alien forces get political names: 'The Yellow Peril', 'The Evil Empire', 'The Backward, Envious, Devious and Irrational Islamic Fundamentalist' (who has the added advantage of looking like a Jew out of an illustrated version of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*). But the enduring figure, outlasting the rise and fall of mere politicians, states and blocs, is that of the Other-Worldly Alien (*Alien I, II* and so *ad infinitum*). In Ecuador, following one of a series of 'Indian Invasions' in its capital (briefly *their* capital), a book about the matter was entitled *The Martian at the Corner*. Here a parenthesis is in order: 1) Indians, Dear Columbus, are a couple of oceans

¹ I discover, 2008, that Pogo's original words vary slightly, and that they were addressed, in 1970, to the coming US environmental disaster rather than the current Vietnam one. The enemy, nonethelss, remains both us and the US.

away, going *East* from Europe; 2) Quito is in the middle of the Andes, full of [Andin@s](#), some working at computers, whilst expressing their quite irrational disregard for back-to-front-baseball-hat-wearing Triffids, by displaying long plaits and traditional Quechua *traje*; 3) Manhattan is not only in the USA, but also in Johannesburg, Bombay and even in that most-isolated and poverty-stricken of Latin American cities, La Paz (where, provocatively, it can be seen, literally downtown, from the slums a half kilometer above).

Therefore (or however), I have to declare, in solidarity with Pogo, that I have seen the Alien – and he is quite indubitably us.

The Alien is equipped with the most advanced technology. He is warlike and imperial. He has a devious intelligence. He has no familiar human emotions. He wishes to either destroy us or to bring us the benefits of his superior civilization: failure to recognise and accept this is punishable by the most-advanced electronic or chemical means of incineration or vaporisation. He considers others as means to his own ends. He is, in appearance, both recognisably human and frighteningly foreign. He can suck out of us or otherwise transfer to himself our bodies, hearts and minds (alien Hearts 'n' Minds are things which We, in the West of our imagination, only wish to win over).

There is, fortunately, nowadays, a Saviour at hand. He is not noticeably either meek or mild and bears an enormous phallic weapon of punishment rather than a cross of reconciliation. He is, as you may have guessed, the Identikit WASP, but either one who has had all his brains transferred to his bipodial-vascular-triceps, with the latter pumped up to *übermensch* proportions, or a clone, or a cyborg, who nonetheless has the same warm feeling for us weakly earthlings (earthly weaklings) as a series of square-jawed Presidents (Nixon, the second-hand car salesman, the exception who proves the rule, must, surely, have been of Levantine descent?).

Alienation – the deprivation or denial of human capacity and potential – was related by the somewhat eurocentric Marx not to the 'nations without history' at the periphery but to the dynamic and internationally-expanding capitalism at the centre. (Marx had, perhaps, not heard the widespread African saying that 'I am who I am because of other people' but would surely have considered it superior to the liberal capitalist notion that 'I am who I am despite other people'). Alienation was the condition, prototypically, of the modern wage-worker rather than the craftsman or peasant (who were presumed, at that time, to still have some property over the means of work and livelihood). Psychology and philosophy have generalised this as the human condition under modernization/ westernization. Alienation was related by Marx to the replacement of all earlier and other human sentiments and ties by the cash nexus. This is a vision of the Other in terms only of individualised competition, of profit and loss. Man's estrangement was, thus, also from his fellow (working) men - not to speak of women.

September 21, 2001, I heard an alien speak on the BBC World Service. He had adopted the voice of a commentator from the ultra-right (I *hope*) US journal, *National Review*. He declared that the cause and responsibility for the September 11 Outrage rested with Islamic Fundamentalism, envious of the US because it was Rich, Powerful and Good. This, it appears, is the Holy Trinity of the Masters of the Universe (who until recently viewed the rest of us from the secure and distant heights of the World Trade Centre). This new Three-in-One is, apparently, GloboMan's alternative to the French Revolution's Liberty, Equality and Fraternity (we would nowadays say Solidarity).

The logic and morality of this Alien American's message to the increasing number of the world's Others is somewhat puzzling to myself in my perverse Pogo

propensity to see things from the standpoint of the Other. Which came first, the chickens (Riches and Power) or the egg (Goodness)? Or are they dialectically inter-related, mutually dependent and self-evidently *inalienable* from USAmericanism? In so far as Riches and the Power are relative, and therefore dependent (*increasingly* under International Monetary Fundamentalism) on the poverty and powerlessness of the Other, has all Goodness been sucked out of the Other, too? Has it been privatised, copyrighted, registered and deposited in Fort Knox? ©Virtue Inc®?

I note that the relationship between Liberty, Equality and Solidarity is one of mutual dependence, in that each is part of the meaning of the others. Also that this secular trinity is universalistic and therefore in principle universalisable - at no Other's expense! I can find no such universalism or mutually-determining relation between Wealth, Power and Virtue, since the first two must, of their nature, be unequally spread. And how could Goodness be considered - in anything other than the self-serving PR morality of the greedy and hegemonic - to be concentrated amongst the Rich and Powerful? If you don't know either, take out a subscription to *National Review*.

My Masters of the Universe come from Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*. This is a savage satire on New York, on Wall Street wheeler-dealers, on WASP privilege and superiority over the streets, the slums, and those who live in or on them. His anti-hero is alienation on limo wheels – alienated from everyone outside his ethnic-class (also within it), from his work (which he cannot explain even to himself though it nets him millions) and particularly from those who live in the Jungle. This is his word for the underworld of New York – 'underworld' not as in crime, but as in a place inhabited by animals, or *untermenschen*. (I guess some of them would have flipped hamburgers or cleaned floors in the WTC, as one of them cleaned shoes in Sherman's office). The people of this particular abyss are, of course, quite alien to Sherman McCoy, until he gets lost in the Jungle, is involved in the death of one of its Black inhabitants, and is hauled in front of a venal criminal justice system and flayed by a trivialising and sensationalist media. Tom Wolfe's satire and ridicule runs out of the required wit and spleen when Sherman is finally reduced to jeans, sneakers and prison.

Not being much aware of the French Revolution, Sherman's sense of human solidarity is not markedly touched by the leveling down, particularly since his fellow prisoners appear to share certain vengeful features with less-secular communities of the humiliated and dispossessed. At this moment class, race and breeding tell: confronted by the multi-coloured mob (not, again, of the particularly criminal kind), Sherman, uncaring of life or death, confronts them with his bare, if shackled, fists. Out of the jaws of anti-heroism Wolfe snatches...a hero!...an Anglo-Saxon one, confronting the Wogs and the Fuzzy-Wuzzies. Here the genre becomes that of the 19th century British *Boy's Own* adventure yarn. The crowd retreats before his righteous anger. Sherman is no longer Rich and Powerful. But he is still, or now, Good. The Real McCoy. If the thesis is hubris and the anti-thesis nemesis, there is no sign here of an integrating and surpassing synthesis. Humanism? Compassion? Forgedaboutit!

So is the alien really *out there*? Is he only *around* us, in place, space, and ether? Or is it we, in here, who are alienated from our Others and our Selves? Or at least from our possible Other Selves, who could live in a relationship of increasing dialogue, cooperation and trust with Them?

The Martians are at the corner, armed now with neither arrows nor nuclear devices, but with the instruments we have fashioned for our daily work, travel, residence and pleasure, taking advantage of the freedom that commoditisation and capital accumulation require, using the morality of the Old Testament. And the Old West: 'Dead or Alive, Dead or Alive' says George bin Bush, Cowboy President of the

Universe. These barbarians are determined, it seems, to add to *their* Good some of *our* Wealth and Power. Though most of them would be grateful for any significant reduction of poverty and powerlessness made available to them.

Recognising that Aliens "R" Us, that We Are the Enemy, could, surely, be a first step toward surpassing our own alienation, and the self-isolating and - today - self-destructive idea that we only know who we are as the enemy of our very own self-created alien.