

# **305MC**

## **Power, Spectacle and Memory**

**An analysis of how youth unemployment; in particular a recent BBC 'Newsnight' programme; is informed and determined by power, spectacle and memory within contemporary mediated culture.**

Official statistics show that 'the employment rate for those aged from 16 to 64 was 70.2 per cent, down 0.4 on the quarter' (ONS 2011) yet according to the BBC statistics, unemployment is at 'a 17-year high, according to official figures', but unemployment is not a new development for modern society, 'January 1982 figure of 3,070,621 represented 12.5 per cent of the working population, and in some parts of the country it was even higher' (Politics 2011). This is highlighted in the BBC 'Newsnight' programme from 16<sup>th</sup> November 2011, that there are various myths surrounding unemployment; youth unemployment being the most popular; but why in contemporary society are false figures released in the media? What is released is controlled by power spectacle and memory; the 'Newsnight' programme highlights this and various theories look at how this is happening within the programme and extend to society as a whole.

Emma Harrison suggests in the 'Newsnight' programme on youth unemployment, that unemployment for young people is a part of their lives; their parents are unemployed, as are many others around them so it is normal to them. This contradicts what Fineman found in 1987 that '[being unemployed] you've no status...almost all hated being unemployed...a feeling of helplessness and isolation'. On the extreme 'studies have shown that unemployed persons have an increased risk of death... 63% higher than the risk of death for employed persons' [Roelfs 2011] but this is disputed by many. Blauner [1964] is more likely to agree that the youth of today enjoy their unemployment, as the alternative is a life of factory workers suffer who from powerlessness, four counts that amount to 'industrial powerlessness' [Blauner 1964], so those who are not in employment escape from this. Harrison may apply Durkheim's theory of anomie to those who are unemployed; society around those without work is breaking up and causing a loss of jobs; but Blauner would suggest workers suffer under Marx's theory of 'the powerlessness of workers', so the break up of society is freeing the workers from the power of the bourgeois.

The bourgeois hold power over the proletariat, Blauner [1964] suggests that the oppressed workers feel a sense of alienation; they are disconnected from their work and the items they are making, as they are taken away and replaced by wages [Debord 1983] and they

are subject to commodity fetishism in which the items they buy do not seem like the ones they made [Debord 1983], because 'a product requires labor, but it is perceived in accordance with its cultural value rather than production value' [Marx and Engels] this keeps them in their place as they feel powerless to rise from the oppression of the masses [Marx 2001]. In addition to this, Debord [1983] suggests those in employment live in a state of false consciousness, all the forces upon them lead them to feel secure and these forces to us are "common sense", when in actual fact they are living in a false reality, a simulacra society [Baudrillard 1994], thus trapping them in production and consumption.

Foucault would suggest that this oppression and hidden control is brought to the proletariat from early life, the power of discourse works in that parents are the dominant discourse whilst a child is growing up, they teach us the rules and laws of society; one of these being that we should be employed, we should have a job and we just accept this. Marx would say that this is furthered in education, education is another norm we are taught as a child and throughout education we are told a good education; knowledge; leads us to a good job; knowledge is power. During education we are subject to the 'hidden curriculum' which Marx says prepares us for working life and how to be an obedient member of the working class; 'the compulsory education machine does not communicate information; it imposes upon the child semiotic coordinates possessing all the dual foundations of grammar...Indifference...often verges on provocation...Language is not life, it gives life orders' [Deleuze and Guattari 1987]. Blauner agrees that this also ensures the proletariat stay in their place and feel powerless to rise from their place in society.

The unemployed youth that Harrison speaks of however, have been socialised differently, so that they place less value on knowledge; their parents have given them the power and communication to escape the oppression. In terms of Nietzsche [Deleuze 1983], the language given to us by parents is a force on us, employment is another force on us; language is likely to be superior and employment inferior; and the differential – balancing – element is the will to power which manifests in education. At some point one or more of these have been affected in the unemployed youth's life, more than likely the will to power, the differential force, causing a loss of value on knowledge.

However the unemployed youth have a false sense of control, they are not in power over society, as spectacle is used to make an example of them, much like the 'bread and

circuses' of ancient Rome. Ancient Rome controlled their society by making a spectacle of those who disobeyed those in power, so the unemployed are made a spectacle of in our society. The unemployed are seen on the news lining up in queues outside the job centre or the long-term unemployed like those Harrison discusses are seen as the 'under-class'. The news headlines are watched by the audience, who passively consume what they are seeing and hearing [Debord 1983]. The news suggests that the unemployed are a problem in society and this reinforces information given to the audience as children that being in employment is the right thing to do. Those featured in the news clip are seen as out of the ordinary and different to everyday life; a spectacle [Debord 1983]; of which lodges in the mind, reinforcing the norms and thus ensuring society is kept under control, as in 'bread and circuses'.

This also suggests an answer as to why false figures of unemployment are released in the media; firstly it scares workers into conforming as they do not want to be next as an outcast of society and secondly the workers feel superior – more powerful, more knowledgeable – than those who are unemployed. This video; [George Galloway](#); is a conversation of George Galloway from 'Newsnight' with a male nurse, and highlights how effective the spectacles and 'bread and circuses' are on a passive audience. Even daytime television host Jeremy Kyle hosts his own spectacle in his programme '[Jeremy Kyle Confronts Benefit Britain](#)' in another reinforcement of how unemployment is wrong. This furthers Debord's [1983] argument that life consists of many spectacles.

Unemployment is nothing new though; the large figures of unemployment are misleading to begin with, given that the population has risen from 56,352,000 in 1980 [Parliament 1999] to 62,218,761 in 2011 [Google Public Data] so there are likely to be 0.91% more unemployed UK citizens since there has been a 0.91% increase in people living in the country. But society is led to believe that unemployment was not such a problem in the past as it is now, the media compare numbers rather than percentages to make the problem seem worse and to look back on the past through rose tinted glasses. Baudrillard [1994] would suggest this false illusion of the past is a simulated history. Foucault [1980] would look at this as not just nostalgia, but a false utopia of history or even alternative history. It could be seen as just nostalgia of the past, society always remembers the past with a sense of fondness, of the "golden years", 'the "historical amnesia" and resultant nostalgia that plagues consumer culture' [Jameson 1963]. But it could also be seen as a deliberate attempt to change and cover up the past for the benefit of today, for the benefit of control, for those in power. By false

representation of the past, a false representation of the present is created; a comparison of something that never was with something that is, creates a false consciousness because you feel secure in reality, but that reality is not real.

A simulated history of unemployment can only occur due to social/collective memory. Connerton [1989] and Halbwachs's [1992] theory of collective memory in saying that memory is a socially constructed phenomena; 'it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories' [Halbwachs 1992]. Power and spectacle reinforce the memory of a society without unemployment as such a large problem and society accepts this. This allows for the dominant forces of power to control the working class into a state of fear for their jobs, that they should be lucky to be working, thus keeping them oppressed. Social memory of unemployment is shared by the whole of society, a nexus between past and present is constructed and thus the situation of unemployment of past and present are connected and remain seldom challenged [Connerton]. Spectacles are important for this, as the constant reinforcement of statistics and news reels showing queues outside job centres are shown to a passive audience who remember them because they have been socialised to believe that is out of the ordinary. The collective memory of unemployment legitimises employment as an institution and creates a stasis in the social structure [Jameson 1991].

Social memory is extremely important in legitimising employment as a structure. 'Recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performances and that performative memory is bodily' [Connerton 1989], this could be the simplest of things; setting an alarm clock to ensure you get up for work at the right time, or laying out your office clothes ready to wear the next day. So important an institution is work that society calls the commuting to work hours the "rush hour" and everyone knows what this means. The ritual of graduation from university, or prom on leaving school symbolises to society that you have left education and are now ready for work. 'Bodily social memory... is an essential aspect of social memory' [Connerton 1989].

The calendar signifies the importance of employment, as Bank Holidays are meant as a reward, as a break from your job. Summer holidays are a talking point for those in employment, a mark on the calendar and the events that take place up to it are there to show how they are anticipated; booking the time off work, booking the holiday at the travel agents, the last day at

work before you go, packing, arriving at the airport and finally boarding the plane. But although you feel liberated from your job, Blauner [1964] would suggest you only have this freedom because you bought it, your labour was replaced with wages and those wages paid for you freedom. But the workers know they must be in employment to have this holiday each year, so they are trapped in the institution of employment which has been fixed by this need for freedom. Therefore those in unemployment have a life of liberation everyday; they do not complete these rituals or buy their freedom, but they are marginally excluded from society and its rites and rituals.

Baudrillard [1998] cites that power from greed keeps the proletariat in their place; 'the entire concept "instinct of preservation" is one of them... the "struggle for existence" – this formula refers to an exceptional situation; the rule is much better than the struggle for power, the ambition to have more and better and quicker and more often'; their desire for more possessions and to obtain them quicker means they are more willing to work and for more hours so they can get the things they want. Baudrillard may suggest that those who are unemployed are exempt from this; they are free from the cycle, free from the 'system of needs' [Baudrillard 1998]. However unemployed youth's still have needs and wants, in being unemployed they have removed themselves from the system but in doing so have removed their ability to fulfil their wants.

The suppression of actual history and the creation of a simulated history are used to repress the memory of the 1980's strikes, which in turn stops workers doing the same as they no longer have the power of the memory. The strikes, as featured in this video; [The Miners Strike 1984-85](#); are spectacles as they are eye-catching draw in the public's attention [Debord 1983]. The strikes were passively watched by an audience, watching it on the news freed them from the burden of 'existential anxiety' [Debord 1983]. 'The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible' [Debord 1983], the audience supported what the miners were doing and to onlookers the miners seemed untouchable, they were standing up for their right and no-one to begin with could stop them.

Those taking part in the spectacle of the strikes lost themselves in the crowd, 'contagion is so powerful that it forces upon individuals not only certain opinions but certain modes of feeling as well. Contagion is the cause of the contempt' [LeBon 2008], things got out of hand because they felt in control and took on the beliefs of the crowd in order to gain more control. Debord [1983] would suggest that the crowds used to spectacle to feel as if they had much

greater power and significance than they actually did; an illusion of power. Government is seen in society as an institution of power, but the control the strikers had in that the working week became just three days at some points during, could suggest that the strikers' resistance towards the government's power meant that the government had lost its power. However 'in the 1987 general election there was a further series of measures which were designed to limit or undermine the trade unions ability to take collective action' [Wrigley 1997] which could demonstrate that the government actually held the power but waited to exert it, so as to take the means off communication away from the strikers.

The strikes at the time were a spectacle there to give the strikers an illusion of power to make them feel as if they had control and to give them a brief release from the oppression of employment. It connected with the 'bread and circuses' they were seemed to be allowed power but when it went too far they were made an example of as a way of keeping order in society. It taught the workers that employment is an institution that should be respected. The strikes were a means of communication for the workers, so in order to stop unemployment from becoming the dominant discourse, the communication had to be taken away and the powerful government force used. The memory of the strikes is repressed so that workers now do not feel they have the power to do the same as in the 1980's, they are prevented from uprising. However the strikes are can be remembered, but only in a controlled manner.

'Spectacular drama is...a mode of performance in which possible experience is visualised in order to impress an audience' [Chaney 1993] theatre is a spectacle which engages the mind and emotion and draws on experience or memories. In particular, repressed memories; 'catharsis...the emotional release of paralysing affects associated with pathogenic traumatic memories. Catharsis referred to the discharge of repressed quanta of emotional energy...liberation from unfinished emotional business through various forms of role play' [Freud 1900]; the repressed memories can be safely released when watching a theatre play, as it is in a controlled environment and the memory helps understanding of and connection with the narrative and characters. This is evident in Willy Russell's '*Blood Brothers*', the storyline of the play moves into the great unemployment of the 1980's:

*[Singing]*

*'Take a letter Miss Jones (quote)*

*I regret to inform you,*

*That owing to circumstances  
Quite beyond our control.  
It's a premature retirement  
For those surplus to requirement,  
I'm afraid it's a sign of the times, Miss Jones,  
An unfortunate sign of the times.*

...

*Take a letter, Miss Jones, of course we'll  
Let the workforce know when  
Inflation's been defeated  
And recession is no more.  
And for the moment we suggest  
You don't become too depressed  
As it's only a sign  
Of the times,  
Miss Jones,  
A peculiar sign of the times.'*

- [Blood Brothers, 1985]

At the point of recognition of the repressed memory and the subsequent release of it, Freud [1900] suggests that Oedipus is occurring in that theatre has now become therapy;

*'a primitive psychic activity...it serves as a hedonic tension regulator with limited effect in a deficit situation...the temporary positive change in this condition that is effected by the hedonic correction of wish fulfilment appears sometimes with a concrete prospect of real gratification but, when there is no prospect of such gratification, in compensatory form...Wish fulfilment*

*constitutes a psychic evocation of hedonic experience, in such a way that the person involved fashions and enjoys a scenario of fulfilment with the resources of the imagination...Thus this conception of wish and wish fulfilment explains neither an intentional nor a planned action in everyday life...'*

- Freud 1900

; the therapy of the theatre though, allows for a "safe" release of emotions, without spurring the audience to take action – i.e. the worker would not connect the memory of the 1980's unemployment with the strikes and therefore not do so themselves, thus keeping them oppressed as Marx would say. However despite the Oedipus, Blauner would also suggest that 'Blood Brothers' shows evidence of unemployed youths enjoying their time out of work, much like those Harrison described on the 'Newsnight' programme;

*[Singing]*

*'Dry your eyes, Miss Jones*

*It's not as bad as it seems (you)*

*Get used to being idle*

*In a year or two.*

*Unemployment's such a pleasure*

*These days, we call it leisure*

*It's just another sign*

*Of the times,*

*Miss Jones, it's*

*Just another sign of the times.'*

- [Blood Brothers, 1985]

; but since the story then ends in the two main characters death, partially due to their unemployment, it could be said to show that the enjoyment of unemployment end this way as a form of power within the spectacle of the theatre to keep workers trapped in their jobs for fear

of this. This can be furthered by the character of Mrs Johnstone having one of her reasons for giving up her baby to Mrs Lyons as;

*[Singing]*

*'And when he grew up*

*He could never be told*

*To stand and queue up*

*For hours on end at the dole'*

- [Blood Brothers, 1985]

; because she valued employment as an institution and did not want her son to be unemployed, of which all of these the audience are subject to passively whilst subject to the spectacle of theatre.

A discourse only operates when there is a counter discourse in operation [Foucault 1980]. Therefore employment can only function if unemployment exists. Change can only happen when counter discourse gets hold of the means of communication [Foucault 1980]. So unemployment could only become the norm for society if the means of communication were gained. But power, spectacle and memory are in place to prevent this from happening.

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