

Britain in Decline in Anthony Burgess's *The Wanting Seed*:

Institutional Violence and Dystopian Consequences

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My paper today consists of extracts from a larger project, dealing with representations of “soft” institutional violence, in this case the formative power of the norm; more precisely, as concerns Burgess, dystopian norms imposed by a dominant power and their negative consequences on this particular society. Just a 15-second synopsis of the novel, in case you haven’t read it, or if it’s been a while. *The Wanting Seed* was published in England in 1962, and in the USA the following year. The imminent catastrophe on which the plot of the book rests is an overpopulated world; global famine is a very real threat. So, the dominant powers of this society are desperately trying both to reduce the birthrate and increase the number of casualties in the ongoing war. When I say “this society”, I mean what Burgess calls in the novel the “English-speaking Union,” and references which he makes throughout the novel make it clear that Britain is the core of such a Union. The high-level directors of this population-reduction program take advantage of the instability of particular norms as a way of changing undesirable behaviors; I’d like to talk briefly about four of those behaviors, namely: sexual norms, especially regarding reproduction; infanticide; cannibalism; and finally how easily a society accepts war as normal. The common thread linking these targeted behaviors is social class and economic necessity. As I hope to show, this is a novel of social critique, highlighting the severe effects on a society when reference points are continually changing according to the latest whim of those in power; the border between soft institutional violence and hard institutional violence all but disappears in such a world gone crazy.

Pierre Bourdieu, in *Le sens pratique*, describes the norm in terms of its efficiency, instability, and political utility, all of which bear on Burgess’s novel. Without giving the entire quotation, Bourdieu remarks that authority comes largely from values which a certain group recognizes, and that the “uncertain conditions” of domination must be continually updated and

maintained. John Gledhill, in *Power and its Disguises: Anthropological Perspectives on Politics*, talks of “social taxonomies”, which “subaltern groups ‘misrecognize’ as legitimate by failing to see them as arbitrary constructions serving dominant class interests. The dominated are thus accomplices in their own domination by symbolic power”. Arthur Redding, in *Raids on Human Consciousness: Writing, Anarchism and Violence*, uses the term “management techniques of discipline” used by institutions as an effective alternative to repression. Although cultural norms are constructed and artificial, we would be mistaken in calling them fictions, given the profound effects that they have in the real world; we must accept their materiality, their weight and their consequences. Kathleen Kirby, in *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity*, calls such a construction a “functional fiction...that for all its intangibility, grounds actions and produces effects nonetheless”. Anthony Burgess has given us a dystopia, a society not only in decline but which has hit rock-bottom, as a direct result of institutional manipulation of people’s lives to the extreme.

Although the concept of what is normal touches many aspects of our lives, sexual norms are perhaps the most important, the most discussed, given their foundation in biology and nature. But those who would prioritize the biological aspects of human sexuality ignore everything that is performance, role, tradition, habit, ritual, custom, in a word cultural in a critique of sexual norms. An everyday binary opposition, Masculine / Feminine, for example, is much more charged with cultural baggage than with biology or nature. In *The Wanting Seed*, sexual behavior is targeted as a means of reducing, even eliminating, reproduction, and it’s the cultural components of human sexuality which are modified by the dominant power. Homosexuality has become, by official decree, the norm, while heterosexuality is strongly discouraged. The institution responsible for enforcing this new idea is called the Ministry of Infertility, and their publicity campaign includes posters, “showing, in ironical nursery colours, an embracing pair of one sex or the other with the legend *It’s Sapiens to be Homo*,” or advertising night school classes at the Homosexuality Institute. Beatrice-Joanna, one of the heroes of the novel, is disturbed by this inversion of what she has always accepted as normal; Burgess is clear that she is one of the critics of the current social situation, in spite of her loyalty to the old norm which assigned her a traditional feminine role of wife and mother:

[Beatrice-Joanna] was a handsome woman of twenty-nine, handsome in the old way, a way no longer approved in a woman of her class. The straight graceless waistless black dress could not disguise the moving opulence of her haunches, nor could the

splendid curve of her bosom be altogether flattened by its constraining bodice [. . .] she seemed to glow and flame with health and, what was to be disapproved strongly, the threat of fecundity.

Beatrice-Joanna doesn't play the game, at least not the game under the current rules, which gives her not only a more objective position from which to critique, but also suggests the possibility of subversion, which might worry the dominant power. But in fact, the dominants are not too concerned by an isolated case of resistance, since a strong (ie. versus weak state) state is capable of making the current norm work in its favor. Bourdieu uses this metaphor of a game, which includes even those who refuse to enter into the game, saying that the dominants are capable of changing the norm at any time, while simultaneously erasing the history of the game. It's as if no other doctrine ever existed, neither before nor imaginable in the future. We are reminded of Deleuze and Guattari's warning that « On écrit l'histoire, mais on l'a toujours écrite . . . au nom d'un appareil unitaire d'état. » (from *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2 : Mille Plateaux*, page 34). Judith Butler, in « Performativity's Social Magic, » talks of this spectacular means of subject formation, exploited by the dominant power :

The performative is not merely an act used by a pre-given subject; rather it is one of the powerful and insidious ways in which subjects are called into social being, inaugurated into sociality by a variety of diffuse and powerful interpellations. In this sense the social performative is a crucial part not only of subject formation but of the ongoing political contestation and reformulation of the subject as well.

That Beatrice-Joanna prefers the former status quo changes little in terms of the element of performance of the norm, no matter what it's current form. Of course, in *The Wanting Seed*, sexual orientation is presented as having only two poles, which limits the subject's movement from the start; the State uses a system of binary opposition to better control and class its subjects, even though something as complicated as human sexuality should allow for much more diversity.

The State, in this case the "English Speaking Union", uses economic pressure (which should be included as a form of soft institutional violence) to enforce its new sexual codes. The sexual role, especially in its sense of game or of performance, is always linked to power, and Beatrice-Joanna's brother-in-law Derek plays the game perfectly no matter which norm is current. He is ambitious and wants to advance his career, so he becomes the perfect mime of orthodox homosexual behavior. "He was, it was said, likely to rise very high in the hierarchy of the Ministry". He's not really homosexual, we know, because he's having an affair with Beatrice-

Joanna – he’s playing the game. Although Derek’s role is highlighted as an exceptional performance, in reality he represents a subject in an ordinary situation, caught in the fabric of a society and having to do what is necessary to advance. Burgess seems to be presenting a sort of pessimistic cultural evolution, where the survivors are those who are best able to adapt to a society in constant transition, without asking themselves too many questions. If Derek sees his career advancing because of his orthodox homosexual behavior, his brother Tristram is in the opposite situation. Tristram is an experienced teacher, and was a candidate for the chair of the History Department, but his candidacy is refused because he is heterosexual. The school principal reads the list of other candidates from the Department, almost all preferable to Tristram because they correspond to the new sexual norm: “Wiltshire’s homo. Cruttenden’s unmarried. Cowell’s married with one kid, so he’s out. Crum-Ewing’s gone the whole hog, he’s a castrato, a pretty strong candidate”. Tristram tries to protest, but the principal stops him before he says anything that would get him into trouble: “Nancy is a very contemptuous term. The homos, remember, virtually run this country and, for that matter, the whole of the English-Speaking Union”. The current sexual codes have, like Starbucks and MacDonald’s, gone global. And Tristram of course finds himself in the situation of a teacher who is obliged to teach the correct version of history and to properly socialize the students, by inculcating them with what Thomas Szasz calls “culturally shared myths” and by encouraging conduct which favors groups solidarity.

There is, nevertheless, a certain logic in this society where homosexuality has become the norm; the authorities are trying to reduce the birthrate in a dangerously overpopulated world. Heterosexual families still have the right to exist, but they are limited to one child per family – here Burgess touches, as he often does, on a real event, recalling the situation in China for example. Social policy, what I’ve been calling institutional violence in *The Wanting Seed*, varies depending on the socio-economic class of the dominated. For example, the authorities seem to insist on the stricter homosexual norm for members of the governing class, which brings to mind the situation in 1984, where party members are watched more closely than the proles. The State has other means to encourage population reduction, especially among the working class. Burgess gives us, in this Britain in decline, even further extremes. Infanticide and cannibalism have become normal as well. Families who kill their children are paid a benefit, as long as they at least make it look like the death was an accident:

... the State condoned infanticide. 'Got sort of suffocated in the bedclothes. Only three weeks old to the day he was, too.' 'Scalded, mine was. Pulled the kettle right on top of him.' The speaker smiled with a sort of pride, as though the child had done something clever. 'Fell out of the window, he did. Playing, he was.' 'Money comes in handy.' 'Oh, yes, it does that'.

To kill one's own child for money has become the norm, but Burgess is clear that this practice targets the poorest families. Economic necessity is perhaps the most insidious, as well as the most effective, tool of institutional violence exploited by the dominants. The economic argument seems easy to justify, easy to accept as normal. Although it's largely invisible to those who are submerged in the game, the word "violence" is not an exaggeration, as Arthur Redding reminds us: ". . . violence has become economic, structural, dissipated, or sublimated but it is violence nonetheless." This kind of violence is most invisible to the rich and the middle classes, who are ready to accept the status quo because of what Redding and Caudwell call bourgeois pacifism: "[the middle class] fails in its ideological decadence to see the violence that is already endemic, albeit rendered invisible by the reification of the structures of political economy". Like the murder of children, cannibalism too is tolerated, even encouraged by the current government; policemen attend the banquets of human meat:

Late December, in Bridgwater, Somerset, Western Province, a middle-aged man named Thomas Wharton, going home from work shortly after midnight, was set upon by youths. These knifed him, stripped him, spitted him, basted him, carved him, served him – all openly and without shame in one of the squares of the town. A hungry crowd clamoured for hunks and slices, kept back -- that the King's Peace might not be broken -- by munching and dripping greyboys.

But the Ministry of Infertility, infanticide and cannibalism are not enough; the dominants need yet another way to exterminate millions of people, especially adults who may have a memory of certain anterior norms. It is of course a large-scale war that is planned, a war that follows the rules that we've read about in books, a war the way a war should be, a war according to the norm. A military truck driver explains:

I meant, you know, fighting. Armies. One lot having a bash at another lot, if you see what I mean. One army facing another army, like it might be two teams. And then one lot shoots at another lot, and they go on shooting till somebody blows the whistle and they say, 'This lot's won and this lot's lost.' Then they dish out leave and medals and the tarts are all lined up waiting at the station. That's the sort of war I mean, mister.

This norm is based, even among people who have never known war, on abstractions such as glory and honor, heroism and romance that have been programmed into subjects for generations. Tristram sees through the façade, but like the other “volunteers” for the war, he was targeted because of his poverty, having accepted a small sum of money. When Tristram tries to refuse service, the Sergeant explains, “Now, you needn’t have taken the King’s money if you didn’t want to . . . it was all quite voluntary.” The economic factor is always important, and the logic of a “contractual obligation” is just another form of institutional violence, as if someone always had a real choice in the matter, as if a choice were never forced or coerced. Redding speaks of this everyday violence when he says that “all legal contacts are premised on the latent presence of violence in an institution; it is this latent presence that guarantees the enforceability of the contract.” The violent norm of a contractual obligation is always in favor of the dominants. As it turns out, this particular war is a theatrical war, a loudspeaker war, a war where there is no real enemy; it is staged, performed with all the trappings of war, including casualties. Tristram lives through the “attack” and learns the truth, but even when he threatens to expose what he knows, his superiors (and, finally, Tristram too) understand that he’ll just be taken for a crackpot.

Earlier I mentioned Judith Butler and her idea that the performative is essential to subject creation, and the performance of war must be included within her definition. According to Andrea Caffe, the lesson which we learned after 1914 and 1917 is that total war is not a spontaneous event of the contemporary world, but a precondition of such a world. Not only has perpetual, large-scale war become normal, it has become a fundamental element in the creation of a society which accepts war as ordinary, as necessary, as giving a sense of mythic identity, of national cohesion, supporting the military-industrial complex so necessary to global capitalism. What Burgess seems to highlight in *The Wanting Seed* is that power rests in the hands of the State, even though the norm, the reality of every day, is manipulated. Institutional violence and ideology, networks of power and of collaboration continue to function, just as they did before. All of this illustrates clearly that a society built on a foundation of binary opposition is not transformed by the inversion of the two poles. Inversion does not equal transformation, but instead the reproduction of institutional violence. Just as in *The Wanting Seed*, the history of a people going through cycles, from one extreme to the other, makes it relatively easy to predict the future; a future which reproduces the status quo rather than a future of renewal.