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In our culture of short-term work, mobile communications and rolling media it seems we are always on the move; but are we really getting anywhere? *Non-Stop Inertia* argues that this appearance of restless activity conceals and indeed maintains a deep paralysis of thought and action, and that rather than being unquestionable or inevitable, the environment of personal flexibility and perpetual crisis which we now inhabit is ideologically constructed.

Non-Stop Inertia registers the tragedy and the farce, elicits anger and laughter... A beautiful book.

Angela Mitropoulos, Queen Mary, University of London, author of *Precari-Us?*

IVOR SOUTHWOOD has worked as a mental health nurse and studied literature and media. He has also done various temporary jobs and is interested in the culture of precarious work.

IVOR SOUTHWOOD

NON-STOP INERTIA



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Non-Stop Inertia

Non-Stop Inertia

Ivor Southwood

To my Mum and Dad

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To my Mum and Dad

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... but in the meantime people were being given
... and death, two or three every month, mostly people like
me who had only recently been employed. Every day could be
the day you got the tap on the shoulder.

Meanwhile the managers strode along the aisles, on the
 lookout for people not keeping themselves occupied – the redun-
dants in their own workplaces presumably gave them more time
for surveillance duties – and whenever one of them approached
as I was dragging some pallet along or stacking a box I'd think,
could this be my P45 moment? If I was being cynical I could
suggest that some of the managers seemed to actually enjoy the
 tension that this atmosphere brought and the extra power it
gave them, even as they applied for other jobs themselves. Unfor-
tunately all the managers who seemed to embrace this role were
also men. The disciplinary regime meant that no-one could stop
working in the afternoon until one of the managers came out of
the office and shouted at us that we could go in the last few

Non-Stop Inertia

From street level, among the debris of spent lottery tickets and crumpled talent show contestants staring up from the covers of discarded free newspapers, the period of apparent change and upheaval through which we are currently living seems to signify not the disintegration of the old forms of social inequality but the consolidation of them. Just as the "war on terror" has been used as a pretext for military violence and police surveillance, the everyday language of insecurity has been put to the service of maintaining structural security. The state of emergency seems to have been made permanent. Employers in the UK and elsewhere routinely impose competitive performance targets, use short-term contracts and rely on casual agency labour, and workers accept these arrangements along with their effects: continual stress, disrupted workplace relations and irregular income. Bank debts have been seamlessly transferred to the state while public services are squeezed; supermarket chains and energy companies rake in huge profits while their customers struggle to make ends meet. And the more individuals and communities are pulverised by these pressures, the more effective they become as raw material for re-pointing the capitalist brickwork.

How did things get to this stage, where such insecurities and anxieties are taken for granted, where opposition has been flattened and so many people's lives have been taken over by a zombie existence of debtworking and jobseeking? To begin to find out, it is instructive to go back to the time when such a situation really was new and strange. In 1988 cultural theorist

Stuart Hall attempted to come to terms with these "New Times", as they were briefly known. He offered a comprehensive list of the then emerging characteristics of this now all too familiar era, under the general heading of post-Fordism:

more flexible, decentralised forms of labour process and work organisation; decline of the old manufacturing base and the growth of . . . computer-based industries; the hiving-off or contracting out of functions and services; a greater emphasis on choice and product differentiation, on marketing, packaging and design, on the 'targeting' of consumers by lifestyle, taste and culture rather than . . . social class; a decline in the . . . skilled, male, manual working class, the rise of the service and white-collar classes and the 'feminisation' of the workforce; an economy dominated by multinationals . . . the 'globalisation' of the new financial markets . . . greater fragmentation and pluralism, the weakening of older collective solidarities . . . the emergence of new identities associated with greater work flexibility, the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption.¹

These changes were mirrored, for Hall, by a reconfiguration of ourselves as subjects: the New Times "are both 'out there', changing our conditions of life, and in 'in here', working on us. In part, it is us who are being re-made." Challenging the traditional tactics of the socialist opposition as much as the governing strategies of capitalism, Hall argued that in this new climate a return to the old Fordist production line organisation of politics was impossible: society must instead strive to turn post-Fordism "inside out", appropriating new technology and embracing these "new social movements", finding "new points of antagonism" through "a politics of the family, of health, of food, of sexuality, of the body".²

This somewhat optimistic view of the possibilities of the new

flexible era must itself be read in the historical context of a growing discourse of diversity, which was then beginning to challenge the old institutional structures of race and gender prejudice. The argument for a move from macro- to micro-politics represented an effort to divert the flow of the new liquefied culture, to claim the new politics of identity for those whose everyday lives had been routinely crushed by patriarchal-colonial capital.

Looking back on these New Times, however, it appears that the hopes of a new equality have not materialised. The endlessly innovative dimensions of post-Fordism mean that its inside-out version has proved to be just a logical progression of its dominant interests. In the UK, the new subjective politics anticipated the seamless transition from Thatcherism to New Labour's lifestyle marketplace: the hollowing out of the public sector by the fake corporate language of "choice", the convergence of politics and media, a postmodernised menu of values dictated by consumption. Twenty years on, the rhetoric of diversity and empowerment has been largely incorporated into the business portfolio.

What is more, those same dominant interests which harvested the profits of the new flexibility have since succeeded in marketing fragmentation as a positive social aim, a quasi-Olympic project to which all citizens are required to contribute; so the contradictory logic of the micro-political New Times has been internalised. As Arlie Russell Hochschild notes, the ongoing capitalist project to commercialize intimate life expands not only globally, but also into the "local geographies of emotion".³ The machinery has gone inside (literally in the case of the mood-regulating drugs so widely prescribed today).

Hall also looked forward to a new feminism, anticipating a move towards a "feminisation of the social";⁴ however, one of the main achievements of the new lifestyle-politics has been to create a postfeminist subjectivity defined by consumerism, a

position of what Nina Power has called "perky passivity".⁵ Meanwhile the "soft skills" of negotiation and communication traditionally associated with feminised work have been re-formatted by the cut and thrust discourse of business. (As a former NHS nurse I was somewhat taken aback during an interview, while going through my employment history, to hear the pinstriped recruitment agent describe nursing as a potentially "lucrative" profession.) Managers have found that when adapted for commercial use such skills make the perfect contemporary giftwrapping for old-fashioned inequality. Many of the lowest paid, most insecure and least valued jobs are still done by women, who are now merely talked down to in a more self-aware and slippery language than before.

Unsurprisingly for such an inside-out, back-to-front society, consent to this newly liberated/indebted way of life is manufactured through consumption. We are now addressed as consumers first and foremost, rather than producers, even if we are penniless: the illusion of choice must be maintained at all costs. Even the Jobcentre calls its claimants "customers". The role of unions in the public psyche has to a great extent been taken over by consumer rights groups. The globally positioned consumer-citizen is promised freedom and mobility through the wonders of the Internet, but this constant connectivity is in reality just another pressure. Digital consumption becomes an obligation, almost a form of self-care. Like unpaid technicians, we all obediently maintain our own media networks, and we are constantly contactable (especially by employers) through the miracle of the mobile phone, its de-yuppification another example of remote control disguised as liberation.

Permanent debt has come to shape this era of flexibility as much as insecure work, and the two are of course mutually supportive. Individual debt – due in many cases, including mine, to a combination of higher education and intermittent low-paid work, rather than the use of credit as a lifestyle-boosting steroid

– manoeuvres the individual into a position of complicity with the very system which is despised. A population submerged in debt is relatively easy to manage: most people cannot muster sufficient resources to maintain any real independence, while individual cases of financial or psychological disintegration are seen in corporate terms as an effective deterrent and a small price to pay for overall homeostasis.

Beneath the veneer of lifestyle choice, in reality most people cannot afford to accept or reject particular jobs according to their own ethical preferences or pursue outside interests which are not strictly "goal-oriented". Instead, both in and out of work one becomes a slave to one's own introjected boss, accepting even the most tenuous or unsuitable scraps of work, fulfilling one's duties of self-selling and availability, shopping at supermarket chains with unhealthy food and healthier employment practices and buying cheap Made In China goods. This suffocating indebtedness (along with the fear of terrorism) is the closest the UK population comes to having a collective identity. We hold our breath while a few oligarchs suck in the oxygen, even though we're supposedly "all in it together" ("it's up to all of us").

Such preoccupations divert attention away from wider abstract social or political concerns and onto a continual anxious self-surveillance. This constant precariousness and restless mobility, compounded by a dependence upon relentlessly updating market-driven technology and the scrolling CGI of digital media, together suggest a sort of cultural stagflation, a population revving up without getting anywhere. The result is a kind of frenetic inactivity: we are caught in a cycle of non-stop inertia.

From this vantage point, it is more important than ever to pull our gaze away from whatever new crisis/opportunity/spectacle is dangled in front of us and instead look for the reality which has re-installed itself in the digital/global network. Back in 1964 Herbert Marcuse described the "unfreedom" wrought by what

he called a "one-dimensional society": a culture where opposition cannot take root and negativity is taboo, a discourse of liberation which contains within itself a code for continuing domination. This unfreedom has since found new means of exerting its power through precarious work, accelerated consumption, rolling media and technological individualization. These are the "new forms of control"⁶ into which the New Times have coalesced.

Marcuse's text now reads more like prophecy than history, a warning of a synthetically smoothed out society geared entirely towards preserving authority through the elimination of friction and the dampening of conflict. "Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour in which ideas, aspirations and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe."⁷ Whether in politics, popular culture or academia, opportunities for real liberation today have indeed been largely repelled by market forces, or reduced to placatory simulations.

When this point is reached, domination – in the guise of affluence and liberty – extends to all spheres of private and public existence, integrates all authentic opposition, absorbs all alternatives. Technological rationality reveals its political character as it becomes the great vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilisation for the defence of this universe.⁸

We are permanently mobilised against change, recruited for the defence of the present economic universe. After a generation of New Times we are both exhausted by and inured to job insecurity and continuous availability, obligatory consumption and persistent debt; and we have become complicit in the system

which perpetuates and reproduces these situations. Even as we struggle resentfully under the burden of this arrangement – which is somehow both ever-changing and unchanging – we maintain and disseminate it, regarding it as unavoidable and, in many cases, as perfectly natural. To break this cycle of passivity it is necessary once again to find new points of antagonism.

The modern worker cannot be uprooted. In an environment where jobs (or "assignments") appear and disappear at such a rate as to seem normal, mundane everyday worries – family security, debt, bureaucracy – are regularly amplified into existential threats by those who do not indicate the environment. The dread which lies behind such taken-for-granted aims cannot be clearly defined but nevertheless seems to be a constant background presence. Daily life becomes precarious. Planning ahead becomes difficult, routines are impossible to establish. Work, at whatever cost, might begin or end anywhere at a moment's notice, and the burden is always on the worker to seize the next opportunity and to surf between roles. The individual exists in a state of constant readiness. Predictable service, savings, the fixed category of "occupation" all belong to an alien historical world.

It would seem vital, then, to give a name and a shape to this dread, to fear which presents itself in the post-fortified subject as a force of nature or as something emanating from within the individual rather than a deliberate external manipulation of power, and some theories of contemporary work, including the philosopher Paolo Virno's, have indeed sought this particular constellation of anxieties as "the anxiety" of the modern worker. It is a fear in which two previously separate things become conflated: on one hand, fear of concrete dangers, for example, losing one's job. On the other hand, a much more general fear