

## Letters to the Editor

(July 17, 2006)

[Ed. As a reminder to Letter writers: If you want your letters to be published, you must include your first and last names and your city and state of residence. Also, please, enter in the subject line of your e-mail "letter to the editor," and specify the article or the subject on which you are commenting. Thank you.]

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### Plagiarism, Expropriation, and Commercialism

To the Editor:

In a [recent issue](#) of *Swans*, Jonathan Nitzan wrote [an article](#) charging the authors of *Afflicted Powers* with plagiarism, and compared the practice to commercial plundering of common property, in this case intellectual property.

I've read both Nitzan's work, *The Political Economy of Israel*, and *Afflicted Powers*, and admire them both. Nitzan's work is scholarly, focused, scientific, and paradigm-creating in the field of Marxist theory of capital accumulation. *Afflicted Powers*, written by a collective of San Francisco Bay Area intellectuals, is challenging in a different way. This work, which tries to assess the many meanings and levels of meaning of 9-11, is wide-ranging, speculative, eclectic, and sometimes subjective, as any document that looks at unfolding history has to be.

I am not interested in settling the charge of plagiarism. Nitzan makes a strong case for it. The authors of AP, at the same time, give very explicit credit to Nitzan and his co-writer Shimshon Bichler as the main source of their ideas in the chapter that deals with oil. There are several footnotes referring to Nitzan's work, though perhaps there are also ideas and phrases that are not acknowledged.

I sympathize with Nitzan and Bichler. No one likes to have their property taken. Also, no one likes to have their statements misrepresented. In the world of science and scholarship, where Nitzan's work properly belongs, there are safeguards against this, primarily peer publications where disputes are carried on in public view, and standards of evidence are in theory adhered to.

*Afflicted Powers* was written for a different world, with different standards of argument and evidence. Though some of the writers in the AP collective are themselves academics, I believe the audience they aimed for was simply the non-scholarly general readership of the left. This is the same audience that daily reads writers like Norman Solomon, William Rivers Pitt or Greg Pallast, without ever checking on their facts or wondering about the source of their ideas. This is a world not of academic research, but of interpretation, impression, exhortation. This is the world of the blogosphere, in the age of information overload, where most of us, for all our factual knowledge, are like medieval peasants looking for portents in the night-time sky.

Most of us don't have the training or credentials to operate in the world of science and scholarship. For better or worse, we are forced to operate in the world of "appearances" (in Plato's sense), public opinion, media, and "spectacle." (*Afflicted Powers* has a whole chapter on *Spectacle*, the concept and school of thought introduced by French writer Guy Debord.) Most of our efforts are attempts to over-shout the din of media, to cut through the haze of spectacle and spin, to highlight truth before it vanishes. In this pursuit, the un-scholarly are just as apt to have an impact as the most. Think of Cindy Sheehan.

Notwithstanding the aridness of much modern academic specialization, science and scholarship can be compared to cartographical exploration, where the researcher or scholar ventures into undiscovered country and attempts to draw a usable map of it. Nitzan and Bichler do this for our understanding of capital accumulation. Anyone who wants to go further with this subject, or even discuss it at all, has to deal with the coordinates laid down by these two authors.

On the other hand, someone who is attempting to make sense of complex contemporary history, and communicate an emotional attitude to it, finds himself having to take a certain amount of liberty, painting in broad brush strokes, writing rapidly, highlighting details and omitting others. Even careful reporters like Seymour Hersh take liberties by seeing trends where the evidence may not be complete. (Hersh's recent article on top-level military resistance to administration plans to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities is clearly an update and a corrective to his earlier reporting that the bombing was inevitable.)

When I was an English graduate student, struggling to say something important about Edmund Spenser and the Renaissance, it pissed me off tremendously that Time/Life books could publish a glossy volume that was both more interesting and more learned than my tortured efforts. I knew, though, that different standards apply to academic and commercial worlds.

**Robert Wrubel**

Sausalito, California, USA - July 7, 2006

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**Orhan Pamuk, a Creation of the West? Peter Byrne's [Orhan Pamuk: A Novelist Where The Currents Cross](#)**

To the Editor:

[ed. A Turkish commenter sent the following via Louis Proyect:

Orhan Pamuk has never been arrested (as to my knowledge) for defending Kurdish Rights or for calling attention to Armenian genocide for that matter. He was indicted, though. I agree with educated radical minded Turkish friend of yours. He is the creation of the West. There had been Turkish intellectuals, who spoke out and stood for the

Kurdish rights during the fierce fight between Kurdish guerrillas and Turkish Army in 1984-1995 period. The ones I know of spent 4-15 years in prison. And Orhan Pamuk was not around that time. In the late 1990s, we started to see Orhan Pamuk in especially western media for defending Kurdish rights; what a coincidence, his literature talent was also discovered then. As for you not being able to read his *My name is Red*; do not worry no one really has ever been able to read it, including Turks.

Peter Byrne responds to these comments.]

Reactions to my piece on Orhan Pamuk (*Swans*, July 3, 2006) call for a few added remarks.

- 1) The contention that Turks don't read Pamuk is disproved by the record-breaking number of his books in circulation in Turkish. The first printing of *Snow* in Turkish was 100,000 copies. Were they destined for subscribers of *The New York Times* in Connecticut?
- 2) Pamuk is not a heroic, long-time defender of Kurdish autonomy or a zealot for the recognition of crimes committed against Armenians. But he did say to a Swiss journalist, "thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody but me dares to talk about it." For this statement he was brought before a court in Turkey. Of course, countless others have suffered infinitely more at the hands of Turkish authorities for other thought crimes.
- 3) To use postmodern as a dirty word is parochial. Applied to the novel, the word now properly serves as shorthand for any narrative approach of recent years that isn't recognizably traditional. There are postmodern novels that are beneath aesthetic contempt and others that are as good as anything ever written.
- 4) It's sad to find readers in the Marxist tradition judging novelists who write books like Pamuk's as unreadable or too clever by half. When Karl Marx read Honoré de Balzac much of the public considered the Catholic Monarchist Balzac an esoteric mystifier. Yet Marx quoted him, to the considerable enhancement of the first volume of *Capital*. One has to wonder whether contemporary Marxists haven't forgotten Karl Marx's humanism and become one-track "practical" minds like the members of the society around them that they reject.
- 5) There's no sense in asking whether Pamuk has been created by the West. Which is not to say some Western hacks haven't cherry picked elements of his work that suit their agenda. But they do the same with any writer from outside Europe or North America. For centuries Turks have been shaped by the West as well as the East. Facing up to that fact is what Pamuk's books are all about. Rather than castigate him for being the son of a prosperous middle-class Istanbul family, his denigrators would do better to read his analysis of that fate. It cuts much deeper than their sloganeering. Like Charles Dickens, Pamuk is "only" a reform-minded liberal. That didn't stop Karl Marx quoting from Dickens in admiration and affection in that same *Capital*.
- 6) Literary "talent" isn't something that can be cooked up by publicists on the spur of the moment to meet the needs of a political cause. If someone would like to challenge Pamuk's literary skill, he should make his case by literary criticism, not by off-hand sarcasm. To begin, he would have at least to read Pamuk's books through.

**Peter Byrne**

Lecce, Italy - July 12, 2006

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To the Editor:

Thanks for [warning me about PayPal](#) and I agree we should try to avoid them for several reasons. I donated ten pounds sterling to [Media Lens](#) through PayPal. It all went well, I assume, but I'm guessing *Media Lens* actually received only 9.5 pounds of my donation.

I'm also writing to let you know that something new happened today as I was reading [Information Clearing House](#), literally a one-man operation. He (Tom Feeley) has now switched from PayPal to something I have never heard of before as a means of making donations: it is called (hold on to your seat) [Amazon Honor System](#) from Amazon.com. You'll probably think I'm terrible but I donated US\$ 20.00 immediately because it was so goddam easy, having an account with them already. (I buy the great bulk of my used books from small booksellers, however.) When you have time, why not look into it? (and yes, I know how you feel about the [big booksellers](#) from your comments on *Swans*.) You could write to Tom Feeley to see how it works and find out what Amazon's fees are, if any.

By the way, what is worse than drinking to forget? Answer: forgetting to drink. (old Irish joke...again!)

**Steve Heeren**

Vernon, British Columbia, Canada - July 2, 2006

Gilles d'Aymery responds: It would rather be unbecoming on my part to on the one hand blast Amazon.com and call for its boycott and, on the other hand, use their payment services, no?

To affect change, dear Steve, will take a bit more than sitting on your bottom and clicking on a few buttons. Get hold of your checkbook or forever be silent.

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### **American Wars in Defense of Private Property, and the Life of an Iraqi Insurgent**

To the Editor:

I very much enjoyed [Philip Greenspan's blast](#) at those who believe that Bush's anti-democratic tendencies and militaristic foreign policy are great departures from past American history. He is quite correct in saying the Founding Fathers established a government to protect property, and that American laws have only been wrenched to accommodate broader social needs and more democratic practices through long and arduous struggle.

I would add to his list of wars started by American presidents the Cold War, whose seeds were doubtless planted in secret negotiations to end the war under Roosevelt and then set in stone by Truman, Acheson, and later John Foster Dulles. Anyone wishing to have more details about the list of foreign interventions of American presidents can consult William Blum's book, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since WW II*.

Michael Doliner's [Day in the Life](#) (of an Iraqi insurgent) is a powerful piece of creative imagination,

which makes the reality of our criminal intervention in Iraq more vivid and depressing than any reporting could. After reading this, it is hard to believe there's anything America can do to bring peace to Iraq or redress our grievous wrongs there.

**Robert Wrubel**

Sausalito, California, USA - July 12, 2006

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Want change? Make it happen...and, please, [help](#) us help *YOU* make a difference.

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### **Questions & Answers**

Hey, Monsieur d'Aymery,

I've been out of the loop for a long while. Could have much to say. But this will do for today: 1) Why don't you jump on Israel and her death wishes? 2) Why don't you embrace Zizou's head-balling? 3) Why don't you change the world? 4) Why don't you leave that rotten country? 5) That will do for today.

Allez, bon vent. Give 'em hell.

Happy Bastille Day.

**Alouette Arouet**

Paris, France - July 14, 2006

Gilles d'Aymery responds: 1) Israel is fine with me. Her government's drastic policies are what I oppose. 2) Violence, even in the name of racial slurs, is not my cup of tea. Zidane's example should not be followed. 3) Wish I could... 4) Tell me another country I can move to where I won't be hounded or ignored. At least here, I am ignored but not yet hounded. 5) Good. Try again.

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**number. If we publish your opinion we will only include your name, city, state, and country. Send your comments to [the Editor](#).** (Letters may be shortened and edited)

[Previous](#) || Letters to the Editor || [Next](#)

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