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TELLING THE TRUTH

Edited by LEO PANITCH and COLIN LEYS

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CONTENTS

Preface		vii
Colin Leys	The cynical state	1
Atilio A. Boron	The truth about capitalist democracy	28
Doug Henwood	The ‘business community’	59
Frances Fox Piven & Barbara Ehrenreich	The truth about welfare reform	78
Loic Wacquant	The ‘scholarly myths’ of the new law and order doxa	93
Robert W. McChesney	Telling the truth at a moment of truth: US news media and the invasion and occupation of Iraq	116
David Miller	Propaganda-managed democracy: the UK and the lessons of Iraq	134
Ben Fine & Elisa Van Waeyenberge	Correcting Stiglitz: from information to power in the world of development	146
Sanjay G. Reddy	Counting the poor: the truth about world poverty statistics	169
Michael Kustow	Playing with the truth: the politics of theatre	179
John Sanbonmatsu	Postmodernism and the corruption of the academic intelligentsia	196
G.M. Tamás	Telling the truth about class	228
Terry Eagleton	On telling the truth	269

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PREFACE

A generalized pathology of chronic mendacity seems to be a structural condition of global capitalism at the beginning of the 21st century. Previous volumes of the *Socialist Register* have analyzed the imbrication of national states and economies in the American neoliberal imperial order, and the stresses this generates within them, as well as between them. What has become increasingly clear is that it is not just falling in line with the increasingly crude, militarized geopolitics of the imperium that threatens the legitimacy of governments that join 'coalitions of the willing'. Equally profound, and perhaps ultimately more serious, problems of legitimacy are created by the relentless pressure of the market forces unleashed by global neoliberalism, and the ecological degradation and social dislocation they are generating. These legitimacy problems are reflected in the unprecedented levels of secrecy, obfuscation, dissembling and downright lying that now characterize public life.

The declaration of a 'war on terror' has aggravated this situation by allowing governments to take new powers to conceal what they are up to. In the USA, the number of official documents classified as secret rose from under 6 million a year in 1996 to nearly 16 million in 2004, while the number of pages declassified each year fell by more than 80 per cent. Basic information is now routinely called 'sensitive' and withheld from the public, while measures like the USA Patriot Act place citizens under comprehensive state surveillance, covering everything from their travel to the books they borrow from the library (readers beware!). Armed policing is becoming commonplace, people are arrested and detained indefinitely without trial or even being told what they are suspected of.

The egregious lies told in Washington and London in connection with the invasion of Iraq are only a conspicuous case of a more general problem. Honesty and plain speaking by politicians has become exceptional, and there is abundant evidence of the shameful complicity of the journalistic profession. The empty motivational language and sales-pitch mentality of corporate culture increasingly pervade all areas of life. Less widely recognized, but in the long run no less important, is the growing subordination of scientific research to commercial ends. The deliberate abdication of a significant

segment of the academic intelligentsia from the vocation of telling the truth makes matters worse. Indifference to truth in the academy soon resurfaces directly in public life. For example, 'narratives' have been a favourite concept among the staffers working for New Labour – Blair's director of communications even appointed a 'Head of Story Development'. And after living through the era of George W. Bush will post-structuralists and postmodernists still claim that any 'narrative' is as true as any other?

But the degeneration of public discourse is neither unchallengeable nor irreversible, even if the structural condition that underlies it could only be removed by a thoroughgoing democratic revolution. For the present the important thing is to help make the problem and its causes as visible as possible. In the middle of the Vietnam war Robert Lowell could see that it was nonetheless 'a golden time of freedom and license to act and speculate', but he had a 'gloomy premonition' that it would be ended by an 'authoritarian reign of piety and iron'. We are not living in such a golden time; there are better grounds today for such gloomy premonitions. Public life is increasingly beset by elements of authoritarianism, some with a distinct proto-fascist tinge. But there is still space to think and speak critically, and we need to take full advantage of it.

To be sure, making the degeneration of public discourse and its consequences visible is not a simple matter, as Louis Mackay's cover for this, the 42nd volume of the *Socialist Register*, brilliantly captures, with its graphic representation of religious truths, corporate truths, bent truths, half-truths, and hidden lies. The essays in this volume are all sensitive to this, starting with a sober analysis of the 'cynical state' in the West, epitomized by the UK under New Labour, at the centre of the chronic mendacity we are living under. We then turn to a critique, based on the experience of democratization in Latin America in recent decades, of the term 'capitalist democracies', which argues that capitalist states are first and foremost capitalist and only contingently democratic.

Subsequent essays focus on the concealment of capitalist class interests behind the fig-leaf of the 'business community', the class war conducted in the name of 'welfare reform' and 'law and order', and the craven failure of the media to challenge official lies around Iraq. This is followed by an essay which describes how, G8 rhetoric on ending global poverty notwithstanding, the World Bank persists in using statistical measures that fail to reveal the extent of world poverty and the actual needs of the world's poor. Another essay shows how the world's most famous liberal economist, Joseph Stiglitz, while candidly expressing his disappointments at the World Bank, remains a prisoner of his discipline's utter failure to analyze the structural factors

behind the maldistribution of political power and market information he complains of.

The abdication of so many left intellectuals from the vocation of telling the truth is surveyed in an essay which charts the rampant spread of postmodernism as both philosophy and ‘habitus’ in American academia. Postmodernism is one form of what the 1990 *Socialist Register* called ‘the retreat of the intellectuals’, and this was partly the result of political and intellectual shortcomings on the traditional left. One of these shortcomings is the subject of a wide-ranging and challenging essay which, starting with a critique of the position famously taken by E.P. Thompson in the 1965 *Register*, addresses a more long-standing retreat – from Marx to Rousseau – that has been at the core of the ambiguity about class in the socialist project from its inception. Intellectual retreats, especially when combined with complicity on the part of journalists with official mendacity, has often compelled artists to try to fill the gap. In this context we publish here our first ever essay on the politics of the theatre, which examines theatre’s vital role, especially today, in ‘playing with the truth’. Finally, the tensions between the aesthetic and the social, the elite and the mundane, postmodernism and socialism, as approaches to truth are addressed in a concluding essay which underscores the aims of the volume in saying that ‘it is not power, but its victims who need the truth most urgently ... power does not need to be told the truth because it is in some ways irrelevant to it’.

At about this point in the *Socialist Register’s* prefaces a paragraph usually appears that begins ‘Among our contributors ...’ and proceeds to describe the cast of characters in the order of their appearance. We have decided to break with this tradition and go back to the initial practice of the *Register* in 1964 and list the contributors alphabetically on a separate page in the conventional way. But, *nota bene*, all our contributors remain covered by our usual disclaimer that neither they nor we necessarily agree with everything in the volume; nor shall we neglect to thank them all here for their invaluable contributions. In addition to the thanks we also owe Adrian Howe and Tony Zurbrugg at Merlin Press, as well as Alan Zuege for his superb editorial assistance, we want to thank Atilio Boron and his colleagues at CLACSO for their remarkable achievement in translating, publishing and distributing the *Register* in Latin America, not only in Spanish but also in Portuguese. And we are grateful to Frederick Peters and his team of Aidan Conway, Tom Keefer and Marcel Nelson at York University for creating our new internet archive for all volumes of the *Socialist Register* from 1964 to 1999, and for making this available on our website: www.socialistregister.com.

Our contributing and corresponding editors around the world remain extremely important to the success of the *Register*. One of them, Diane

Elson, has retired, while generously offering her continuing support. On the other hand, we are delighted that the Marxist economist and Latin Americanist Alfredo Saad-Filho has agreed to join us as a contributing editor in London.

We should note, in conclusion, that we were very much saddened by the death in April 2005 of Andre Gunder Frank, a courageous internationalist who was a major formative influence on thinking about global development for almost four decade.

LP
CL
July 2005