

Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society

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In this book, Frank Mort, who holds a Chair in Cultural Histories at the University of Manchester, continues the work begun in *Cultures of Consumption: Commerce, Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* and in *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830*.⁽¹⁾ This volume presents a cultural history of London in the decade that begins in the early 1950s with the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (1953) and ends in the early 1960s with the Profumo Affair (1963). London, Mort explains, serves as the urban prism to bring into focus changes in personal and sexual lives taking place in this period: here is London as an exemplary progressive city, and its urban spaces as settings for culture, power and action. 'Capital Affairs' are those dramatic and public moral conflicts concerning sex, leisure, social policy, immigration, espionage, law, that caused a promiscuous miscegenation of high and low cultures.

London – the only 20th-century European capital not to fall to the forces of fascism or communism – came to be repositioned between 1945 and 1965 as central to national and world affairs, engendering further changes elsewhere. The usual term to characterise such change is the emergence of the 'permissive society'. But this is a misprision that conceals as much as it reveals, Mort contends. 'Permissiveness' was not necessarily a new, linear, progressive, emancipatory or modernising force in London, Britain or the world. Mort disagrees with the conventional periodization of this change (the 'Swinging Sixties'), with the key protagonists, the social consequences, and the assumed links between sexual changes and wider cultural-economic ones. His argument is that here is neither a revolution nor a radical break but an uneven acceleration of transformations possessing longer duration: major Victorian social policies and value systems, laws and morals, remained in place.

There are two keys to Mort's analysis. The first is sex. While sexuality is part of wider networks of consumption, a contested domain which is a product of competing cultural and political forces and shot through with wider social divisions, also, sex is a privileged way of interpreting the workings of power. Power is, indeed, Mort's second key. It must be understood both structurally-cum-discursively and humanistically: there are egocentric actors, albeit that 'men and women are not at the centre of things' (p. 11). What are central are 'cultural expressions' that come to be expressed in 'historically situated authorial consciousnesses', as Mort cites Judith Walkowitz. Individuals use the resources available to them to make sense and express themselves, but they are not fully in control of the process of bearing witness. Neither free agents nor wholly trapped by circumstance, men and women make history in the face of events they do not control and by way of the languages on offer to them.

His mediatory stance between *structuralisme* and humanism still accords with feminist critiques and with Foucauldian counter-histories of sexual-moral progress, Mort feels. But he would include the way in which he was himself attracted by the lure of London after the decriminalisation of homosexuality: a place to 'experience the energy that was opening a new phase of the gay male world' (page 20).

Mort writes his account through seven main chapters. Chapter one recounts the London coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 and the patrician figures at the centre of this performance. Chapter two charts the impact of an elite on fashionable stereotypical characters or figures such as the 'man-about-town' and associated styles of upper-class femininity. A re-emergence of this elite culture, it is argued, can be linked to London's metropolitan dominance during the 1950s, and the shaping of a new 'progressive' metropolitan culture. Chapter three examines certain spectacular transgressive sexual events, in particular the 'Rillington Place Murders' by John Christie (primarily of prostitutes but also of his wife). These stories of dangerous and wayward sexuality effected a juxtaposition between metropolitan high society and low underworlds, and destabilised traditional moral certainties. Socio-technical surveillance became necessary to cope with the 'new' rise of prostitution, homosexuality and immigrant mores. In chapter four the Wolfenden Inquiry on homosexuality and prostitution, loosening public behavioural straitjackets, takes centre stage. Chapter five focuses on Soho, an exotic, foreign and cosmopolitan quarter of London, of bohemianism and Jewish immigration and entrepreneurship. A kaleidoscope of cultures existed here and the term 'cosmopolitan' was vaunted, implying if not a Kantian sense of detachment, of critical distance and universalism, then a modern metropolitanism that included both the positives of commerce, leisure and transnationalism and the negatives of transgression, impurity, rootlessness and disorder. Soho as the key locus of pleasure and danger continues in chapter six with an account of the permissive sexuality performed at the Windmill Theatre and the Raymond Revuebar; also with an account of a shift in surveillance from patrician consensualist control of the limits of decency, taste and etiquette to more direct police intervention. Finally, chapter seven considers the Profumo Affair: a Conservative Secretary of State for War enjoys a sexual dalliance with Christine Keeler who is also the reputed mistress of an alleged Russian spy, and then lies about it in the House of Commons. 'The scandal's legacy', Mort suggests, 'generated an atmosphere of moral confusion and social turbulence that reflected the dilemmas and possibilities associated with permissiveness' (p. 24).

British post-war cultural change, concludes Mort, is a matter of the *longue durée* and is the result not only of elite or governmental actors and actions, nor of experts and entrepreneurs, but also of young sexually independent women, Caribbean newcomers and homosexual men: all players in a combustible mix.

Frank Mort's book is long and detailed: 361 pages; 82 pages of notes; 40 pages of references; 22 pages of index. It is a labour of love, I would say, in which personal history and the social-cum-national are combined. 'Personal nationalism' is the phrase that the anthropologist Anthony Cohen has used to describe the way in which individuals may find themselves in collective labels and symbols, in assertions of communitarian tradition and change. 'Nationalism is an expression of self-identity', Cohen argues: 'I substantiate the otherwise vacuous national label in terms of my own experience, my reading of history, my perception of the landscape, and my reading of [a nation's] literature and music, so that when I "see" the nation, I am looking at myself'.⁽²⁾ Mort's book presents a cogent narrative of a life in London and Britain in those years before the Swinging Sixties seemed to have changed everything.

But I also note how Cohen concludes his argument. The nation is a grand generalization, he observes ⁽³⁾, whose objective correlative is a form not a meaning. The nation bespeaks homogeneity and is indiscriminate with regard to the identity of individual members, but this is true *as formal rhetoric only*. In the domain of meaning, the nation, as with any symbolic construct and any collectivity, is animated and filled and deployed by individuals in idiosyncratic ways for particular purposes at particular moments. Of course it is often a political strategy to claim that *formal* homogeneity equals *meaningful* homogeneity – that all within a category take on the stereotypical lineaments of that category – as 'British', say, or 'Muslim' or 'women' – but if we as human scientists derive the identities of our individual subjects from their membership of a collective or a category then we have denied that these individuals inevitably and inexorably construe their own identities in their own ways. Not only is the individual authorship of identity a universal capacity and a universal practice, it is also, Cohen concludes ⁽⁴⁾ a universal – one might say, 'cosmopolitan' – right, and 'it is an infringement of that right for the anthropologist or anyone else to treat my self, however it is described, as a mere reflex of some larger structural condition'. If we peddle the myth of communitarian homogeneity then, 'we have been complicit in the colonization, massification, or anonymization of the human subject'.⁽⁵⁾

How does this sit with Mort's assertion that 'men and women are not at the centre of things': that the task of the human scientist is to contextualise 'egocentric actors' among discourses and structures, among 'cultural expressions'? The trouble with this is that 'context' is so slippery, so potentially 'colonizing' and 'massificating' a concept. As Ernest Gellner famously phrased it: 'There is nothing in the nature of things or societies to dictate visibly just how much context is relevant to any given utterance, or how the context should be described'.⁽⁶⁾ Or in the more direct terms favoured by Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'There is nothing more stupid than the chatter about cause and effect in history books; nothing is more wrong-headed, more half-baked'.⁽⁷⁾

Gellner would have hated the 'context', above, that allowed his words to be classified alongside those of Wittgenstein as commensurate to an argument. But that is my point. Context is a personal construct of individual meaning-making and world-view.⁽⁸⁾ It is a matter of how one attends to the world and makes one's circumstance.

Mort attends to London between 1953 and 1963 by way of seven major landmarks which together come to embody the analytical context of 'permissiveness as a situation of the uneven acceleration of longstanding traits of British society and culture'. These seven landmarks, we have seen, are the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, the patrician 'man-about-town', the Rillington Place murders, the Wolfenden Inquiry, the cosmopolitanism of Soho, the licentiousness of Soho, and the Profumo Affair. But why these precisely?

In 'The Book of the Recording Angel', as A. M. MacIver (9) characterised the ideal history, 'the whole story of everything that ever happened to every individual' would be recounted. The stuff of history, MacIver elaborated, is the countless actual individual doings of all individuals who have lived taken together – history being 'nothing but the resultant of all the acts of millions of individuals', some more consequential than others – since it is individuals who are met in the flesh and who possess an ontology distinct from the postulates of theory ('class', 'spirit of the age', 'discursive episteme'). However, since history is also a human product (rather than an angelic one), it can only approach the ideal, MacIver concluded, and it does so by eschewing generalization. History approximates to a perfect recounting as generalization tends to zero.

What might this mean in practice (and the issue would appear the same not only for the historian but the ethnographer, the memoirist and the biographer)? It may not be satisfactory for the 'history' of something to become synonymous with the 'diary' of something, but nevertheless I would like to stake the claim of history being an avowedly personal documentation. It is the writing of actual individual doings by actual individuals: it is the *personal* attempt to consider countless individual doings, own and other. And since no human individual can write 'The Book of the Recording Angel', and any history will therefore inevitably contain imperfect constructions of context in whose terms individual doings might be seen to make sense, and will inevitably formulate some generalizations that elide individual details with others, let it be admitted – given an overt personal signature – that this is a history *from an avowedly individual point of view*. Frank Mort's book is a cogent depiction of life in London and Britain in the years preceding the Swinging Sixties, but it is also an individual history imbued with a personal portrayal of context and generality, I would assert, and all the better for it. It is filled with authenticity and passion. I read it as 'Frank Mort's London 1953-63'.

The way I have attended to *Capital Affairs* has been influenced by my recent reading of Sarah Bakewell's biography of 16th-century essayist and humanist, Michel Eyquem de Montaigne. She entitles it, *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*.(10) Montaigne's words form part of the context in which I read human science at present and compose my own. It is appropriate, then, that it is with words from Montaigne's *Essays* – history, ethnography, memoir, biography in one – that I end:

I do not speak the minds of others except to speak my own mind better. ... I set forth a humble and inglorious life; that does not matter. You can tie up all moral philosophy with a common and private life just as well as with a life of richer stuff. Every man bears the whole stamp of the human condition.(11)

A definition of the 'cosmopolitan' might be the recognition that the individual human being is at once the universal human being. It finds men and women to be precisely 'at the centre of things' because in the individual speaks the human. An individual's personal history – of London 1953-63, say – is not 'merely' individual, then, but also a version of the human – and hence the most we can aspire to.

Notes

1. Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Commerce, Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1996); *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830* (London, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A. P. Cohen, 'Personal nationalism: a Scottish view of some rites, rights and wrongs', *American Ethnologist*, 23(4), 802–15, 803–4.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *ibid*, 802.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *ibid*, 806.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *ibid*, 803.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. E. Gellner, 'Concepts and society', in *Rationality*, ed. B. Wilson (Oxford, 1970), pp. 18–49, p. 33. [Back to \(6\)](#)

7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Chicago, 1980), p. 62e.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Nigel Rapport, 'Context as an act of personal externalization: Gregory Bateson and the Harvey Family in the English Village of Wanet', in *The Problem of Context*, ed. R. Dilley, (Oxford, 1999), pp. 187–211.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. A. M. MacIver, 'Historical explanation', in *Logic and Language*, ed. A. Flew (2nd series, Oxford, 1961), pp. 187-202, pp. 188–9.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. S. Bakewell, *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (London, 2010).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. M. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. D. Frame (Stanford, 1958), pp. 108, 611.[Back to \(11\)](#)

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Scottish Herald

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Islington Tribune

<http://www.islingtontribune.com/reviews/features/2010/jul/books-review-capital-affairs-london-and-making-permissive-society-frank-mo> [6]

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[6] <http://www.islingtontribune.com/reviews/features/2010/jul/books-review-capital-affairs-london-and-making-permissive-society-frank-mo>