

## Orange Juice and Agent Orange

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Bruce Robbins

*... how can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if  
the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension?*

Don DeLillo, *Underworld*

THE PHRASE FROM DON DELILLO THAT I HAVE TAKEN AS MY TITLE spontaneously re-created itself at the birthplace of this collection of articles, a conference held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in March 2006 and entitled "States of Welfare." No conscious allusion was made to Don DeLillo, yet his question was suddenly present in the room, and in very nearly his exact words. It seemed like a message from the massive system itself. And it was so taken, I think, even by those of us, like myself, who have our doubts about paranoia as the imagination's default setting and who thus wonder (as DeLillo seems to wonder in *Underworld*) whether we can be sure there exists a single system that connects orange juice and Agent Orange at a level beyond our comprehension. Even as a cause of wonderment, however, the uncanny repetition of words seemed to put us on notice that from this time forward we would be talking about a new and urgent topic.

Some of us had come to the conference prepared to take part in ongoing conversations: the heritage of the Enlightenment and whether it should or could be left behind (would there be a rematch between Foucault and Habermas?), or the stance of the academic Left toward liberalism in a time when, outside the academy, liberalism could plausibly be seen as marginalized and even stigmatized rather than as complacently empowered. Once the orange-colored words had been linked, however, what we got instead was an exercise in defamiliarization. For neither Fou-



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cault nor Habermas offered much guidance on the questions we suddenly found before us. Does the value of action at the level of the nation depend absolutely on how that action looks from a broader, transnational perspective? If the “system” widely assumed to connect the two indeed exists only at a level beyond our comprehension, then would not their identification belong to the realm of theology rather than to that of secular ethics? Is there a nontheological way of negotiating the relationship between domestic governmentality and the uses of governmental power (largely violent ones) in the space beyond the nation? Is there a relationship that does not assume their ethical equivalence?

The phrase “orange juice and Agent Orange,” which crystallized these questions, was a collaborative effort. The orange juice part of it came from my plenary lecture, which talked about Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman*.<sup>1</sup> As I read it, Steedman’s memoir makes a backhanded but nonetheless compelling and indeed exemplary case for the welfare state. This is not a case that Steedman seems eager to make. In her book’s opening scene, a memory of childhood trauma, a representative of the welfare state, a caseworker, or “health visitor,” humiliates the family and provokes the four-year-old Carolyn to assume a defiant sense of her class identity. It is something of a surprise, therefore, to read the generous assessment of the welfare state that follows: “It was a considerable achievement for a society to pour so much milk and so much orange juice, so many vitamins, down the throats of its children, and for the height and weight of those children to outstrip the measurements of only a decade before; and this remains an achievement in spite of the fact that the statistics of healthy and intelligent childhood were stretched along the curve of achievement, and only a few were allowed to travel through the narrow gate at the age of eleven, towards the golden city” (122).

The milk and orange juice are mentioned as part of Steedman’s defense of “state intervention in children’s lives” in the 1950s—interventions in the lives of families as well, of course, and interventions that took the sometimes very disagreeable shape of health visitors at the door. As she gets toward the end of the book, Steedman appears to forget the health visitor scene and how awful she had found it. State intervention was “experienced, by me at least,” she writes, “as entirely beneficent.” One of the few who “were allowed to travel through the narrow gate . . . towards the golden city,” Steedman knows it is not fair that the travelers *were* so few. Yet she insists, I think quite properly, that it was indeed an achievement for society in its newly and self-consciously organized political form to have done so much for so many. Her account of what it felt like to be on the receiving end of the state’s attention in the years after the health visitor is no less convincing than the opening scene: “The calculated, dictated fairness of the ration book went on into the new decade, and we spent a lot of time after we moved from Hammersmith to Streatham Hill, picking up medicine bottles of orange juice and jars of Virol from the baby clinic

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago, 1986).

for my sister. I think I would be a very different person now if orange juice and milk and dinners at school hadn't told me, in a covert way, that I had a right to exist, was worth something" (121–22). Though Steedman begins in anger against a representative of the state's intervention in children's lives, she ends in no doubt that it is only such interventions that allowed her to feel that she herself "had a right to exist, was worth something."

In my lecture I went on to suggest that despite the memoir's traumatic opening, Steedman herself finally becomes an ambivalent representative of the welfare state, a kind of intellectual health visitor.<sup>2</sup> The work she describes herself doing, having benefited from state scholarships and become a state-supported academic historian, is visibly continuous with the work of "visiting" and in a sense trying to rescue the working class, including women like her mother, her sister, and herself as a child. After her fashion, she too is now distributing milk and orange juice. No one familiar with her career could believe that this statelike labor is either negligible or merely complicit in a structure of social subordination.

Enter our title's second phrase. In the course of a witty and generous response to this lecture, Cary Nelson raised the legitimate and perhaps inevitable question of whether my focus on welfare did not obscure the state's other, less nurturing functions, like imprisoning people of color on a massive scale and, of course, making war. War was on everyone's mind. We were a few days from the third anniversary of the U.S. bombing and invasion of Iraq. The Vietnam era term "quagmire," initially hushed up by a supine media, had already returned with a vengeance. In talking so appreciatively about orange juice, Nelson suggested, we should not forget about Agent Orange.

The phrase was immediately picked up by other speakers and became, in my eyes at least, the central animating theme of a very animated conference. The proceedings were not taped, and the present collection makes no effort to reproduce them—indeed, various contributions are entirely new. But the volume does take its inspiration from the passionate intelligence and variety of perspectives provoked by this lapidary formulation: on the one hand, horrifying military barbarism against enemy civilians and even toward the state's own veterans (accountability for Agent Orange has by no means been resolved to everyone's satisfaction); on the other hand, the premise that even in this international context there was reason to support the state's agency in sheltering its own citizens and residents from the extreme cruelties of the market—to support, that is, the state's real or potential benevolence.

The organizers of the conference, Lauren Goodlad and Michael Rothberg, were by no means neutral in this debate. Their premise was that the humanities in general and literary criticism in particular have for too long delayed a necessary engagement with the agency of the state. This agency needed to be acknowledged for its formative role in their own lives as academics and intellectuals (in part, state sponsored, as at the University of Illinois). And state agency needed to be acknowledged as a crucial ally and court of appeal, a means of realizing or consolidating progressive projects of social change, without which many calls for such change by Left academics risked sounding like empty posturing. This acknowledgment, they felt, was not happening. The prevailing common sense they felt themselves to be pushing back against, whether explicitly anarchist or not, holds that appeals to the state are always fundamentally misguided. This common sense can be expressed by the titles of two recent books about the history of the 1930s: Götz Aly's *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* and Wolf-

<sup>2</sup> A full version of this argument is available in Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), chap. 5.

gang Schivelbusch's *Three New Deals: Reflections of Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933–1939*.<sup>3</sup> In its critique of the welfare state, each book takes the highest possible moral ground. Both tar the welfare state with the brush of fascism. Popular satisfaction with the militarism of the Third Reich was achieved in part, Aly argues, by a systematic distribution of plundered “foods, goods, and amenities” that must be described as “a kind of racist-totalitarian welfare state” (2). According to Schivelbusch, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt tried to establish a welfare state, he was drawn to imitate those that Mussolini and Hitler had already founded. In a 1933 review of Roosevelt's *Looking Forward*, Mussolini himself praised the new American president's agreement with the fascist principle “that the state no longer leaves the economy to its own devices, having recognized that the welfare of the economy is identical with the welfare of the people.”<sup>4</sup> Exploring “points of convergence between Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and the deromanticized New Deal” (10), Schivelbusch proposes that even the militarism we find characteristic of Mussolini and Hitler goes deep into the historical roots of Roosevelt's project as well. For Roosevelt, as for the Progressivism he learned from, “the words ‘welfare’ and ‘warfare’ soon became almost interchangeable” (47). For both, in short, orange juice literally does mean Agent Orange.

In the United States since September 2001, it is both strange and not strange at all that this common sense should be so flourishing.<sup>5</sup> It is strange because the big story of the late decades of the twentieth century, a story that has thus far extended its run effortlessly into the twenty-first, has of course been globalization. As far as the welfare state is concerned, this means the pressure of global capital and its champions at home to privatize, defund, and dismantle those few state institutions aimed at regulating the operation of the market in areas crucial to the general welfare and to protecting society's most vulnerable members from the tender mercies of the bottom line. The strangeness of the refusal to defend or identify with such institutions can be multiplied by the number of American Foucaultians who, along with many ideas of greater value, also took over their master's very French antistatism. The transnational parallel was always forced: there was clearly no equivalent on this side of the Atlantic to the centralized, panoptical French state to which Foucault's antistatism was a philosophical rejoinder. And in the century's final years, as I said, the timing was particularly bad. Americans were adopting this antistatism even as whole sections of the American state edifice were crashing down around them. When the government, urged by its corporate backers, repeatedly and systematically decimates the already thin ranks of those inspectors sent out to ensure the purity of our food, air, and water, it requires something of a leap of faith to believe inspection is the evil heart of the modern regime of power.

And yet in another sense this belief is not strange at all. For the Bush administration's response to the attacks of September 11th, 2001, was to institute a scale and intensity of surveillance that made even the least paranoid reach for their worn paperbacks of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The administration's ideology might have been hostile to so-called big government, but the effect was in the spirit of Big Brother. Along with the new military Keynesianism, anti-immigrant

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<sup>3</sup> Götz Aly, *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007). In German, the title is *Hitlers Volksstaat* (Hitler's Welfare State). Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections of Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933–1939*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> For an eloquent example of this common sense, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

crackdowns and reinforcement of the borders, and the lawless augmentation of executive power, the systematic intrusiveness of the so-called War on Terror forced many of us to stop and ask ourselves whether the Foucaultians had not been right all along. Foucault had much else going for him. But the utter rejection of liberal reform with which he is rightly or wrongly associated could not have kept its hold over so many without serious help from the Bush government. Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, and the moral and legal horrors for which these place-names now stand have sustained this common sense. Nothing less dramatic could explain the sudden fashion for the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's revolutionary messianism and his contempt for legal order and parliamentary politics, which were arguably nongeneralizable effects of watching postwar Italy's seamless transition from fascism to Christian Democracy, might seem another unlikely import to the United States in an era when the U.S. government has been acting in shameless defiance of human rights and international law.<sup>6</sup> (Note that even under Obama, Guantánamo has not yet been shut down.) It seems clear that what the United States needs is more respect for democratic procedure, not less. Yet it is as if Bush's disrespect for such procedures, his attempt to play the role of the charismatic leader who in a moment of national emergency rises above such petty norms, found a perversely sympathetic echo among many academic humanists. Along with Agamben, they too seem to judge that the hollowness of liberal norms and institutions has been properly exposed, that we are long past the time when such norms and institutions could make any genuine appeal to our critical energies. With Agamben, they seem willing to take the extermination camp as the exemplary institution of the modern state, the deep truth not only of Nazism but of liberal governmentality as well. Whether critical thinkers in the humanities and cultural disciplines will prove supple enough to adapt to the Obama administration, which is to say to the possibility of a renewed discourse of state intervention and regulation in the interests of the American public at large, and even (such is the hope, at least) in the interests of the world outside America's borders, is one of the more crucial questions we are now facing.

Theoretical common sense is always shaped by the impact of particular historical experiences. It generalizes more or less abusively, applying conclusions drawn from one experience to the urgencies of different places and institutional contexts. That is one challenge that I have tried to capture in the title "Orange Juice and Agent Orange." What's in a common color? Are we sure that the violence of the dioxin-bearing, cancer- and birth-defect-causing defoliant is the hidden truth behind the supplying to children of the humble citrus drink, rich in vitamin C? To return to Agamben and company: in addition to everything else they are, are the camps really *exemplary*? One example calls up another. Consider the argument by James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta about the Anganwadi Program in India.<sup>7</sup> Like the program that provided milk and orange juice to the young Carolyn Steedman, this one too was designed by the Indian government to provide better nutrition, in this case for pregnant women as well as young children in need. Discussing this program's surprise inspections, intended to ensure that local offices were actually carrying out this work, Ferguson and Gupta do not ask whether such inspections might be necessary and productive. Instead they dispute the state's claim "to the general good," to "national, as opposed to local, interest." The thrust of the argument is a defense of the local and the particular against the state's claim "to represent the 'greater' good for the 'larger' dominion of the

<sup>6</sup> Mark Mazower, "Foucault, Agamben: Theory and the Nazis," *boundary 2* 35, no. 1 (2008): 23–34.

<sup>7</sup> James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta, "Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality," *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 4 (2002): 981–1002.

nation and the world" (988). To observers of modern India, the quotes around "greater" and "larger" may or may not seem self-evidently appropriate. But in the presence of arguments like this, which takes for granted that the local always needs to be supported at all costs against an intrusive state whose claim to the general good is obviously bogus, an American may think back to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. There, as some will recall, the local was enthusiastically represented by Governor Orville Faubus and police chief Bull Connor. In Alabama and Mississippi, the defense of the local had a precise ideological content: racism. And the content of the federal government's claim to represent the "national, as opposed to local, interest" was desegregation. Why are we so reluctant to believe that, like desegregation, better nutrition for pregnant women and young children in need might be a perfectly legitimate object of state policy, one that—given local resistance in both cases—might actually benefit from some oversight?

If Bush's detention camps were able to steal the show, distracting attention from other, very different instances of state intervention and from other institutions of surveillance, more horrifying to multinational corporations than to the world public at large, there is also a longer-term reason. This reason is the transnational turn in intellectual work, a strong preference for seeking coherence and significance in phenomena that transcend the nation-state and for subjecting national phenomena to scrutiny in the name of planetary justice. Each of the editors, in her or his own way, has participated eagerly in this turn. None of us plans to forsake it. At a moment when some voices in the Obama administration are already hinting quietly that perhaps the economic crisis can be blamed on Chinese monetary policy, it would be foolhardy to assume that even the most ambitious "new New Deal"—something for which the chances are increasingly bleak—will manage to avoid making foreigners pay as much as possible of the price. Still, we have also tried to remain aware of the broader context and the dangers of political slippage that the transnational perspective makes possible. Over the past thirty years, it has been global capital, as I noted above, that incited taxpayer revolt against institutions of government oversight and the call for their downsizing. In smoothing the intellectual passage to a generalized antistatism, enthusiasts for the transnational have worked in unconscious and in many cases unwilling complicity with globalization. When intellectuals begin tracking cultural flows that cut across national borders, celebrating ever more complex forms of transnational hybridity, and so on, the assumption is too often that political sovereignty is either irrelevant or antagonistic to the critical enterprise. What can a state do other than *block* flows of people, ideas, and cultures, stop them from mixing, arrest the process of aesthetic creation or identity creation? It can obviously detract, but what can a state possibly *add* to such objects of cultural interpretation? What sense does it make, then, to force literature and the welfare state together?

The assumption here is that these questions are not merely rhetorical. Answers might be sought, for example, in some of the social categories with which the humanities in the United States have most intensely concerned themselves. One of the arguments made at the Illinois conference, and taken up again in this collection, is that it is not a coincidence that attacks on the welfare state should so often take on racist and misogynistic intonations. Women and people of color, often those most at risk in American society, have certainly been among the genuine beneficiaries of welfare programs. Among the many things the state has done in the United States is attempt, however reluctantly and unsatisfactorily, to diminish and embarrass racism in American society, or at least cushion against its lingering effects. A similar argument could be made about the state's role in the women's movement: the promulgating of laws protecting women from

sexual harassment, and so on. When criticism takes up the categories of gender and race, it will leave out a lot if (to adapt a phrase from Theda Skocpol) it does not bring the state back in.

But the title of my article tries to urge the reader toward a wider problematic. It asks about the connection between the state's efforts at domestic amelioration, assuming such efforts are at least potentially substantive, and its actions at the international level. At the international level, it must be admitted, the picture changes immediately and drastically. Welfare, however modest, has by and large been restricted to people within the state's borders. It is only within those borders that the good has been recognized even very tentatively as common. The state's treatment of those outside its borders has tended, on the contrary, to oscillate between the poles of indifference and violent aggression. The phrase "Agent Orange" keeps this aggression on display. It is arguable, though by no means firmly established, that the welfare state has managed to exist, in countries with more or less developed social services, only by taking advantage of the violence that the European powers in their colonial phase and the neocolonialism of the United States have been in the habit of meting out to countries that have no such services. It seems hard to deny that, historically speaking, funding for what were to become welfare institutions would have come at least in part from what can still be called imperialism.

On the other hand, of what act of civilization would this well-documented dependence on barbarism *not* be true? How much can we properly deduce from it? No simple judgment seems adequate to this clash of equally valid perspectives.

In a radio broadcast in 1946, looking back on what was admirable in the Victorian liberalism in which he was raised, E. M. Forster noted that liberalism's sincere belief in social progress was achieved only by "exploiting the poor of our own country and the backward races abroad."<sup>8</sup> I think we would want to say now that liberalism's limits, as Forster expresses them, number at least three: (1) its ill treatment of the poor at home, (2) its ill treatment of the "backward races" abroad, and (3) the fact that Forster, carrying on the tradition of liberalism, *continues* to use the phrase "backward races" without quotation marks. The question, however, is not how bad liberalism's history is, or even how far forward that history extends into today's era of humanitarian intervention. The question is whether the tendency to disparage and mistreat non-Westerners is intrinsic to Western ideologies like liberalism and Marxism, which is to say whether liberalism and Marxism are intrinsically mismatched with Third World peoples. In his book *Liberalism and Empire*, the political theorist Uday Mehta suggests that they are indeed mismatched—that the failure of self-limitation indicated by numbers 2 and 3 is in fact constitutive of liberalism. "For the *project* of nineteenth-century liberalism . . . other peoples' experience must be viewed as lacking coherence"<sup>9</sup>; other peoples must be viewed as objects requiring improvement. Liberalism, not in its antipathy to state interference but on the contrary in its positive vision of the state—in Lauren Goodlad's words, "as a potential aid to individual and social welfare"<sup>10</sup>—is of course (along with pressure from below and from the Left) a major source of the welfare project. It is precisely this tradition that Mehta ties to imperialism abroad. "The stronger the claims for a particular intervention being progressive, or bettering life, the more it has pressed against the existing norms limiting the use of political power. And in that sense such claims have served to expand, and justify the expansion of, the domain of the political. . . . What is latent in the liberal

<sup>8</sup> Simon Joyce, *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 43.

<sup>9</sup> Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 78–80, 212–13.

<sup>10</sup> Lauren Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), viii.

conception of the political is a deep impulse to reform the world” (79). Marxism and liberalism share “a view of the world as something malleable through political effort” (80). If this view of the world was contained and contested at home, in the empire it takes over. “In the Empire, this . . . urge to reform and progress . . . becomes virtually determinative” (80). The welfare state side of liberalism is conceptually aligned with its imperialist side: both are interventionist. The liberal justification of empire is the imperative, to which liberalism fixes no limits, to intervene and improve. Mehta invites us therefore to try a thought experiment: to imagine the world as not needing political improvement.

From this experimental viewpoint Edmund Burke, a conservative who resisted schemes of improvement that intruded upon the givenness of custom and locality and thus spent his best energies fighting the East India Company, becomes Mehta’s antiliberal hero, a planetary progressive precisely because he was not a domestic one. In the context of today’s human rights militarism, this impulse to reverse the meanings of Left and Right at the international scale is ever more understandable. And yet on reflection, something more complex than a reversal seems called for. What happens in South Asia once the pre-1947 division of colonizer and colonized no longer suffices to guide political demands and identities—as I think it no longer does suffice? Is Burke still a model to emulate, a figure of the proper Left, *within* India? Could any Indian citizen, naturally concerned about flagrant inequalities and systemic injustices of various sorts, rest content with the thought experiment of imagining Indian society as in need of no improvement other than at the individual, ethical scale? To ask this question is, I think, to answer it. We are speaking of a country where despite impressive economic growth at least half the population, or something like five or six hundred million people, currently live below the poverty line set by the Indian government itself, which is to say below an income of approximately two hundred dollars per year. In such a situation—and India’s is superior in this sense to many others—to adopt Mehta’s thought experiment and consider the social world as needing only individual ethical improvement seems to me an unspeakable obscenity. If you fix your eyes on the five or six or seven hundred million people living in severe and life-threatening deprivation, talk of the sacred givenness of place and custom can only sound like what it clearly was for Burke: a defense of the status quo, which is to say a defense of the comforts and privileges of a ruling elite at the expense of most of humanity.

This would be the moment, mimicking what Burke did at the trial of Warren Hastings, to tell atrocity stories about deprivation and injustice that, like some of Carolyn Steedman’s, make it almost impossible to sit still. I ask the reader to take it on faith that I could tell such stories and that they would inform us that yes, *pace* Mehta, the world does after all need improving, drastic improving, political improving. We know that atrocity stories are often used to make listeners forget what agent is being invited to intervene, how much that agent has to answer for, how tainted its motives are, and so on. None of these can be safely forgotten. An ethical language must be found that recognizes the need for restraint of arrogant and self-authorized intervention by those who have the power to intervene, like the United States. The right to intervene cannot be restricted to the powerful. Still, that self-limiting language will also have to posit the need for intervention and the need for improvement. It cannot discount the state as one agent of improvement. And when it thinks about improvement, it will have to borrow some of the state’s own abstractness. Consider an example of outrage expressed in dry statistical form, statistics being the characteristic language of the state. The utilitarian philosopher Ted Honderich has calculated that on September 11, 2001, “when 3000 were killed at the Twin Towers and the Pentagon

... on that day, if deaths by starvation for 2001 were spread evenly throughout the year, 23,000 people died of hunger.”<sup>11</sup> It is only the bureaucratic impersonality of this language, learned from the state and then extended beyond it, that permits us to define injustice properly and thus even to conceive of doing something about it.

The issue of how to relate larger and smaller ethical scales has a long, if somewhat obscure, history. The disparity between the two is already striking in Thomas More’s *Utopia*, where outside its borders the ideal commonwealth does not obey the same principles it subscribes to within them. The development of international law, both late and eccentric in its relation to ordinary state-centric law, offers much to reflect on from this perspective. Today the eccentricity question is suddenly central to debates in postcolonial studies. Postcolonial critics can no longer count on the simple and professionally convenient faith that the existence of empire *must* have expressed itself at the center of metropolitan culture and must therefore lie there awaiting scholarly exposure. Perhaps, as the interviewers of *Politics and Letters* once suggested to Raymond Williams apropos of the Irish Famine and the realist novels of the 1840s, even the most apocalyptic results of imperialism did *not* show up in even the most sensitive instances of the domestic “structure of feeling.”

If not, there would be a good side as well as a bad side to the disconnect—for evidence of the relative autonomy of the national would make it a bit harder to disqualify every claim to progressive achievement in the domestic sphere by means of a crushing reference to visible foreign crimes. It was a few such achievements that E. P. Thompson listed in his rejoinder to Perry Anderson, who had judged the English working-class movement by the extremely demanding criterion of unmade revolution and thus found it wanting. “The abolition of factory labor for children under the age of 11, or the institution of divorce, or the penny-post, may affect the power-model [i.e., revolution] scarcely at all; but for those who were then living these may have affected them inexpressibly or quite perceptibly.”<sup>12</sup> His opponents, Thompson said, see “social reforms” merely “as distractions from ‘hegemonic’ aspirations. . . . But surely any mature view of history (or of contemporary actuality) must in some way combine evaluations of both kinds” (87)—in other words, both ultimate goals and immediate changes in “the quality of life,” in particular those provisionally enforced by state action.

As the university’s least practical branch, the humanities have tended to feel most at home when speaking in the name of ultimate goals and ultimate values. Discomfort with apparent improvements in the day-to-day quality of life, with reform in general, and with the utilitarian reformer Jeremy Bentham in particular forms an intriguing constant from Matthew Arnold to Michel Foucault. Yet Arnold was of course an educational reformer, and Foucault spoke very eloquently in defense of Social Security. Things were not better, he reminded us, when old people were tucked away for prolonged periods in the family’s attic. It is not clear that critics in either the Arnold or the Foucault lineage—arguably the same lineage, with minor inflections—are entirely on the same page as their discursive forefathers when they scorn less-than-apocalyptic improvement and neglect the daily functioning of the institutions that educate the young, protect the old, or step in when the status of temporarily able-bodied is suddenly withdrawn and someone neither young nor old is pushed into sharing their common dependence and vulnerability. It is also unclear whether we critics have the right to make that grandiose claim to public

<sup>11</sup> Ted Honderich, *Terrorism for Humanity: Inquiries in Political Philosophy* (London: Pluto, 2003), 23–24.

<sup>12</sup> E. P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English” (1965), in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 86–87.

significance disguised by allusions to “politics” if all our interpretive commitments are pegged to the ultimate, a safely postponed realm where dilemmas, alliances, and dirty hands—usually thought to be the stuff of politics—do not have to be confronted. Hence our project: to elicit a conversation with various positions in and around the humanities that assume, not without provocation, that the ultimate malevolence of the state is a safe guide to political judgment.

The issue here cannot be resolved by anything so simple as a choice between short term and long term, reform and revolution, justice at the level of the nation and justice at the level of the planet. We are obliged to live these different scales and goals and temporal rhythms simultaneously, yet without any guarantee that they can be made to conform to each other. This means that we must get used to a schizophrenic politics. We must live with and within the contradiction of struggling at home to *increase* national solidarity, to raise national solidarity to the level necessary for the defense of welfare institutions (even though those institutions will not help the much needier people who are neither citizens nor residents of the United States), while working to *detach* Americans from the sorts of national solidarity that permit chauvinist adventures like the current war in Iraq. And we must struggle at the global level to see that non-Americans are provided with (or get to keep) the welfare institutions that they need or that global capital (with our help) is vigorously trying to undermine. The global struggle is of course already going on. There are at least glimmers of coherence between global and domestic. If you look deeper into recent election results in the Middle East, the success of what looks to some like extremism might seem better described as a demand for social welfare at all costs. As Saba Mahmood writes in *The Politics of Piety*, “Islamic welfare organizations around the Muslim world have increasingly stepped in to fill the vacuum left by post-colonial states as these states, under neoliberal economic pressures, have withdrawn from providing social services to their citizens.”<sup>13</sup> I would argue that the generalizing of the welfare state is already the unstated goal of much of the world’s “antiglobalization” or rather counterglobalization movement, which demands regulation in place of free-market chaos. From the perspective of politics, then, the question is whether people like ourselves are ready to join these struggles without the comforts of full and prepaid consistency.

From the perspective of literature, the word “struggles” might seem an example of egregious overreaching. Literature participates in the life of its time without, for the most part, taking an active part in its decisive battles. Nor does it necessarily have much to say about the state. Poets have worked in customs houses and consulates, but that is not by and large what they wrote poems about. The state is of course the object of those struggles that we most readily name “political,” as in Shakespeare’s history plays, but the sort of modern state action suggested by “welfare” does not always rate even that adjective. To say that neither the state in general nor welfare in particular has a prominent place in modern literature would be something of an understatement. In the nineteenth century, when the modern state bureaucracy was taking shape, the novel offers little more than occasional glimpses into the workhouse, the schoolhouse, the orphanage, the courts, and above all the police.<sup>14</sup> Aside from some plague stories from Defoe to Camus, passing through *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch*, it is hard to think of interesting creative attention

<sup>13</sup> Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), xi.

<sup>14</sup> “The neo-conservative return to the Victorians was inseparable from contemporary efforts to reform the welfare state” (Joyce, *Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, 145). Defense against the modernist anti-Victorian contempt concedes something to Himmelfarb: “what was increasingly enshrined in the second half of the nineteenth century was the idea of an impersonal and bureaucratic state as the only available option for dealing with large-scale social problems, especially when the alternative options were private charity and a philanthropic moralism” (146).

to public authorities who take action in defense of the public welfare, and even harder to think of literary imaginings of action that happens on an everyday, nonemergency basis. Even in the period of the modern welfare state—roughly, since the 1930s and 1940s—there is little expectation that the state might figure in imaginative work in more than a trivial, incidental way.

This group of articles attempts to change that expectation. It goes back to the nineteenth century, when the foundations of modern welfare institutions were laid, to show how rich and unpredictable the story is that connects then and now. Taking inspiration from two important books on the New Deal—one by Michael Szalay, the other by Sean McCann—it tries to usher various social figures out of the dim background of the taken-for-granted and give them an intriguing state-related profile—for example, the elevator-inspector heroine of Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*.<sup>15</sup> In this context it suddenly becomes a matter of significance that the father in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* is also (though not a state employee) an inspector of infrastructure, in his case a railroad operated as a public trust but about to be the object of a hostile corporate takeover. The literature of the HIV/AIDS crisis and its critical attention to the state-sanctioned medical establishment can now be fit into another useful framework. Quite a number of texts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are suddenly candidates to be arranged in an emergent literature-and-the-state tradition.

From this perspective, state-related interpretive dramas start to become visible in any number of works, including some of considerable creative power and cultural centrality. Why has no one noticed how much interest in the welfare state there is, for example, in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*? Toward the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to Irie's Jamaican grandfather:

Darcus had come over to England fourteen years earlier and spent the whole of that period in the far corner of the living room, watching television. The original intention had been that he should come to England and earn enough money to enable Clara and Hortense to come over, join him, and settle down. However, on arrival, a mysterious illness had debilitated Darcus Bowden. An illness that no doctor could find any physical symptoms of, but which manifested itself in the most incredible lethargy, creating in Darcus—admittedly, never the most vibrant of men—a lifelong affection for the dole, the armchair, and British television.<sup>16</sup>

The portrait of a lethargic Caribbean immigrant who spends a lifetime on welfare flirts with a politically potent stereotype. Add to it the later satire of the hyperliberal headmaster and of the Chalfens, who see themselves as “the inheritors of the Enlightenment, the creators of the welfare state . . . and the source of all culture” (359), add to it, above all, Irie's denunciation of Chalfenite health-visitor-style interventionism in the lives of others—“How about we all try a policy of non-involvement for once? A little *laissez-faire*?” (360)—and you get something that will remind the reader inevitably and uncomfortably of Thatcherism.<sup>17</sup> Reference to the Thatcherite assault on the welfare state is anything but peripheral to a novel that centers, philosophically speaking, on the question of how much one can or should guard against accidents and risks, ensure the secu-

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 26.

<sup>17</sup> When a Pakistani butcher “received a hammer blow to his ribs in January 1970, he naively reported it to the constabulary and was rewarded by a late-night visit from five policemen who gave him a thorough kicking” (*ibid.*, 391). This viewpoint on the state would be less cheering to the Thatcher government.

rity of one's family, try to control the unfolding of events. Nothing could be more antithetical to Thatcherism than the proud, rebellious existence of Britain's Caribbean and South Asian population. Yet there is a strange overlap here between Third World fatalism and Thatcherite *laissez-faire*, each of them aligned against the liberal/welfarist impulse toward state intervention.

For anyone interested in this coincidence, *White Teeth* conveniently hints, via the history of the school attended by the younger characters, that today's orange juice is directly entangled in the history I have abbreviated as Agent Orange. The school building was once a Victorian workhouse (241), but its financial origins turn out to lie at the very heart of colonialism: it was paid for by the English owner of a Jamaican tobacco farm, a man we gradually discover was also the would-be rapist of Irie's grandmother (252). The point might seem conclusive. And yet the last and most synthesizing of the novel's grand speeches, the speech in which Irie asks her family and friends to shut up, is in a sense a hymn of praise to the public domain. "In case you didn't notice, there are, like, *other people* on this bus and, believe it or not, not everyone in the *universe* wants to listen to you lot" (425). Irie's speech turns into an appreciation of "neutral spaces," of people who "don't do public performances of angst on public transport" (426). The fact that the speech is itself delivered on public transport might not initially seem to matter very much. But Irie's words are framed, strangely and poignantly, by a discussion about what public transport means to these two working-class families. Archie, her father, has noticed "the amount of information they put on the bus tickets these days" (424). His friend Samad has sarcastically offered his Foucaultian guess that this "is part of some huge governmental monitoring process to track the every movement of one Archibald Jones" (424). Archie seems ready to believe it. But when Irie's public declamation is finished, she explains softly to her father "about the bus tickets": "One theory goes it's because so many people pay less than they should for their journey. Over the past few years the bus companies have been suffering from larger and larger deficits. You see where it says *Retain for Inspection?* That's so they can check later" (427).

Here is a moment of deep fellow feeling between father and daughter—I spare the sentimental details—which is also an affirmation of the illogical interventionist decency that Archie will act out in the novel's climax a few pages later: a rejection of level-collapsing consistency that might stand as one example of the present argument. This affirmation takes the specific form of imaginative identification with public transport. The civic-minded identification extends, astonishingly, as far as the bus companies' "deficits." Even "inspection," Irie suggests to her father, is actually in your interest as a citizen. She ends the conversation with an oblique rebuttal of Samad's paranoid vision of universal monitoring: "When I was a kid . . . I used to think they were little alibis. Bus tickets, I mean, look: they've got the time. The date. The place. And if I was up in court, and I had to defend myself, and prove I wasn't where they said I was, doing what they said I did, when they said I did it, I'd pull out one of those" (427–28). It is a fantasy, of course, but then so is the novel, and the two fantasies, one within the other, bear a fractal resemblance. Each encourages a surprising respect for the pragmatic uses of otherwise tarnished institutions. In spite of the toxic forces that Smith sees acting through, as well as against, the state, she seems to treat democratic public entitlements as something apart from either state surveillance or state violence.

In Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, which so cleverly anticipated my title, the question of whether you can tell the difference between orange juice and Agent Orange is in fact a genuine question. Matt Shay, the character who asks this question, later becomes a nuclear scientist; he has his own reasons for wondering whether his work on behalf of the cold war state is part of a

quiet, long-term atrocity. Matt oscillates, but unevenly. He thinks that “everything connects in the end, or only seems to, or seems to because it does.”<sup>18</sup> In his case, the answer seems to be yes. When he has the orange juice/Agent Orange illumination, he is in the midst of the Vietnam War, deciphering aerial reconnaissance photos. (Today, aerial photos of the Vietnamese landscape still reveal the scars of “Operation Ranch Hand,” the massive dropping of Agent Orange that was discontinued in 1971.) But is either Matt’s thought or his situation representative? Are we sure there is a “massive system” that ensures that everything done for the apparent benefit of humankind is actually and necessarily to be interpreted as part of an effort to kill, mutilate, and subdue humankind? We see evidence of ecological horrors throughout this novel, at the level of domestic waste disposal as well as birth defects caused by fallout from nuclear testing. But DeLillo also prepares us to think that there is a paranoia that systematically sees more system than actually exists. “All technology refers to the bomb” (467): the overstatement is an open invitation to disagreement.

Those who imagine the police as if their social function were nothing but directing traffic efficiently are clearly missing out on one or two things about modern history. But so are those for whom maintaining the flow of traffic in a civilized manner is the moral equivalent of aerial bombing. In *Mao II*, a novel that seems torn between a banal blaming of violence on uncivilized Others and a hypercivilized man’s violence envy, DeLillo craftily uses traffic danger and traffic safety to focus this ambivalence about civic-mindedness and civilization. In London, “Bill reminded himself to read the pavement signs before he crossed the street. It was so perfectly damn sensible they ought to make it the law in every city, long-lettered words in white paint that tell you which way to look if you want to live. . . . The pavement signs were the only things he paid attention to. Look left. Look right. They seemed to speak to the whole vexed question of existence.”<sup>19</sup> Here the pavement signs seem a model for the novelist as a public figure, throwing down those long-lettered words on the public pavement as a perpetual encouragement for those who treasure life. Yet it is not clear that Bill does want to live. That is why he does not look when he steps off the curb, forty pages later, and is struck by the car that kills him.<sup>20</sup>

*Underworld* depicts contemporary America as a wasteland, especially for the urban poor. The protagonist’s old Bronx neighborhood, infested with drugs and violence, seems very nearly uninhabitable, and since the novel moves relentlessly toward it, pulled back from the present to the past, its habitability is in a sense the novel’s crucial question. On what conditions, if any, can a decent life be lived there? Two options are presented. One is that of the teacher Bronzini. It seems doomed. The other is that of the nuns. They do what they can to ameliorate an evil system over which, like everyone else, they have little or no systemic purchase. “The nuns deliver food to people living in the Wall and nearby, the asthmatic children and sickle-cell adults, the cases of AIDS and the cocaine babies” (811). In short, they perform their version of the distribution of milk and orange juice. As they do so, they ask themselves “if we make a difference” (811). It is not obvious that they do. Esmerelda, a young girl who has been abandoned by her addict mother, is raped and murdered before they can help her. DeLillo ends the novel with a vision of transcendence that, whether fully ecstatic or partially ironic, seems to mock by its very grandeur and conception all such paltry activities as guaranteeing a nutritional minimum for modernity’s

<sup>18</sup> Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribners, 1997), 465.

<sup>19</sup> Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 120.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Jesse Berlin for the insight.

most miserable victims. The nuns join a crowd of neighbors watching a billboard as, lit up by each passing train, it miraculously reveals the dead Esmerelda's face.

But what is most strange in this visionary scene is the way it reaches back to revise my titular phrase. Four hundred pages earlier, the phrase "orange juice and agent orange" had invoked a sense of system so vast, coordinated, and incomprehensible as to seem a malevolent deity. The malevolence blackened the orange juice, so to speak, turning it into the defoliant's toxic twin. Now we are told that an "orange moon hangs over the city" (820). Then we get a description of the billboard: "the billboard is unevenly lighted, dim in spots, several bulbs blown and unreplaced, but the central elements are clear, a vast cascade of orange juice pouring diagonally from top right into a goblet that is handheld at lower left. . . . it is the juice that commands the eye, thick and pulpy with a ruddled flush that matches the madder moon" (820). When the headlights of a commuter train sweep across the billboard and the face of the murdered girl appears, we are told that Sister Edgar "has seen it but so fleetingly, too fast to absorb—she wants the girl to reappear" (821). A schoolroom sadist and tyrant, Sister Edgar is said to resemble her namesake J. Edgar Hoover, the novel's closest thing to a villain as well as its foremost representative of the cold war U.S. government. One might almost say that Sister Edgar has been an agent of Agent Orange itself, or of the state in its Agent Orange aspect. She does not love those who now live in the neighborhood around her. Like Hoover, she fears them as dirty and immoral. Yet she has stayed to serve them, and now in the midst of a multiracial crowd she receives a transforming vision: "Women holding babies up to the sign, to the flowing juice, let it bathe them in baptismal balsam and oil" (821). The next time the vision is seen, we are told again that "Esmerelda's face take[s] shape under the rainbow of bounteous juice" (822). In a sense it is an orange juice vision. It celebrates what Sister Edgar herself has been doing: visiting families that are at risk, substituting for the absences and deficiencies of parents, to the best of her ability giving children a sense of their right to exist.

It is of course a symptom of the extreme weakness of American welfare institutions that here it is the church, not the state, that arranges for the orange juice. And the scene leaves other uncertainties. In the midst of his billboard epiphany, is DeLillo really interested in arguing that these institutions are not an example of systemic toxicity but a fragile stay against it, and that it would be better if they were stronger? Are we sure he is backing off from what the earlier pairing of orange juice and Agent Orange had so memorably suggested? And yet if these are genuinely open questions even in so unlikely a text as *Underworld*, do they not crave attention in many others as well? Working on the assumption that the literary imagination is not obliged to invest exclusively in capitalism's "creative destruction," and that the same is true for how and where we readers and critics decide to invest our limited political energies, I place these unaccustomed items on the critical agenda. [A]