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“THE BEST FORM OF GOVERNMENT...”: CAGE’S LAISSEZ-FAIRE ANARCHISM AND CAPITALISM

For Paul Obermayer, comrade and friend

This article is an expanded version of a paper I gave at the conference ‘Hung up on the Number 64’ at the University of Huddersfield on 4th February 2006. My thanks to Gordon Downie, Richard Emsley, Harry Gilonis, Wieland Hoban, Martin Iddon, Paul Obermayer, Mic Spencer, Arnold Whittall and the editors of this journal for reading through the paper and subsequent article and giving many helpful comments.

John Cage, quoting Thoreau (used in Solo 35 of the *Song Books*): ‘The best form of government is no government at all.’

Henry David Thoreau: ‘I heartily accept the motto, - “That government is best which governs least”; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which I also believe, - “That government is best which governs not at all”; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.’¹

Ronald Reagan (in his first inaugural address): ‘Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem. From time to time we’ve been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. But if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?’²

Thoreau: ‘The character inherent in the America people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not soemtimes got in its way. For government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of India-rubber, would never manage to bounce over the obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and, if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on railroads.’³

Reagan: ‘With the idealism and fair play which are the core of our system and our strength, we can have a strong and prosperous America at peace with itself and the world. So as we begin, let us take inventory.

We are a nation that has a government -- not the other way around. And this makes us special among the nations of the earth. Our Government has no power except that granted it by the people. It is time to

¹ Henry David Thoreau – ‘Civil Disobedience’ (1849), in Thoreau – *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (London and New York: Penguin, 1983), p.385

² cited on <http://www.americanrhetic.com/speeches/rreagandfirstinaugural.html> - accessed 31/1/06

³ Thoreau, *op cit*, p.386

check and reverse the growth of government which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed.

It is my intention to curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment and to demand recognition of the distinction between the powers granted to the Federal Government and those reserved to the states or to the people.

All of us -- all of us need to be reminded that the Federal Government did not create the states; the states created the Federal Government.’⁴

Thoreau: ‘But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.’⁵

Reagan: ‘Now, so there will be no misunderstanding, it’s not my intention to do away with government. It is rather to make it work -- work with us, not over us; to stand by our side, not ride on our back. Government can and must provide opportunity, not smother it; foster productivity, not stifle it. If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on earth, it was because here in this land we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before.

Freedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available and assured here than in any other place on earth. The price for this freedom at times has been high, but we have never been unwilling to pay that price.

It is no coincidence that our present troubles parallel and are proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of Government.’⁶

Introduction

The similarities between the various opinions expressed above are, in my opinion, too close to be ignored. The politics of John Cage, deriving in large part from the ideologies espoused by Thoreau, though with some later modifications, have been loosely and tacitly associated with the ‘left’ for some time, a perspective which as a convinced socialist I find deeply problematic. My intention here is not to create some sort of a political tribunal for Cage, but rather to simply view his political philosophy, which has been viewed by both Cage himself and other commentators as fundamental to his work, with a certain critical detachment.

My motivation for engaging both now and in the future with aspects of Cage’s life and philosophy may initially seem paradoxical – it is in order to reinscribe the case for Cage as a *composer*. A great deal of the writing and criticism on Cage in English I have encountered seems to make a too-hasty equation and identification between Cage’s expressed ideas and biography on one hand, and his compositional (and literary) work on the other, often implying the corollary that the latter is in essence a mere representation of the former, or even a footnote to it. This gives rise to the

⁴ Reagan, *op cit*

⁵ Thoreau, *op cit*, p.386

⁶ Reagan, *op cit*

common perception that Cage is simply less interesting as a composer than as a thinker. I profoundly disbelieve this and would suggest on the contrary that his philosophies, political and aesthetic or otherwise, are relatively half-formed, woolly, riddled with contradictions and rather self-serving, whereas his compositional work is of major significance. Whilst not wanting for a moment to deny that a link exists between the two, I do believe that intention and realisation are non-identical in this respect. The milder view, which sees the work as of value but as an expression of the thought, still fails to engage with the question of *mediation* in the process of composition on Cage's part. This issue of mediation is for another future article when I will consider the ways in which non-identity between ideas and work manifests itself specifically in Cage's music. For now, I am concerned with dismantling some of the mythology that surrounds Cage (much of which seems to have been consciously cultivated by himself), in this case specifically his political thinking⁷. If such de-mythologisation can be achieved, then perhaps more attention will become focused upon Cage as a composer in a relatively conventional sense of the term, rather than as a mystical guru. Cage seemed aware of the dangers inherent in gurus, as he makes clear in the 'Diary':

Commune problem: communes re filled with gurus, needing (not having) others "to guru." But teaching's part'n'parcel of divisive society we're leaving.⁸

But this did not seem to stop Cage cultivating his own role as a guru, from the earliest days of the formation of the New York School onwards. He was quite explicit about his own attraction to guru figures such as Schoenberg and Suzuki, proudly declaring how he went to the 'president of the company' when learning either figure's teachings⁹.

I first became interested in approaching Cage from this angle after reading, some 10 years ago or so before writing this article, the fascinating interview between David Patterson and Christian Wolff in *Perspectives of New Music* on Cage and after.¹⁰ Patterson, in one of his questions to Wolff, points out that during Cage's 'Thoreau' period (which David Revill locates as beginning around 1967, after Cage was introduced to Thoreau by the poet Wendell Berry¹¹) he started to think and talk much more about 'sounds as representative of a model society' rather than the earlier idea of

⁷ Other areas for future study also include the truth or otherwise of Cage's early biography which he repeated many times, and the processes (including financial processes, in terms of funding of his projects) by which he established his reputation in the US and Europe. At the time of writing, Amy C. Beal's book *New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006) has just been published. Later articles will engage with this important work.

⁸ John Cage – 'Diary: How to Improve the World (You will Only Make Matters Worse) Continued 1968 (Revised)' in *M: Writings '67-'72* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1974), p.12. Throughout this article, I am working on the assumption that the opinions presented in the 'Diary' were ones Cage was happy to endorse, at least at some point in his life. This is of course an assumption that is open to challenge. Even if this is endorsement may not have been the case, nonetheless the fact of Cage's having presented such opinions in such a manner renders them viable for critique, I believe.

⁹ Cited in David Revill – *The Roaring Silence: John Cage – A Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), pp. 109-110.

¹⁰ Christian Wolff and David Patterson – 'Cage and Beyond: An Annotated Interview with Christian Wolff', *Perspectives of New Music* Vol. 32 No. 2 (Summer 1994), pp. 54-87.

¹¹ Revill – *The Roaring Silence*, p. 220.

‘letting the sounds be themselves’.¹² To some extent this later attitude was implicit in Cage’s earlier thought as well, I believe; however, it was during this period that his pronouncements became more explicit, and continued for much of the rest of his life, culminating in particular in the mesostic ‘Overpopulation and Art’, from 1991.¹³

In the Patterson/Wolff interview, Wolff expresses some scepticism about the implications of Cage’s political viewpoints, though without following these up in any great detail. In reference to the fact that the positing of any system will always imply that which lies outside of it, Wolff also says ‘The whole dynamic of Cage’s life and thinking is precisely because of such contradictions’, and comments that Cage disliked the world ‘politics’ – perhaps in the sense of ‘high politics’, specifically the machinations at the highest level of government?¹⁴ This is the sense in which the term is used by historians when speaking of ‘political history’, seen as a distinct branch of the discipline from social history, workers’ history, women’s history, black history, etc.¹⁵, all of which are surely ‘political’ in a broader sense of the term. It is in this wider sense that I refer to Cage’s politics, incorporating both his explicitly ‘political’ statements as well as the implications of the rest of his outlook, which he might not call ‘political’. Cage wants both to have his cake and eat it when calling on one hand to ‘Remove government, politics from society’ and on the other to ‘Let private property go’, a proposal which it would be very hard to deny is ‘political’.¹⁶ The question of which aspects of any philosophical or ideological system (including those specifically appertaining to music) deserve to be called ‘political’, and the dangers of what is sometimes called ‘left functionalism’, by which practically everything in the world is somehow viewed as ‘political’, are both potentially huge subjects to do justice to which it could take a whole book; for now, I will focus particularly on a re-examination of some elements of Cage’s thought from the 1960s onwards, when his social philosophy became more explicit.

This subject has been written about before, most notably by William Brooks in his essay ‘Music and Society’ in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*¹⁷ and David W. Bernstein in his essay ‘John Cage and the “Aesthetic of Indifference”’ in the volume on *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts*.¹⁸ I am approaching this subject from a political perspective more explicitly on the far left than these authors, so I hope my conclusions will offer something rather different. However, I should point out that my perspective emphatically rejects the anti-individualistic and anti-subjective ideology expressed by Cornelius Cardew in his both Maoist and neo-Stalinist tract *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*¹⁹. Nor is it particularly like that of

¹² Wolff and Patterson, *op cit*, p.81.

¹³ Cage – ‘Overpopulation and Art’, in Marjorie Perloff & Charles Junkerman (eds) – *John Cage: Composed in America* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 14-38.

¹⁴ Patterson & Wolff, *op cit*, p. 82

¹⁵ See for example the chapter ‘Society and the Individual’ in Richard J. Evans – *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 2000), pp. 161-190

¹⁶ Cage – ‘Diary’, continued 1970-71, in *M*, p. 96. Cage’s remarks on private property obviously mitigate some possible right-wing interpretations of his work, but seem relatively superficial, as they are not generally backed up by any alternative proposals for ownership or how to bring private property to an end.

¹⁷ William Brooks – ‘Music and Society’ in David Nicholls (ed) - *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 214-226

¹⁸ David W. Bernstein – ‘John Cage and the “Aesthetic of Indifference”’ in Steven Johnson (ed) – *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp.113-133

¹⁹ Cornelius Cardew – *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (London: Latimer New Directions, 1974)

Heinz-Klaus Metzger²⁰ who, pursuing further some of Theodor Adorno's comments in this respect²¹, attempts to situate Cage's work and its relevance within a wider historical dialectic, though I have many sympathies with this type of political approach.

Bad politics (Souvtchinsky) produce good art. But of what use is good art? (Johns said he could imagine a world without it and that there was no reason to think it would not be a better one).²²

Anarchism

Cage was very clear about the way he would describe his own political views, on many occasions of which the following is an example:

I think of myself as an anarchist. And Mao himself, when he was younger, was very much involved with anarchist thought. But through the exigencies of the political situation, he made a solution to the Chinese problem that found him involved in a political change.²³

There are of course many different varieties of anarchism, an explication of which is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say that Cage's anarchism was less similar to that of Mikhail Bakunin or Emma Goldman²⁴ (or Noam Chomsky) than to that of Henry David Thoreau, the most significant influence on his political thinking, and whose work permeates his writings from the 1960s in particular. A key question is whether this variety of 'anarchism' really has any critical meaning in the context of capitalist society, or whether it is easily reconciled with 'anarcho-capitalist' ideology, often difficult to distinguish from simple right-wing libertarianism. One should not overlook the fact that Thoreau is sometimes cited by right-wing libertarian members of the modern day Republican Party and other ideologues of the untethered free market, unencumbered by state intervention.

²⁰ As in various of the essays in Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn (eds) - *Musik-Konzepte Sonderband - John Cage I/II* (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1990)

²¹ See for example, Theodor Adorno - 'Music and New Music' and 'Vers un musique informelle' in *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on modern music*, translated Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 249-322, and 'Difficulties', translated Susan H. Gillespie, in *Essays on Music*, edited Richard Leppert (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 644-679. Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, a work which seemed to particularly interest Adorno, is also mentioned in the chapter 'Coherence and Meaning' in *Aesthetic Theory*, translated Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), p. 154. There are some short scattered references to Cage in various of Adorno's other writings.

²² Cage - 'Diary', continued 1966, in *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 60

²³ Interview by C.H. Waddington (1972) - cited in Richard Kostelanetz (ed) - *Conversing With Cage* (New York: Limelight, 1991), p. 266

²⁴ Cage does cite both Bakunin and Goldman in the preface to his long mesostic *Anarchy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), pp. v-x (snippets from Goldman in particular permeate the mesostic itself, also). A detailed investigation of the discrepancies between Cage's thought and that of either thinker would itself require at the very least a whole article. Suffice to say at the very least that Cage's disdain for protest and action (see below) is difficult if not impossible to reconcile with Goldman's actions on behalf of inciting unemployed workers, distributing birth control literature, and attempting to oppose the draft, all of which Cage would have known about through reading her autobiography, which he describes having done in the preface to *Anarchy* (p. vi.). Similar points can be made with respect to Bakunin's thought and actions. Both are problematic figures whose ideas I ultimately find unconvincing; nonetheless their revolutionary anarchism should in my opinion be treated quite separately from that of Thoreau or Cage (notwithstanding the fact that Goldman cites Thoreau on various occasions).

Cage on Government and Taxation

Cage's thoughts on government also came directly from Thoreau, in particular from the essay on Civil Disobedience that he had read when younger (long before his 'Thoreau' period):

Cage: The final thing that I think influences my action more than anything is social concerns, so I try not to write a piece unless it is useful as an instance of society. I don't mean to say that I think I've solved anything socially in the music, but I've tried to give instances of improvements in society.....In the last paragraph of the essay on "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau says that a government is like a tree; and when people ripen, they are like fruit that drop away from the tree. So this piece, *Etcetera* [1973], is that tree with the fruit, some of it on the tree and some of it dropping off.²⁵

Thoreau: There will never be a really free and enlightened State, until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose, if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellowmen. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.²⁶

Cage attempted another distinction to take account of the clear fact that some things do require central organisation in order for society to function at all:

I think we must distinguish very clearly nowadays between government and utility. I do not think we should think of utilities as forms of government, because they're obviously necessary; otherwise, the great population of the earth is not going to be able to exist. Utilities are made in such a way that they reach all the various peoples, and what we need is a situation in which the world is not divided, as it is so dramatically in South America, between those who have and those who do not have; it must be a world for people who have, all of them have, and that can only come about through the utilities, whereas the governments discriminate between those who *should* have and those who *shouldn't* have. Therefore, we do not need government; what we need is utilities.

The utilities include shelter, food, clothing, air (because now we are ruining the air), water, energy, and you can go on; but that is the basis, and the direction. I will not say that someone should love someone else; we must each be left to discover the beauty of love. But we must not be forced, as the religions ask us, to love one another, because it doesn't do any good if you love someone when you also keep them hungry.²⁷

Cage rather conveniently changes terminology when it suits the purposes of his own arguments. In the above, one of his most powerful political statements, he is simply arguing for one type of government rather than another. Because something is 'necessary' it is therefore not 'government', according to his use of the term. This is a specious line of argument – first one says that government is unnecessary, then when one finds things that governments do that *are* necessary, one carefully redefines the term 'government' so as to exclude them. Ronald Reagan would often

²⁵ Interviewed by Robert Cordier (1973), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 258

²⁶ Thoreau – 'Civil Disobedience', p. 413

²⁷ Interviewed by Alcides Lanza (1971), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 274-5. Cage made a very similar point in the preface to *Anarchy*, in 1988 – 'We don't need government. We need utilities: air, water, energy, travel and communication means, food and shelter. We have no need for imaginary mountain ranges between separate nations. We can make tunnels through the real ones.' – Cage – *Anarchy*, p. v.

misuse language in a similar manner, when talking about such concepts as 'freedom', 'choice' or 'human rights'.

The following should also demonstrate how flexible Cage's principles were as regards his own work and livelihood:

I keep on paying my taxes, which Thoreau wouldn't have done, but I do it in order to be free of the things the government could do to me in revenge. I want to be able to continue my work, so in that situation I do what the government requires, but no more. Thoreau didn't pay taxes, because he could continue his work, in which no one was interested while he was alive, in or out of jail. My situation is the reverse. Many, many people are interested in what I am doing, so I must continue and keep moving.²⁸

This is a vain, egotistical and self-serving statement masquerading as altruism. Any artist could use such a justification for doing practically anything that helps to further their career instead of acting according to other ideals. If Cage had the courage of his convictions, then why was he not prepared to go to jail for them? Actually his situation in this respect was considerably easier than that which affects someone with a family to support, unlike Cage.²⁹

And for Cage's cranky economic ideas:

More and more the paying of bills is nothing but numbers. All the government will eventually have to do is decide to give basic economic security to everyone. It's already set up the computer way of handling it. We use credit now much more than we use money. All we have to do is extend it and not require people to pay bills at the end of the month..... We already know we can get all the work done if each of us does one hour's work a year.³⁰

It would be interesting to know the basis upon which Cage knew that one hour's work yearly per person would get everything done³¹, as well as how such a viewpoint can be reconciled with his comments in 'The Future of Music', that 'A necessary aspect of the immediate future, not just in the field of environmental recovery, is work, hard work, and no end to it'³², which he relates to the considerable challenges (and work) involved in the *Études Australes* and *Freeman Études*?

²⁸ Interviewed by Stephen Montague (1982), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 277

²⁹ Though Cage did support his parents and also left money in his will for the Cunningham Foundation. My thanks to Rob Haskins for pointing this out to me.

³⁰ Interviewed by Genevieve Marcus (1970), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 278

³¹ Cage may have been thinking of Thoreau here, as when in the *Journal*, January 10, 1851, Thoreau says that 'Those slight labours which afford me a livelihood & by which I am serviceable to my contemporaries are as yet a pleasure to me and I am not often reminded that they are a necessity' (Henry David Thoreau – *A Year in Thoreau's Journal: 1851* (London and New York: Penguin, 1993), pp. 5-6). There are touches of bitterness in an entry from a month later, on February 18th, when Thoreau declares that 'The most practically important of all questions, it seems to me, is how shall I get my living', then that 'I should certainly prefer to suffer and die rather than be at the pains to get a living by the modes men propose' (ibid, p. 21)

³² Cage, 'The Future of Music', in John Cage - *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), p. 184

Cage on the Rule of Law

We do not need to have the laws that tell us not to do this but to do something else. Thoreau said that the only reason to have the laws and governments is in order to keep two Irishmen from fighting in the street. I would rather have a few murders here and there than our war in Vietnam. And they could be murders of passion, rather than the cold useless murders we now have. We have what you might call “mass media murders.”³³

Cage’s comments on the murder as a mass media spectacle are far-sighted (in more recent times, one need only consider the O.J. Simpson affair, for example); no less important is the clear implication from his observation that the war in Vietnam caused many more deaths than other forms of murder³⁴, a truth that seems banal to assert but still needs to be spoken as often as possible in opposition to right-wingers who bemoan rising crime but promote imperialist wars. But consider the wider implications of Cage’s comments on murders, or on violence in general. According to British Home Office statistics for England and Wales, 16% of all violent offences are domestic violence, and domestic violence will affect 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men in their lifetimes.³⁵ Perhaps quite a number of the lethal cases of domestic violence would fit Cage’s category of ‘murders of passion’ and thus win his approval?

Government (which by no means implies centralised government) can act to protect the rights of ethnic minorities, homosexuals, etc. (though in no sense does this statement necessarily imply that governments at present are generally successful in doing so, nor even that many of them particularly care about such issues). But it was this very fact that led to the hatred of government espoused by American far-right militias, seeing such multicultural and liberal policies as part of a Jewish conspiracy, as outlined in the ultra-racist *Turner Diaries* by William Pierce (writing under the pseudonym of Andrew Macdonald³⁶), one of whose readers was the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

At the beginning of 1991, the year before Cage’s death, the US led a coalition of forces (ostensibly under the auspices of the United Nations) against Iraq in the first Gulf War, following Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait³⁷. Cage was privately most dismayed by the occurrence of this war³⁸. The 23-year old Timothy McVeigh was fighting in Iraq and Kuwait, but came to feel ostracised from his political and military masters after witnessing first-hand the carnage on the ground, especially that

³³ Interview by C.H. Waddington (1972) - cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 266

³⁴ In the earliest section of the ‘Diary’, Cage points out that ‘War will not be group conflict: it’ll be murder, pure and simple, individually conceived’. See ‘Diary’, 1965, in Cage – *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 9

³⁵ See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime-victims/reducing-crime/domestic-violence/?version=1> - accessed on 31/3/06. Statistics for domestic violence in the US vary widely depending on the organisation collecting them. Nonetheless, it is clearly a significant problem in both countries (and elsewhere).

³⁶ Andrew Macdonald – *The Turner Diaries* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 1996)

³⁷ For the context of successive US governments’ relationship with the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein prior to the first Gulf War, see John Pilger – ‘Paying the Price’, in *The New Rulers of the World* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 48-100

³⁸ See John Cage & Joan Retallack – *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music* (Hanover, NH & London: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), pp. 43-48

committed against retreating Iraqi soldiers on the Basra Road. This is generally believed to be the primary stimulus for his involvement in the Survivalist movement, a group of individuals who would retreat from the mainstream of US society to live, heavily armed, in the wilderness, preparing themselves for a coming apocalypse against the government.³⁹

If one reads McVeigh's comments on the oppressive nature of the US government and its actions as affects other people and nations (for example, in a letter he sent to Fox News, saying 'Many foreign nations and peoples hate Americans for the very reasons most Americans loathe me. Think about that.'⁴⁰) one could often imagine oneself to be reading the words of a quite typical left or even liberal critic of US imperialism⁴¹. Liberals⁴² will frequently, and rightly, bemoan the terrible regimes and circumstances in place outside of the Western world, without often considering the extent to which such foreign policies might be an inevitable consequence of the global capitalist system they inhabit (and often benefit from, as do some of those in the working classes who, as Lenin pointed out in *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*⁴³, can be 'bribed' by redistribution of some of the spoils of imperial exploitation - in the contemporary Western world this often takes the form of cheaper fuel supplies, increased social security and a generally higher standard of living). Such liberals may wish their governments would stop doing beastly things in the rest of the world, despite the fact that their own financial and other well-being is absolutely predicated upon the continuation of such actions. Genuine international socialists, on the other hand, realise the need to fight for the ultimate overthrow of the reign of private capital (of course no simple task to achieve!). A socialist, certainly one from a genuine Marxist tradition, may not have a clear utopian vision of what a post-capitalist society will be like in all its details (if it were ever possible to know such a thing), but would generally believe that by some means power will in the future be held by and for working people and their families. For those (including myself) who utterly reject the Stalinist model of pseudo-socialist centralised government which is in no sense representative of the interests of workers, this need not translate into an antipathy towards government *per se* – rather towards an advocacy of decentralised government in the form of localised workers' associations as far as possible⁴⁴.

³⁹ McVeigh's involvement in the movement may not have been provoked by the hatred of liberalism and multiculturalism that is a defining ideology of the far-right militias, but he was undoubtedly embroiled in a movement that believed such things.

⁴⁰ <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,17500,00.html> - accessed on 31/1/06

⁴¹ For a hugely misguided apologia for McVeigh on this basis, which whitewashes the points I mentioned in note 39, see Gore Vidal – 'The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh', in *The Last Empire* (London: Abacus, 2002), pp. 270-302.

⁴² Here and elsewhere I use the term 'liberal' to denote a species of political opinion which supports market-driven capitalism in most of its essentials whilst at the same time insisting on a large degree of individualist freedom in terms of sexual morality, lifestyle choices, and a certain amount of tolerance towards criminals and other societal outcasts.

⁴³ Vladimir I. Lenin – *Imperialism, the Highest State of Capitalism* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1975), p. 9-10, 125, 127-129, 152. Lenin (citing in particular Engels on the situation of the proletariat in Britain) focuses specifically upon the *upper stratum* of the working classes being 'bribed' in such a manner., 'to strengthen opportunism among them [the workers] and to cause temporary decay in the working-class movement' (p. 128). It is arguable that these processes reach more deeply into the working classes in contemporary Western society.

⁴⁴ There are of course those who call themselves 'anarchists' who believe in a similar thing, as did Mikhail Bakunin (see Bakunin – *Statism and Anarchy*, ed. Marshall Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge

I am outlining this distinction in an attempt to make clear the fundamental difference between the type of principled socialist opposition towards government acting in the interests of capital, and the type of laissez-faire anarchism that informs the thinking of Thoreau and Cage, which opposes government but not capital⁴⁵. As such, I do not believe it is altogether an overstatement to suggest that such a form of anarchism is not so fundamentally *at cross-purposes with* the political ideology of McVeigh. In a Cageian world capital would still be free, indeed free to organise itself militarily on a private and even less accountable basis. Democratic institutions still allow some measure of public accountability for government, albeit deeply imperfect, especially in the corrupt, corporate-driven political system that is in place in the United States. For all such accountability is deeply problematic and coming to seem untenable in the light of the control that corporations and the mass media have over the political process, what is advocated by Cage is a step backwards, not forwards⁴⁶. It would be facile to accuse Cage of somehow being a supporter of Survivalist philosophy, let alone the actions of McVeigh; however, the fact that his political philosophy does not actively oppose such things gives room for question. This is one of the major reasons why I believe it is more appropriate to characterise Cage's politics as, if not actively of the right, certainly at odds with leftist forms of socialism or even anarchism (those advocating minimal and decentralised government rather than the end of collective government per se). Freedom from governments of all types can equally bring free trade in nuclear weapons and the like.

Cage on Voting

I wouldn't dream of it [voting]. I'm looking forward to the time when no one votes. Because then we wouldn't have to have a president. We don't need a president. We can get along perfectly well without the government.⁴⁷

It is possible to still vote for politicians more likely to oppose the free trade in nuclear weapons or other hideous things - but Cage refused to do this. At the time of writing, the anti-semitic political organisation Hamas has just won a majority of seats in the Palestinian Authority. Even if one despises this organisation, who cite the blood libel of the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' in their charter⁴⁸, it does not take too much of a leap of the imagination to see why ordinary Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied territories, suffering murder, dispossession and humiliation on a daily basis, have

University Press, 1990), pp. 90-91. Bakunin rejected, however, the key transitional stage of the dictatorship of the proletariat, placing him markedly at odds with Marxism (ibid, pp. 174-189). Cage himself was quite mute on the subject of decentralised authorities, save for his comments on 'utilities' mentioned earlier.

⁴⁵ Notwithstanding the few token remarks on private property, as mentioned in n 14. Thoreau's notorious comments about if he would 'deny the authority of the State when it presents its tax-bill, it will soon take and waste all my property', and 'It will not be worth the while to accumulate property; that would be sure to go again' (Thoreau - 'Civil Disobedience', pp. 400-401) hardly contradict the supposed rights of the individual with respect to their property, precisely what taxation threatens.

⁴⁶ The naïvely romantic comments of Thoreau about how an American (in comparison to the English or the Québécois) is 'nearer to the primitive condition of man – Government lets him alone & he lets government alone', in the *Journal*, August 19th 1951 (Thoreau – *Journal*, p. 162) echo with Cage's backward-looking primitivism. Other 20th-century primitivist philosophies, including those of fascism and neo-fascism, should not be ignored in this context.

⁴⁷ Interviewed by Alcides Lanza (1971), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 274

⁴⁸ See http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Hamas_Covenant, Article 32 - accessed 31/3/06

taken the opportunity to vote for the group perceived to be most likely to present staunch resistance towards their oppressors, something their more moderate rivals are not believed by them to have achieved satisfactorily. Could Cage have told these Palestinians, starved of any rights, that they would do better not to vote at all? It is by acting as a collective body that the Palestinians gain the power to stand up to their Israeli occupiers, but Cage, who said ‘I don’t think of individuals as being massed together in a group’ would have none of this, making a fetish instead out of ‘the uniqueness of the individual’.⁴⁹ This is American petty-bourgeois individualism pure and simple. Such comments, from the end of his life, find echoes in plenty of his earlier pronouncements which I will now examine.

Cage on Protest and Mass Action

I am interested in social ends, but not in political ends, because politics deals with power, and society deals with numbers of individuals; and I’m interested in both single individuals and large numbers or medium numbers or any kinds or numbers of individuals. In other words, I’m interested in society, not for purposes of power, but for purposes of cooperation and enjoyment.⁵⁰

My notion of how to proceed in a society to bring change is not to protest the thing that is evil, but rather to let it die its own death. And I think we can state that the power structure is dying because it cannot make any inspiring statements about what it is doing.

(students of propaganda techniques might disagree rather strongly with this)

I think that protests about these things, contrary to what has been said, will give it the kind of life that a fire is given when you fan it, and that it would be best to ignore it, put your attention elsewhere, take actions of another kind of positive nature, rather than continue to give life to the negative by negating it.⁵¹

Consider the above statement of Cage (which is echoed in other writings, including in the 1968 volume of the ‘Diary’) in the context of the first information coming to light about the Nazi Holocaust. Would protesting this, and letting the world know, as the Polish government-in-exile and Jewish labour organisations strove to do, simply continue to ‘give life to the negative’? On the contrary, *not* protesting on the basis of this knowledge was precisely what the Nazis most wished for, so that the genocide could continue without the wider world becoming aware of the unspeakable reality of events. Of course protest was hardly enough under the circumstances – military action proved necessary; nonetheless Cage’s remark becomes contemptuous when viewed in this context. One could equally well ask about the implications of Cage’s views in terms of whether to protest the Chinese government’s actions in Tibet, which that government would also prefer the world know little about? Or to publicising and alerting the world to the tortures carried out under the auspices of the US government and military in the Abu Ghraib prison in post-war Iraq? Such naïve idealism could perhaps only come from the mouth of one imbued with the culture of American liberalism.

I was recently asked to sign a petition against atomic energy. But I wrote back saying I wouldn’t sign it. I wasn’t interested in critical or negative action. I’m not interested in objecting to things that

⁴⁹ Cage & Retallack, *op cit*, p. 51

⁵⁰ Interview in *Source* (1969), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 257

⁵¹ John Cage – ‘Diary’, continued 1968 (Revised) ’ in *M*, p.12

are wrong. I'm interested in doing something that seems to be useful to do. I don't think critical action is sufficient.⁵²

Signing petitions in itself certainly is only a small step, but surely it is a vital component of the process of mobilising people in opposition to such things as atomic energy. What is Cage's alternative strategy? If he were advocating bombing the headquarters of atomic energy institutions or assassinating those responsible for implementing atomic energy policies and programmes, then in light of the fact that he rejects voting, such an espousal of the need for 'direct action' might at least have some concrete meaning. However, such an advocacy seems somehow unlikely.

Cage's antipathy towards protest does not sit easily with the following comments:

More power to Fuller...to revolutionary guerrillas...to Christian pacifists...to flower children...to hippies...acidheads...beatniks, diggers and provos....to the militant blacks...to those who keep asking questions.⁵³

Some of these groups were effective and important precisely because they were prepared to protest. What impact would the black civil rights movement have had otherwise? Or, for that matter, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, highly active through the period when Cage wrote regularly about the threat of nuclear weapons?⁵⁴

Cage was opposed, according to 'The Future of Music' to any sort of words used to communicate a message, associating these with 'training, government, enforcement, and finally the military'.⁵⁵ But where does this point of view leave a powerful message such as 'Black is beautiful'?

Cage on Maoism

Cage first seems to have discovered the thought of Chairman Mao in 1971, after being urged in that direction by Norman O. Brown, as he makes clear in the foreword to the edition of his writings *M*.⁵⁶

Quotations from Mao and expressions of praise for Mao's China are to be found liberally scattered through his writings from this period, not least in the 'Diary'.⁵⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, Cage presents a thoroughly romanticised view of Mao's China, as was held by a number of artists and intellectuals of the time easily persuaded by propagandistic literature about the new China. Cage does not deny the violent nature of the Chinese Revolution, though he still continues to portray Mao as an essentially benevolent figure. He suggests that in earlier times Mao was an anarchist, perhaps not unlike Cage himself, bizarrely praises the nationalistic nature of Mao's revolution (because it was not 'merely Russian'), attempts to compare Mao to

⁵² Interviewed by Alcides Lanza (1971), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 274

⁵³ Cage, 'Diary', continued 1968 (revised), in *M*, p. 20

⁵⁴ For example, in the 'Diary', continued 1973-82, in John Cage – *X: Writings '79-'82* (Hanover, NH and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), p. 162. However, the value of Cage's thoughts on these matters are called radically into question by the later statement: 'Perhaps a holocaust is necessary to bring us to our senses, hopefully not too complete a one.' - Interviewed by Jonathan Brent (1981), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 265

⁵⁵ Cage – 'The Future of Music', in *Empty Words*, p. 183

⁵⁶ Cage – *M*, pp. xi-xii

⁵⁷ For example, in Cage – 'Diary', continued 1971-72, in *M*, p. 198, 201, 207, 216

Buckminster Fuller, and more hideously compares Mao with Gandhi or Martin Luther King.

We are, if I may say so, a corrupt society. I'm very impressed by an article I read recently in *The New York Review of Books* by Mary McCarthy. She has been a critic of Vietnam and is still a critic of Vietnam because Vietnam continues even though President Nixon tells us that it has stopped. McCarthy sees Watergate as a continuation of Vietnam; she sees it as a silly and pathetic attempt on our part to atone for our true crime, which is Vietnam. But Vietnam is not, I would say, our only crime. We have also ruined our environment. We've done everything in order to be selfish. We should listen now to Mao Tse-tung who points out that the earth in which capitalism grows is just pure selfishness. What was Nixon's excuse for continuing in Vietnam and now in Cambodia? It was to come out of that whole thing as he says with some kind of face or self-respect. It all turns back on the self, and here I would like, if you permit me, to criticize the entire tradition of Christianity. I think the Golden Rule, which is often thought of as the center, really of Christianity, is a mistake: "Do unto others as *you* would be done by." I think that is a mistaken thought. We should do unto others as *they* would be done by.⁵⁸

I'm very sad to see throughout our society now a struggle for power. Instead of this struggle for separatist *divisive* power, we should recognize as Mao did in China that there was a serious problem that required an intelligent solution. Well, he said that it involved power but the expression of power that I think was the most effective in China on Mao's part was the long retreat which is remarkably like something that Martin Luther King might have proposed or Gandhi.⁵⁹

[O]ne of the things that Mao has insisted upon for the Chinese is that if there is an army that everyone is in it, if there is agriculture to do everyone should do it, if the land is to be changed so that it will not be flooded periodically, everyone in the community goes to work to bring about this change, even those who are old, even those who are young, so that the experience of the family has been extended through Mao's influence, so that in a sense the nation itself is a family. And I find this very beautiful.⁶⁰

There is probably much still to be written about the amazing culpability and naïveté on the part of Western leftist intellectuals who were seduced by Mao and Maoist thought. A generous interpretation of Cage's comments would be to call them simply misguided. But more sinister resonances can be found in another of Cage's citation of Mao:

(Cf. Mao Tse-tung: "What should our policy be towards non-Marxist ideas? As far as unmistakable counter-revolutionaries and saboteurs of the socialist cause are concerned, the matter is easy: we simply deprive them of their freedom of speech")⁶¹

Cage advocates this approach with respect to the members of an orchestra (which, as I will mention below, he wishes to make into 'an instance of an improved society'), which should leave little doubt as to the totalitarian nature of his intentions.

When discussing the differing interpretations of Maoism of Cage, Cardew, and himself, Wolff describes Cage as a 'countercultural hero' and Cardew's ideas as 'drastically reductive and mostly wrong'.⁶² Patterson asks Wolff about why references to Mao appear for a short period in Cage's pronouncements, then disappear. Wolff suggests that maybe either Cage became disillusioned as knowledge increased of the enormous human toll of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, or

⁵⁸ Interviewed by Alan Gillmor (1976), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, pp. 263-264

⁵⁹ Interviewed by Hans G. Helms (1972), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 262-263

⁶⁰ Interviewed by Hans G. Helms (1972), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 274

⁶¹ Cage – 'Foreword', in *M*, p. xv

⁶² Wolff & Patterson, *op cit*, p.79

alternatively that Cage might have turned against Mao as a component of his antipathy to Cardew following on from the publication of *Stockhausen serves Imperialism*.

This latter interpretation seems confirmed by some of Cage's own comments in his 1974 essay 'The Future of Music':

Some politically concerned composers do not so much exemplify in their work the desired changes in society as they use their music as propaganda for such changes or as criticism of the society as it continues insufficiently changed.

But is that not in some sense what Cage himself was also doing?

This necessitates the use of words. Sounds by themselves do not put messages across.

In light of the fact that the government of former British Prime Minister John Major introduced prohibitions on gatherings of ten or more people waiting with intent to listen to 'amplified music' which is 'wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats'⁶³, is this necessarily true? This government was in some sense concerned about the 'message' such people would be getting from such music.

And when they do not use words, politically concerned composers tend to revert to nineteenth-century musical practices. This is enforced in both Russia and China. And encouraged in England by Cornelius Cardew and the members of the Scratch Orchestra. They study the pronouncements on art by Mao Tse-tung and apply them as literally and legalistically as they can. They therefore have criticized the politically concerned music of Frederic Rzewski (*sic*) and Christian Wolff, simply because new ways to make music have been discovered by both of these composers.⁶⁴

Cage, happily, would seem to be recanting upon his earlier admiration of Mao. But if he could so easily slip into an idealised view of Mao, with little thought to the practical realities of what the enactment of Mao's ideas might entail, should we not then also be a little sceptical about his advocacy of other guru figures, including Meister Eckhardt, Thoreau, Suzuki, Buckminster Fuller, McLuhan and others? Or, perhaps more accurately, we should investigate further the extent to which Cage's readings of such figures really correspond to the figures themselves and their work?

Cage on Revolution from Within

[A]ll of this arises from my conviction which I've had now for twenty-five years, I suppose, since mysterious involvement with Oriental thought, when I asked myself why do we write music, I came to the conclusion initially that it was in order to produce a revolution in the mind, and that now I would say it would be or hopefully would be, and yet I've just been sceptical about that, it could further revolution in the society.⁶⁵

Cage expressed similar sentiments to this right up until his late interviews with Joan Retallack. In the preface to *Anarchy* he quotes several thinkers on the subject (Peter Kropotkin, Mario Malatesta, Bakunin, Leo Tolstoy, Thoreau and Whitman, as well as

⁶³ As contained in Clause 63 of the UK Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 – see http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1994/Ukpga_19940033_en_6.htm#mdiv63 - accessed 31/3/06

⁶⁴ Cage – 'The Future of Music', in *Empty Words*, p. 183

⁶⁵ Interviewed by Hans G. Helms (1972), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 263

Cage himself⁶⁶) though without any attempt at mediation, but returns to his own statement ‘Changing things radically, therefore, is simple, You just change that one mind. Base human nature on allishness’⁶⁷ which he juxtaposes with Emma Goldman’s comment:

Anarchists or revolutionists can no more be made than musicians. All that can be done is to plant the seeds of thought. Whether something vital will develop depends largely on the fertility of the human soil, though the quality of the intellectual seed must not be overlooked.⁶⁸

Certain schools of vulgar Marxism, especially in the English-speaking countries, are dismissive of the importance of focussing on consciousness prior to direct action, in distinction to the culture and consciousness-focussed work of Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Cage is right to argue for the need for a ‘revolution in the mind’ (as was Goldman), but hopelessly utopian about both the nature of such a revolution and its possibility. Such a revolution would be best achieved by alerting more people to the reality of exploitation, imperialism, inequality, racism, global capital, in the hope of inspiring them collectively to fight such things⁶⁹. Without such a fight or at least the motivation for action, the idea of a ‘revolution in the mind’ remains little more than quasi-new age mysticism.

Cage’s Analysis of the Environment, Unemployment, the State of the World, and how to change it

Well, of course, the whole involvement with power, with profit, and so forth have made it so that we have taught people to be bad. But by nature they are good. Do you see? So we must simply change our educational system.⁷⁰

I think that there must be found a kind of common denominator between those who, like Mao, rely on power and those, like Fuller, who have faith in the goodness of material, of material having. You see, Fuller like Mao believes in the goodness of human nature, and he thinks that what makes people bad is the fact that they do not have what they need. If they had what they needed, they would be less selfish than they are when they do not have what they need.⁷¹

Few socialists would disagree with the above sentiments concerning need and selfishness (though their views on Mao would vary considerably).

⁶⁶ Cage – *Anarchy*, pp. vii-viii.

⁶⁷ Cage – *A Year from Monday*, p. 158, cited in *Anarchy*, p. viii.

⁶⁸ Emma Goldman – Preface to *Anarchism and other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1969), cited in Cage – *Anarchy*, p. viii. Cage’s later citation of Goldman’s comment ‘The problem that confronts us today, and which the nearest future is to solve, is how to be one’s self and yet in oneness with others, to feel deeply with all human beings and still retain one’s own characteristic qualities’ (Goldman – *Anarchism*, cited in Cage – *Anarchy*, p. viii) neglects to make clear the fact that this (admittedly utopian) comment of Goldman’s was made specifically in the context of women’s emancipation.

⁶⁹ Goldman’s preface deals with the difficulties of trying to communicate anarchist thought other than to those who are already converts. Whilst I believe her arguments were ultimately self-defeating for reasons she herself articulates, nonetheless it should be clear that she saw a revolution in consciousness as a prerequisite for ‘direct action’, rather than embodying the revolution itself. Little in Cage’s thought leads me to believe that the ‘revolution in the society’ he describes constitutes anything more than a collective ‘revolution from within’. This sort of position is only available to a middle-class liberal, for the reasons I mentioned earlier.

⁷⁰ Interviewed by Nikša Gligo (1972), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 264.

⁷¹ Interviewed by C.H. Waddington (1972) - cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 267.

Cage's writings from the mid-1970s onwards begin to refer more frequently and explicitly to the environment and to the nature of global problems⁷²:

Our leaders are concerned with the energy crisis. They assure us they will find new sources of oil. Not only will Earth's reservoir of fossil fuels soon be exhausted: their continued use continues the ruin of the environment.⁷³

William Brooks has drawn attention⁷⁴ to the importance of this text and the piece of music it accompanies in making particularly explicit some of Cage's political views. Cage concludes this text by saying:

I dedicate this work to the U.S.A., that it may become just another part of the world, no more, no less.⁷⁵

The following year, Cage said more about his global view:

I don't think we need a president. What we need is a solution of our present problems, which are global, not national. The fact that we have different nations makes every nation want to have the atom bomb and destroy all the others, and that will destroy all of us.⁷⁶

But how does Cage think such global problems might be solved, without the intervention of some sort of quasi-governmental global body? In the late-1980s, the then British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock criticised the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, when she delivered various new-found rhetoric so as to demonstrate concern about the environment⁷⁷, but without backing up such rhetoric with plans for government intervention to try and stem the tide of environmental destruction. He rightly pointed out that her own laissez-faire attitude and policies were totally insufficient in this respect. A similar criticism might be made of Cage. His combination of individualistic criticism together with a refusal to join forces with others to express solidarity in mass protest, and general lack of will to actually engage in concrete action relating to those things he bemoaned, seems to me self-serving and thus highly convenient for an artist, absolving them of any responsibility other than towards their own work, as I mentioned earlier. This is a luxury not afforded to many other people in the world. His writings from the late 1960s often mention the wrongness of the war in Vietnam⁷⁸, but he does not seem to have been prepared to play a part in the collective protests against the war that did play a significant part in changing public opinion on the matter.

Again conveniently, Cage manages to frame the question so that his own work becomes the focus of revolutionary change:

⁷² Though one can find talk of these matters earlier, for example in the seemingly impassioned statement 'We've poisoned our food, polluted our air and water, killed birds and cattle, eliminated forest, impoverished, eroded the earth. We're unselfish, skilful: we include in our acts to perform – we've had a rehearsal – the last one.', in Cage - 'Diary', 1965, in *A Year from Monday*, p. 18

⁷³ Cage – 'Preface to "Lecture on the Weather"', in *Empty Words*, p. 4

⁷⁴ Brooks, in Nicholls, *op cit*, pp. 214-218

⁷⁵ Cage – 'Preface to "Lecture on the Weather"', p. 5

⁷⁶ Interviewed by Tom Darter (1982), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 280

⁷⁷ Thatcher's speech to the 1988 Conservative Party Conference, in which she began making the environment into an issue, can be found at <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=107352> - accessed 31/3/06. I have not been able to locate a printed or web source for Kinnock's comments, made soon afterwards in interview to television journalists.

⁷⁸ Cage – 'Diary', continued 1970-1971, in *M*, pp. 105-106

What can I as a composer do to bring about the revolution? Shall I give up working with trained musicians and go on from what I learned at Kalamazoo? Or shall I continue my efforts to make the symphony orchestra an instance of an improved society, and forget about those two hundred people in Michigan who don't know how to sing anyway?⁷⁹

During the Reagan years, Cage made more explicit comments about American politics:

I'm not interested in the difference between communism and capitalism or between Democrats and Republicans. I think they are all impossible. And I think the thing that's wrong about capitalist countries is that there's a marriage between industry and government, and that the government, like the Reagan government right now, is on the side of industry more than it is on the side of the consumers.

This is of course an absolutely true and potent statement, despite the continued presence of right-wing rhetoric to the contrary.

Reagan doesn't care whether you can buy the products or not. What he cares about is whether or not they're going to be manufactured. He doesn't like communism because it doesn't leave free enterprise open.⁸⁰

But Cage doesn't seem to have any alternative strategy for curbing the power of free enterprise and greed, and conveniently sits on the fence as to how to consider political alternatives.

Industry is already supranational. Coca-Cola sees no boundaries to its commerce. So, we should study the ways of industry, in order to behave, ourselves, globally, as industry behaves. They do it out of greed. We should do it out of the desire to make the *house* we live in, which is the whole place, in good working order. It's now a kind of mess. The games that have been and are still being played have made it very, well, dirty. The environment hasn't been treated properly. It isn't ruined yet, but when you have a *lake* that can be set on fire, something is wrong.⁸¹

But how would our behaviour thus be like that of industry in this respect – surely it would be quite the opposite? And, as I intimated above, how is one to curb the destruction of the environment if not through regulation enacted by government?

[O]ur high degrees of unemployment that we now hear of – all the way from 9 percent unemployed to as high as 40 percent in Puerto Rico. I think in Detroit it's now 14 percent. If we change from seeing that as a threat to seeing that as an advance toward our proper goal, the whole thing could turn from negative to positive.⁸²

In a society with full provisions for all people's needs, this comment would make sense. As it stands, the statement is crass and utterly contemptuous towards those unemployed individuals and families Cage mentions, who live in dire poverty and often hideous conditions. And that situation will remain without some effort to change the world, to make it *better*.

Cage's Late Political Thoughts

⁷⁹ Cage, *M*, p. xv

⁸⁰ Interviewed by Tom Darter (1982), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 279-80

⁸¹ Interviewed by Sean Bronzell and Ann Suchomski (1983), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 281

⁸² Interviewed by Sean Bronzell and Ann Suchomski (1983), cited in Kostelanetz, *op cit*, p. 283

In the last few years of his life, Cage seemed to become as acutely concerned about political and global issues as he had ever been, whilst at the same time exhibiting a certain disillusionment with his earlier naïve idealism. One late interview starts to place his views on art as an instrument for social change into some perspective:

I prefer to do what I'm doing for itself rather than to do what I'm doing for another reason. If I want to help, say, getting rid of AIDS, it would seem to me more effective to support the research than to change the music.⁸³

Cage comments at various points about the emerging conflicts in the Gulf⁸⁴ and Yugoslavia, the latter within the context of his late mesostic 'Overpopulation and Art'.⁸⁵ Here one can find his characteristic views on unemployment:

that is for yoU / to give to yourseLf / increAse / of unemploymentT / untIl we are all / self-emplOyed
self-taught / self-goverNed / A way / Not just to say anarchy / but to Do it (p.19)

the corruption of the rich:

we hAve / the Next war / mappeD out for us / to mAke / the woRld / safe for poverTy / viOlation /
Violation / of laws madE / to pRotect the rich (p. 20)

homelessness, an account of a brutal eviction from a squat, a rare reference to patriarchy:

the necessity tO find new foms / of liVing / nEw / foRms of living together / to stoP the
estrangement between us / tO overcome / the Patriarchal thinking / the aUthoritarian structures / and
the coLdness (p. 23)

and once more a recurrent theme in his work which I mentioned earlier, the need to look at issues globally rather than nationally:

we hAve / these pRblems in common / we can solve Them all best / withOut thinking / of the
diVision / of thE / woRld / into 153 seParate / natiOns / their seParate powers / mortally destrUctive
(p. 27)

Whilst not presenting any significant changes of perspective, the very intensity of this work might suggest that Cage was attempting to come to terms with the contradictions in his earlier thinking in the face of a post-Cold war world in which imperialism and brutal wars continued to be on the rise.

Conclusion

There are, as well as the misguided ideas cited in this paper, numerous instances of penetrating and important political ideas in Cage's work, such as his suggestion to prohibit advertising⁸⁶, though with the rather dubious justification that it would be 'so that the poor wouldn't know what it was they were missing'. Cage sounds like most socialists when, in the context of quoting and praising Mao, he asks 'Where

⁸³ "Taking Chances: John Cage and Laurie Anderson [in conversation]," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Summer, 1992), p.59, cited in Wolff and Patterson, *op cit*, p. 87 n.13

⁸⁴ Cage & Retallack, *op cit*, pp.43-48

⁸⁵ Cage - 'Overpopulation and Art', pp. 14-38

⁸⁶ Cage - 'Diary', continued 1968 (revised), in *M*, p. 13

does the old ideology of the exploiting classes lie? It lies essentially in self-interest – the natural soil for the growing of capitalism’⁸⁷ or when he declares that ‘The function of the governments (American and Puerto Rican) is to see to it that what industry wants is what happens.’⁸⁸

Cage’s comparison of some of the ‘masterpieces of Western music’ to ‘monarchies and dictatorships’⁸⁹ resonates with more recent musical sociology, whilst his antipathy towards ‘wholeness’ or ‘unity’⁹⁰ would accord with the thinking of Adorno (‘the whole is the false’⁹¹).

A recent but as-yet published interview with the Marxist composer Richard Barrett contains a section which might be viewed as an indirect retort to Cage. The interview takes place between an invented interlocutor, Veronika Lenz (who is really Barrett himself) and Barrett.

Veronika Lenz: What about ‘inner emigration’ and silent protest? If we were all pacifists or Buddhists the world wouldn’t have these problems.

Richard Barrett: No, I suppose it wouldn’t. But do you have a strategy to convert everyone? If so it should be put into practice immediately. What we have to remember is that the choices available to us are simply not available to most people, people who are on the receiving end of the rapacity of multinationals or the guns and missiles of the US government and its proxies. You can’t choose to be a pacifist if you can’t afford to feed yourself and/or you are under constant threat of lethal violence. I for one would love to see the ruling class persuaded peacefully to give up its wealth and weapons in order that people across the world could free of brutality, starvation and indignity. However it’s obvious that the chances of that are precisely nil. Socialism isn’t just a way of looking at the world, it’s a way of changing it.⁹²

The Chartists, those who fought to abolish slavery, the suffragettes, the multitude of anti-colonial liberation movements, the gay men and women who resisted the Stonewall raid, and many others all changed the world and didn’t, in my opinion, make things worse. Today resistance fighters in Iraq or in Palestine, to name just two examples, are attempting to do the same and just possibly stand some chance of success. What sort of alternative does Cage’s political position offer them, who have no option but to fight some of the most powerful military machines in the world?

The ubiquitous forces of global capitalism are not at all threatened by the ideas and non-action of Cage and his anarchist fellow-travellers. It is for this reason that Cage’s form of anarchy was and remains a bankrupt ideology. The criticisms I have been making should be applied not only to Cage himself, but also some of Cage’s gurus, as should be clear from the following spectacularly naïve-sounding quotation from 1967:

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⁸⁷ Cage - ‘Diary’, continued 1971-1972, in *M*, p. 204

⁸⁸ Cage - ‘Diary’, continued 1973-1982, in *X*, p. 156

⁸⁹ Cage – ‘The Future of Music’, in *Empty Words*, p. 183

⁹⁰ Kostelanetz – *Conversing with Cage*, p. 258

⁹¹ Adorno’s inversion of Hegel is in his *Minima Moralia*, translated E. F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), p. 50

⁹² Richard Barrett – *Unasked Questions: An Interview with Veronika Lenz*, obtained privately from the author. Interestingly, some of Barrett’s views expressed in this interview and his programme note for the orchestral work *NO: Resistance and Vision* are quite similar to those of Cage on the notion of certain use of the orchestra presenting a model for a better society.

The problem, Fuller insists, is technological, specifically, to triple the effectiveness and to implement the distribution of the world's resources so that there will be enough to go around and that it will get around. At the beginning of this century, only 7 per cent of the world's peoples had what they needed; the rest were have-nots. Now nearly 47 per cent have. By 1972, Fuller says, it'll be 50-50. If we do not destroy ourselves as we continue changing, Fuller prophesies that, by the year 2000, everyone in the world will have what he needs. There will then be no rational reason for war. If, at that time, people want to hate one another, they may, but on an individual, rather than international, level.....A victory for humanity.⁹³

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⁹³ Cage - 'McLuhan's Influence' (1967), in Richard Kostelanetz (ed) - *John Cage: An Anthology* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), p. 171

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