

Brilliant fools: Harold Pinter and the media

The most effective way to control people is to control their assumptions about the world. The task of propaganda is to apply power-friendly labels and make them stick – it is the key to everything. The labelling factory par excellence – the machine that applies the right labels in the right way over and over again – is the mass media system.

Activists have lambasted governments, corporations, industries for decades, but they are swimming against a relentless tide. As has been demonstrated so clearly in Iraq, governments and businesses can do pretty much what they like just so long as the media factory is on hand to label it better: to label away the crimes, the lies, the outrage, the desperate need for change. The media are, and always have been, the supreme obstacle to change.

But you would not know it because all media corporations apply the same potent label to such a thought: 'Unthinkable.'

Naturally enough, high-profile reputations within the mainstream tend to attract negative media labels to the extent that an individual is honest in exposing the crimes of power. This becomes particularly striking when widely celebrated talents choose to focus their energies on political dissent. Then, suddenly, the brilliant become brilliant fools – egomaniacs whose craving for yet more attention lures them into realms of inquiry beyond their competence. Expert wordsmiths become childish scribblers. Sophisticated storytellers become gauche and witless. Even world-renowned scientists are suddenly unable to grasp the most elementary principles of scientific inquiry. The power of labelling appears to be without limit.

This labelling does not involve mere disagreement. As teachers of meditation have instructed for thousands of years, the mind is most effectively trained by constant repetition reinforced by emotion. If labelling is to be effective, it is important that embarrassment, revulsion and even disgust be generated in the public mind.

This ensures that the required label is fixed both intellectually and emotionally, and recalled every time the target individual is remembered, seen or heard.

Factory Labels

A prime example is the British playwright Harold Pinter, who in December was awarded the 2005 Nobel Prize for literature. Pinter is the first British winner since VS Naipaul in 2001.

Pinter has long been equally admired for his dramatic work and reviled for his political activism. Introducing his Nobel acceptance speech, playwright David Hare said:

"The theatre is what the British have always been good at. And nobody has so come to represent the theatre's strengths, its rigors, and its glories, as Harold Pinter." (Harold Pinter: Nobel Prize speech, More4, December 10, 2005)

Reviewers speak in near-mystical terms of Pinter's brilliance. Leading theatre critic Michael Billington observed in the *Guardian*:

"Although he is best known as a dramatist and screenwriter, Harold Pinter is an equally remarkable director... As an actor, Pinter also possesses weight, authority and presence...Pinter's production of Joyce's *Exiles* was a masterpiece of psychological insight and dramatic timing." ('High-octane Harold,' *The Guardian*, February 5, 2005)

Pinter's use of sparse, menacing language in his drama is deemed the stuff of genius. But the labels applied to Pinter's anti-war poetry are different. These poems are "ludicrous, crass, offensive, second-rate, obscure-to-the-point-of-meaninglessness", Daniel Finkelstein declared in the *Times*: "The great dramatist has the right to intervene in politics, just as anyone else has. But he doesn't have the right to be taken seriously. Pinter simply has nothing interesting to say." (Finkelstein, 'Warning: what you are about to read is f***** poetic,' *The Times*, March 9, 2005)

Poet Don Paterson dismissed Pinter in the *Guardian*:

"To take a risk in a poem is not to write a big swearsy



Anti-War. Harold Pinter delivering his Nobel lecture via video to the Swedish Academy in Stockholm.

Photo: Janerik Henriksson/EPA courtesy The Guardian

outburst about how crap the war in Iraq is, even if you are the world's greatest living playwright. Because anyone can do that." (Charlotte Higgins, 'Pinter's poetry? Anyone can do it,' *The Guardian*, October 30, 2004)

Simon Heffer wrote in the *Daily Mail* of Pinter:

"I don't begrudge Harold Pinter his Nobel prize. I have never seen why someone's political views – which in Pinter's case are verging on the barking – should disqualify them from acclaim in any field of the arts." (Heffer, 'David, don't be scared of the truth,' *Daily Mail*, October 15, 2005)

Swallowing Pinter's Bile

In *The New York Times*, James Traub declared that "Pinter's politics are so extreme ... they are almost impossible to parody." (Traub, 'Their Highbrow Hatred of Us,' *New York Times*, October 30, 2005) Traub added, "it is hard to think of anyone save Noam Chomsky and Gore Vidal who would not choke on Pinter's bile".

The Times wrote that Pinter's recent output has consisted "almost entirely of rabid antiwar, anti-American and expletive-filled rants against the Iraq conflict. In his anger, Pinter is as spare with logic as he once was with language". (... The Nobel Prize... for Literature...to Harold Pinter...Hmmm...,' Pause For Thought, *The Times*, October 14, 2005)

Tony Allen-Mills lamented in the *Sunday Times*:

"Among this year's Nobel laureates are several American

scientists who are being rewarded for brilliant work. Yet their achievements appear destined to be overshadowed by a rant from a bolshie Brit." (Tony Allen-Mills, 'This Pinter guy could turn into a pain,' *Sunday Times*, November 6, 2005)

The *Mirror* reported Pinter's Nobel prize speech with the headline: "Pinter rant at 'brutal' US policy." (*Mirror*, December 8, 2005)

In the *Independent*, Johann Hari wrote an article titled: 'Pinter does not deserve the Nobel Prize - The only response to his Nobel rant (and does anyone doubt it will be a rant?) will be a long, long pause.' (Hari, *The Independent*, December 6, 2005)

It is significant that Hari described Pinter's speech as a "rant" before it had even been delivered - the label exists independently of the work, indeed of the author, in question. To subject power to serious, rational challenge is by definition to "rant". Hari commented:

"Ever since Pinter was a teenager, he has been relentlessly contrarian, kicking out violently against anything that might trigger his rage that day."

Afflicted

Charles Spencer also pointed to the 'sickly' psychological roots of Pinter's politics:

"Right through his career, he has been fascinated by the relationship between victim and oppressor, the weak and the powerful, and his spare, clenched dialogue is full of insults, piss-takes and threats.

From what one hears about Pinter the man, as opposed to Pinter the playwright, he's pretty good at menace in real life as well as on the stage." (Spencer, 'Happy birthday party for Harold Pinter,' *Daily Telegraph*, October 14, 2005)

Spencer lamented the influence of Pinter's "adolescent politics" on his plays. A day later, Sam Leith also focused on Pinter's "menace" and rage:

"There has always been the permanent scowl; the finger-jabbing rage; the off-the-peg bohemianism of the uniform black polo-neck; the sense of vanity begging to be punctured." (Sam Leith, 'The childish urge to tease our greatest living playwright is much too delicious to resist,' *Daily Telegraph*, October 15, 2005)

This is the standard, Soviet-style assertion that critics of power are afflicted by psychological disorder, with the concocted 'sins' of power randomly selected as a focus for neurotic ire.

Compare and contrast the above with a comparable dismissal in the *Observer* by Jay Rayner. The title of the article was 'Pinter of Discontent'. The subtitle read: 'Hated Pinochet; loathed Thatcher; doesn't like America; deplores Nato; is disgusted when his play doesn't get a West End run. Good old Harold – he's always bitching about something.' (Rayner, 'Pinter of discontent,' *The Observer*, May 16, 1999)

Rayner referred to Pinter's obsessive "bitching" nearly thirty times, using language like: "raging", "sound and fury", "growling", "outraged", "attacking", "hostility", "rowing", "ever ready to pick a fight", "yelling", "barracking", "fury" (again), "raging" (again).

To consider the robotically consistent nature of the smears – and how we find ourselves assuming that there must be something to them – reveals much about how freedom of expression is crushed in our society.

David Edwards has met Pinter several times and conducted an interview with Pinter in his London office in 1999. The transcript is available in full at <http://www.medialens.org/forum/viewtopic.php?p=4799#4799>

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Readers are invited to judge for themselves the truth of Pinter's "rabid", "barking", "adolescent" politics.

Conclusion

It is a brutal fact of modern media and politics that honesty and sincerity are not rewarded, but instead heavily punished, by powerful interests with plenty at stake. It does not matter how often the likes of Pinter, Le Carré, Noam Chomsky and John Pilger are shown to be right. It does not matter how often the likes of Bush and Blair are shown to have lied in the cause of power and profits. The job of mainstream journalism is to learn nothing from the past, to treat rare individuals motivated by compassion as rare fools deserving contempt.

The benefits are clear enough: if even high-profile dissidents can be painted as wretched, sickly fools, then which reader or viewer would want to be associated with dissent? Then 'normal' - conforming, consuming, looking after 'number one' - can be made to seem healthy, balanced, sensible and sane. Historian Howard Zinn made the point well:

"Realism is seductive because once you have accepted the reasonable notion that you should base your actions on reality, you are too often led to accept, without much questioning, someone else's version of what that reality is. It is a crucial act of independent thinking to be sceptical of someone else's description of reality." (*The Zinn Reader*, Seven Stories Press, 1997, p.338)

The great task of propaganda is to make dissent seem unrealistic, embarrassing, and absurd.

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