Of reds and rednecks: response to Ed Hansen and Herman Rebel

Eliza Jane Darling

Published online: 5 June 2009
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2009

Americans, or so a very English friend of mind found recent occasion to remark, are a lot like hobbits: you can learn all there is to know about them in a month, and they'll still surprise you after a hundred years. This singular homily on the mercurial mindset of the American public was not prompted by the election of Barack Obama a few short years after *The Daily Mirror* announced the 2004 election results with the headline "How can 59,054,087 people be so DUMB?"—though many here in Blighty are still shaking their heads in disbelief that the Yankee electorate could so abruptly replace a bumbling, brutal boob of a tyrant with an enlightened philosopher king. The facile millenarian contours of this titanic clash, which spoke aptly to the temperament of our apocalyptically inclined times, are rapidly fading, even for those who invested genuine hope in the ideological deployment of yes-we-canism from the get-go. No, it was sparked by a more subtle event: an obscure Rasmussen survey whose results sent murmurs of bemusement rippling across both sides of the water. It was elegant in its simplicity, asking one question of a modest sample of American citizens: which is a better system, capitalism or socialism? Capitalism won by the hair on its chinny chin chin, with 53% of respondents rallying to the banner of the market, 20% flying the red flag, and 27% flummoxed by the conundrum (Rasmussen Reports 2009).

That, of course, is my fanciful spin on it. The pollsters specifically declined to define the terms of the question, so there's no way to tell what the respondents really meant by their choices, what histories or tropes or conditions or possibilities they associated with either "system," and that ambiguity has been the focus of much of the ink subsequently spilled on the subject. It is a testament to the entrenched naturalization of capitalism as the inexorable, defining condition of America that these results provoked such intense speculation at all, and which inspired such a degree of incredulity in my supercilious comrade, who (echoing common sentiment

E. J. Darling (✉)
Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK
e-mail: ans01ed@gold.ac.uk

in a dozen or so informal conversations across the Big Smoke) concluded that 47% of Americans must just be confused about the meaning of socialism—a somewhat ironic assumption about a population so anesthetized to the potentialities of alternative economic arrangements that Woody Guthrie once praised the nuthouse as the only place in America where you could jump up on a table and declare yourself a fellow traveler without being arrested. But if these odd Americans aren't just befuddled, then what are they thinking? Even coupled with the palpable populist backlash against the profligacies of a host of deserving malefactors from Wall Street wolves to World Bank Wolfowitzes, this small bellwether of socialist inclination can hardly be read as a sure sign that revolution is back on the menu of American political discourse. However, it's intriguing nonetheless, especially for the possibility that it reveals emerging developments in the politics of blame—which brings me to the substance of the responses by Hansen and Rebel.

Crisis has its uses, as Marx argued and Benjamin elaborated. The “chronic state of emergency” (Taussig 1992) which permeates late modernity, bubbling away on the back burner and filling every nostril with the bland aroma of routinized terror, has a way of marking out particular populations (gendered, racialized, regionalized) for targeted liability. Rebel notes the emblematic campaign moment in which a McCain supporter “accused” Obama of being an Arab, to which the Maverick countered with astonishing matter-of-factness that his opponent was not an Arab but a “decent family man, citizen,” a tactic which jibed nicely with Palin's decidedly less subtle association of Obama with terrorist pals and the more generalized GOP strategy which sought a calculated path between permissible and verboten forms of public racism. The Democratic camp, for its own part, walked a similarly sketchy line across the terrain of identity, parrying with general aplomb emergent debates about the meaning of “African American,” strategically allowing the Republican othering of Obama-as-terrorist to backfire of its own accord, but quietly ushering two headscarf-clad supporters out of camera view at a rally in Detroit—and then making a meal out of a public apology when the incident threatened to become a liability. These were some of the visible apogees in the general topography of racial scapegoating, which was playing itself out in the more obscure hills and hollers of American empire long before the shit hit the fan on September 11, but intensified in its wake, from the classrooms of New York City (Kromidas 2004) to the comedy clubs of Los Angeles (Jacobs-Huey 2006) to the battlefields of Iraq (Silliman 2008). By comparison, the parlous politics of poor white trash which for a brief moment revealed itself in the liberal othering of Palin and her ilk seems like a minor side show. But like the politics of terrorism as an ethnicized construct, it laid bare the systemic and dialectical machinations through which rednecks and terrorists alike are produced and reproduced as identifiable categories.

A strong theme running through the comments proffered by both Rebel and Hansen is that of brutality displaced and dispersed: of AULs, as Rebel succinctly categorizes that nebulous group of people against whom my polemic was aimed, or the “middle class,” which Hansen adroitly pegs as the primary foil for poor white trash, simultaneously constituting the object and subject of class-based revanchism. Both speak eloquently, compassionately, even angrily, but most importantly, structurally, about the dissonance of lives played out in the space between, where

the promise of prescribed normativity through the trappings of education, career, salary, savings, pension, kinship, consumption, and aspiration can be betrayed so blithely by those who both promulgate the American dream in ideological terms (through the bad mortgage cynically peddled) and police its boundaries by virtue of their material relations to the means of production (through the dream home ruthlessly repossessed). Both exploited and exploiters in their own turn, AULs are a semi-periphery of America's internal colonial frontiers. If my own polemic focused on the contradictions of "redneck" as a class condition, these interventions push me to consider the broader context in which those contradictions take shape, and are even compelled: the toxic fallout of a reactive dialectic originating further up the food chain. My initial analysis, more descriptive than explanatory, might leave the reader with the impression that AULs, as a particular cohort of the middle class, objectify and demonize rednecks because, well, they're just a shower of contemptible bastards at the end of the day—much in the same way that fuzzy liberal interpretations of capitalism blame greed, rather than immanent logic or motor force, for the current crisis and other systemic debacles of the capitalist mode of production—or more pointedly, much in the same way that rednecks bear the displaced albatross of personal and cultural failure.

It's a crucial corrective. As Rebel notes, the regional earmarking of cultural culpability and virtue has been exercised to brutal economic effect at larger spatial scales than that of the nation, where my own argument is confined, as shown by the work of world systems and dependency theorists. Yet, as the classical Marxist rebuttal of these schools demonstrated, the focus on social formation to the detriment of political economic process has left us theoretically vulnerable to an eclectically Marx-ish (rather than a rigorously Marx-ist) understanding of how and why, precisely, some regions come to be targeted for conquest and underdevelopment, what kinds of conditions are in turn established through such spatial fixes, and how class struggle within borders relates to class struggle across borders throughout the process. And here Hansen's critique comes into play: class is not just about the descriptive markers of status, but however readily those markers may signify the vagaries of income. Class is not only relational and immediate but material and historical, bound up inexorably with the categories of property, ownership, access, and the particular temporal and spatial conditions of struggle at multiple scales.

This is, of course, where the "redneck" taxonomy begins to break down as a discrete branch of the American family tree. "Redneck" as a construct in the minds of middle-class AULs (or the memories of ex-hillbilly anthropologists) sometimes has little to do with the actual conditions of those objectified and homogenized by the term. Hansen evokes, by way of example, farmers and mountaineers, explicitly historicizing both through his contrast of the vast shifts in the conditions of production witnessed in farming country during the twentieth century and the relative constancy of subsistence patterns among one constituency of the more peripheral woodsy redneck variety from Reconstruction to the present. Mining, fishing, logging, ranching and tourist communities—insofar as rural economies can be so discretely identified anymore (or perhaps ever could)—have different tales to tell. Moreover, intra-regional fissures, particularly that vast and enduring divide between north and south, as evoked by Rebel in his reference to the vampirish

conditions of the Southern Gothic, further belie the alleged unity of a seamless hillbilly category. Whatever systemic commonalities, historical or geographical, emerge from the redneck construct as national signifier of comfort and perturbation, the white rural working class live out their lives at scales of specificity which render the lived experience of “redneck” a grittily textured and uneven one, not only in class terms, but in the complex contexts of racial privilege and gendered oppression. The real work of redneck studies digs beneath the “war of images” to excavate the intercourse of an objective social reality whose structural scrutiny Hansen rightly insists must fortify the deconstructive labor of critical discourse analysis, all too often the path of least resistance.

That my own contribution in these pages only adds to the overflowing barrel of discursive deconstruction, long past five feet high and rising, is apparent, and will likely (and justifiably) raise anthropological hackles about the validity of method. I could have, and should have, spent less time firing indignant missives at the duck soup of the liberal media and more time carrying out the proper footwork of empirical research, which is possible, if problematically so, even across the Atlantic and at the scale of national rural predicament. Let me attempt to salvage this misfire somewhat—while simultaneously arguing that discursive narratives and material conditions are not a zero-sum game—by outlining some broad conclusions from my own research, which I only referenced in an unspecified appeal to native anthropology in “O Sister.”

Like Hansen, I’ve conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the hillbilly hinterlands of upstate New York: the Adirondack Park, the six million acre “wilderness” where I was born in the early 1970s, and to which I returned as PhD student in the late 1990s (Darling 2004, 2005). The local inhabitants of the central Adirondacks face a different economic predicament from those of Hansen’s Woodchuck informants in Putnam County. They are, or were at the time of my research, trapped by the exigencies of rural gentrification, in which rising housing costs in the residential real estate market act to temper and destabilize the alleged benefits of relatively plentiful if highly cyclical low-wage employment—both conditions generated by the waves of transient tourists, semi-permanent seasonal homeowners, and migratory retirees who bring concrete capital investment as well as palpable demographic pressure to the Adirondack mountains, channeled selectively into the landscape by the regulatory environmental policies of the State of New York and extant local patterns of property ownership. Gentrification, however, is merely symptomatic of a larger regime of accumulation, a specialized and spacialized form of post-Fordist “flexibility” in which the Adirondack wilderness outposts, and rural communities like them across the USA and Britain, have become Arcadia factories whose economic viability hinges not only upon the material production of nature and space, but on the successful commoditization of rural redemption, long mustered by the inhabitants of these hills in the ongoing development of a local pattern of subsistence which predatory colonial resource extraction in the logging, tanning, potashing, and mining industries seldom provided. The peculiarly Adirondack variant of the Arcadian idyll, including the keystone figure of the “good hillbilly,” is a regional manifestation of a broader national construction of the American countryside linking whiteness, masculinity, nationalism, and rugged individualism

in the packaging and sale of cultural authenticity, the search for which has become a predictable staple of urban and suburban modernity, resonating with homologous productions of idyllic rurality across the national borders of “the west.” The positive tropes of redneck authenticity, at least for the Adirondacks, are no mere benign side effect of an ephemeral and disembodied liberal discourse handily dispatched by the armchair ethnographer equipped with a laptop and a broadband connection, but a critical lynchpin in the production of demand for wilderness as commodity. These tropes get translated locally and materially into the manufacture and retail of “rustic” second homes, woodsy trappings from clothing to home furnishings, and basic backwoods supplies from gasoline to groceries. They also manifest in the production and delivery of experiential service-sector commodities by a constellation of local actors, from the nostalgically romanticized queen of the silver dollar pouring gin at the local watering hole to the latter-day Daniel Boone guiding would-be pioneer fantasists through the backwoods of Hamilton County: a truck-and-barter in the politics of identity which enables both figures to exchange cultural performativity for an attenuated foothold in the place where they were born, but increasingly cannot afford to live.

If this work speaks to the material significance of the laudatory aspects of the redneck construction, then let me draw, in conclusion, upon another, more personal Adirondack example—this one derived from my “native” experience rather than from my later field research—which hints at the material potentialities of the malevolent face of the hillbilly trope.

On a bitter February evening toward the close of the millennium, Timothy Morgan, a resident of the Town of Bleecker in the southern foothills of the Adirondack mountains, took a cab from a nearby town to his home on an isolated dirt road in the backwoods, and for reasons known only to himself, shot the driver in the back of the head. He was subsequently arrested and charged with murder. In a preliminary motion, Morgan’s lawyer, one Thomas Neidl of Albany, concocted an innovative defense in a bid to have his client’s indictment dismissed. Neidl argued that Morgan was unable to be tried by a jury of his peers on the grounds that there were no “Bleecker people, hicks, hill people” on the grand jury. Morgan and his Adirondack neighbors, Neidl contended, in fact constituted a “subculture or subclass of citizens” (McGuire 1998, p. B1). As the Schenectady Daily Gazette reported,

Neidl told the court that Fulton County residents regard residents of Bleecker as “sexual deviants, of lower intelligence, lazy, shiftless, etc.”... “Members of this class,” he said, “hold no or menial jobs for the most part...are impoverished or sustained by Social Security income, welfare and/or other public assistance...[have] a high rate of alcoholism, criminal histories and generally have been unsuccessful in schooling and have little education. There are claims of high incidents of physical abuse, sexual abuse and incest and mental disorders in this subculture....” He said it appears that Bleecker residents “remain identifiable even when they move to the more urban areas of the county” (McGuire 1998, p. B1).

Neidl’s argument was met with mock incredulity by the Fulton County district attorney, who added helpfully, “not all hicks or hill people are alcoholic or sex

abusers or....lazy or shiftless or of lower intelligence or deviant,” an insight she had apparently gained while living among those self-same hicks for several years as a Bleecker resident herself (McGuire 1998, p. B1).

As Steve Earle once memorably opined, won’t nothing bring you down like your hometown. Bleecker is where I was born and raised, where most of my family still lives on the same dirt track where Timmy’s victim—Joseph Boop, a father and husband—was shot down in cold blood. I grew up with Timmy; indeed our families were entwined through the typical rural slip knots of kinship and friendship and property relations for many years. We rented a trailer to the Morgans when Timmy’s father came to town looking to settle down after having done his own time for murder; we swam and fished in the same lake, he and his brother did odd jobs around the house, his estranged mother befriended my stepfather and saw him through the long ugly march of cancer to its inevitable conclusion. Our two families in those days were a good example of what my mother, who has been a social worker in the area for over 20 years, calls “the poor and the poorer.” But the hillbilly whitewash splashed across that courtroom covered us all—the “undeserving poor,” the marginally better-off working class, the petit rural bourgeoisie—just as the clumsy liberal assault on Sarah Palin condemned a whole people. A neighbor over Benson way erected a two-story comedy shithouse at the end of his driveway in the wake of this event, labeled “Hicks” on the top floor and “Mr. Neidl” on the bottom; a sign pounded into the dirt nearby explained “Turning the other cheek.” It was photographed by the papers, and made the locals laugh like a drain, but it was so much pissing in the wind. The criminalization of the white rural poor, and most especially the poorer, does not just hover in the nebulous realm of detached discourse or the imaginative fancies of urban lawyers, but shapes policy, education, social welfare, and the more ephemeral aspects of Foucauldian, omnipresent power relations. Neidl threw the dice and lost, but it was a calculated gamble rooted in a pervasive, material logic. Timmy was criminalized long before he became a criminal in the technical sense.

This is why I pay attention to discourse: because I’ve learned, from both rurality and anthropology, that its material implications—causal or consequential—are always lurking somewhere in the near vicinity, however murky or twisted the partnership. It’s the same (probably loopy) reason I find some hope, however slim, in the small act of a thousand Americans answering the phone and talking to a stranger about socialism. Not hanging up in disgust or revulsion, not shouting down the house in universal condemnation, just answering yes, no, or how the hell should I know: a glimmer of certainty, a glimmer of doubt, a glimmer of hope. It makes me think crisis, however routinized, still possesses the potential to push people along fault lines which run against the well-worn troughs of displaced, misplaced, and justifiable-but-insufficient anger. Maybe some of the people who chose socialism were AULs, sick to the back teeth of being knocked about by boom and bust. Maybe the prescient pre-election forecast of Reverend Joseph Lowery—that a Good Crazy might grip America—heralded the smashing of bars beyond those based of color, and Guthrie’s madhouse will cover the land. Who can tell? Who can tell.

Acknowledgments Many thanks to Ed Hanson and Herman Rebel for their comments on this piece, and to Julian Brash and Josh Reno for comments on an earlier version.

References

- Darling, Eliza. 2004. Accommodating wilderness: Rural gentrification and the production of nature in the Adirondack park. Doctoral Dissertation. City University of New York, Graduate School and University Center, PhD Program in Anthropology.
- Darling, Eliza. 2005. The city in the country: Rural political ecology and the rent gap. *Environment and Planning A* 37(6): 1015–1032.
- Jacobs-Huey, Lanita. 2006. “The Arab is the new nigger:” African American comics confront the irony and tragedy of September 11. *Transforming Anthropology* 14(1): 60–64.
- Kromidas, Maria. 2004. Learning war/learning race: Fourth-grade students in the aftermath of September 11th in New York city. *Critique of Anthropology* 24(1): 15–33.
- McGuire, Jim. 1998. Accused killer’s lawyer wants charge dropped. *The Daily Gazette* Saturday, September 12:B1.
- Rasmussen Reports. 2009. Just 53% say capitalism better than socialism. <http://tinyurl.com/d78yo4>. Accessed 12 May 2009.
- Silliman, Stephen W. 2008. The “old west” in the middle east: U.S. military metaphors in real and imagined Indian country. *American Anthropologist* 110(2): 237–247.
- Taussig, Michael. 1992. *The nervous system*. New York: Routledge.