

Reviews

The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom

Written and Directed by Adam Curtis

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Reviewed by Bill Blackwater

In March 2007, BBC2 screened *The Trap*, a series of films by Adam Curtis. Curtis had previously won attention for documentary series such as *Century of the Self* (on the influence of Freud) and *The Power of Nightmares* (on neconservatives' use of the threat of Al-Qaeda). In *The Trap* Curtis turned his attention to the post-war political cult of individual freedom, arguing that the theories on which this was based viewed humanity as a collection of atomised and selfish individuals; simultaneously, they held that any other view of society was to be opposed as a hypocritical and dangerous cover for sclerotic statism or totalitarian dictatorship. As our social institutions have been remodelled under the influence of these ideas, Curtis argued, so trust in authority has broken down, society has become more atomised, individuals have begun to feel ever more helpless in a world devoid of beliefs, and the possibilities of politics have been reduced merely to administering the status quo.

Critics among the bloggerati and elsewhere described *The Trap* variously as naïve, manipulative, over the top, incoherent, and something of a left-wing polemic. It was probably all of these, in varying degrees. More importantly, it was profound, persuasive, rousing, technically dazzling, and right.

The Trap was that rarest of things: an intellectually and culturally significant piece of television. It was not just that it was intellectually serious; although it would have stood out simply for this. Nor just that it was artistically brilliant, in its use of documentary footage and music. It is that this series made a number of important arguments in its own right. Most TV programmes on intellectual subjects merely paraphrase – at snail's pace, lest anyone is left behind – the ideas that other people have written about. While Curtis of course has drawn on the ideas of others, his series broke new ground, and was no less intellectually complex than a written essay. It should not be thought of as another ephemeral piece of television; it is still available to view on the internet, and will no doubt have an ongoing life.

What made Curtis's series significant was the way in which it tagged liberal market democracy, identifying the ideology which supports it as surely as the revolutionary and utopian ideologies it was defined against. This has always been a difficult argument to

make, precisely because liberal democracy defines itself as being non-ideological, simply allowing people to live as they are. In turn, this has always made it a particularly powerful ideology, since people struggle to recognise it as such, and therefore do not see the power it exercises over them.

Curtis not only revealed the ideology which underpins liberal democracy, but exposed the inhumanity at its core. In one interview he asked James Buchanan, an early advisor to Margaret Thatcher on public sector reform, what about the role of idealism in public service? Buchanan replied: 'Well, I don't know what you mean ... I don't think that's meaningful, I don't know how to put any handles on that.' At another point, he showed Bernard Levin asking Friedrich von Hayek where altruism came into his model of society. 'It doesn't come in', replied Hayek.

In places the little revelations of his series had the quality of a novel. The originator of game theory – revealed to be startlingly influential as a model for social interaction, despite the obvious sociopathic paranoia embedded in its terms – turns out to have later been hospitalised as a paranoid schizophrenic. The man whom Mrs Thatcher brought in to introduce the internal market in the NHS turns out to have been the man the Pentagon tasked with working out how many millions of dead Russians it would take to win a Third World War. He also invented the 'body count' target as a means of winning the Vietnam War, the perverse outcome of which was the massacre of civilians.

Most important of all, Curtis took hold of the concept of negative liberty (freedom for individuals do what they like, as individuals) which Isaiah Berlin held up in contradiction to positive liberty (freedom from constraints with the express design of transforming society so that people would better express their potential as human beings), and argued that it had itself become idolised as a positive doctrine: only here the constraint was society itself, and our potential was to be atomised consumers, a polity of monads. Thus we were to be forced to be free; to become full market participants. And the new constraints in all this were in large part invisible, since this was the accepted definition of what freedom looked like.

Brilliantly, Curtis illustrated the naivety of those liberal intellectuals who had led us into this trap with some footage of Malcolm Muggeridge saying (with some sycophantic 1950s interviewer responding with 'yes' about forty times) how he hated power, he hated government, he wanted us to be free. This is precisely the grotesquely naïve nonsense which dogmatic liberals praise in the American constitution; the checks and balances, explicitly designed to keep government weak – which of course does not abolish 'power', but simply means more of it is left to be wielded by unelected, private forces.

In probably the least well-marshalled part of the series, Curtis sketched out the developing relationship between the ideologies of negative and positive liberty over the last few decades. In particular, he identified the revolutionary ideologies powering Third World wars of colonial independence as nihilistic credos, which viewed the violence of revolution itself as transformative. The emptiness of these ideologies, however, developed

out of a revulsion against the stultifying, necessarily corrupt and hypocritical ideology of liberal democracy, latterly being fomented by the revolutionary foreign policy of American neoconservatives (and Tony Blair). The ideologues of liberal democracy could not appreciate the opposition that would erupt against them as being decadent and devoid of beliefs, for the simple reason that for them negative liberty is itself a positive ideology, a social religion.

Alongside these political developments, Curtis traced developments in psychiatry which helped to reinforce them; R. D. Laing's counter-cultural attacks on authority deriving from and feeding the same paranoid and atomistic idea of society, and their effects chiming with the right's assault on institutional elites claiming to act in the public interest. The end result of this unwitting coalition of neo-liberal right and counter-cultural left is a society of 'lonely robots', an increasingly unequal, dissatisfied, but apathetic society of individuals who are unhappy but do not know why, living as they do in 'a society deliberately without ideals'. With no respect for expertise or authority, they are equally cut off from a transformative political response to the situation they find themselves in.

The films' treatment of New Labour was possibly their weakest area. Curtis overplayed the negative aspects of government target-setting, and tried to hold it directly responsible for all manner of wider ills. Much better was the argument (more implied than spelt out) that New Labour, instead of ditching the tenets of a certain vision of positive liberty which had become outmoded, rejected positive liberty itself, leaving its ministers with the goal of being nicer and more competent administrators – of a state which is designed to serve the needs of, and thereby to create, a society of atomised consumers. The result is increasing disengagement and infantile rejections of responsibility on the part of the electorate, even while billions of pounds have been spent on it. Failing to understand the underlying reason for this anger, this lack of trust, all the ideology-less politicians of New Labour can think of is 'engagement'. But the more they try to engage with atomised consumers, the more they help to fan the flames which create atomised, irresponsible, consumers in the first place. The e-petition facility on the No 10 website, which led to a mass outburst against the idea of road pricing, was a small, but perfect, example.

Certainly, Curtis overstated his case. His films failed to allow for the way in which thinkers are both produced by and produce the ideas of their time. Perhaps most of all, he failed adequately to deal with the revolutionary excesses which led to the ideal of negative liberty.

In failing to grapple with the concerns of liberals and conservatives the programme weakened itself. But its final conclusion would have been fully in keeping with one leading conservative thinker of recent years. A call to arms, a plea to the left to wake up, enunciated over the Marseillaise, Curtis's final words ran: 'If we ever want to escape from this limited world-view we will have to rediscover the progressive, positive ideas of freedom. And realise that Isaiah Berlin was wrong: not all attempts to change the world for the better lead to tyranny.' Or as Allan Bloom put it in *The*

Closing of the American Mind: 'Utopianism is the fire we must play with. We need to criticise false understandings of Utopia, but the easy way out provided by realism is deadly.'

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