

**Defiant worldings from Manchester, England: Expulsed global solidarities and the international homeland of dignity**

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**Abstract**

This article explores contemporary material and affective traces of two instances of global solidarity in Manchester, England. The first is a letter sent to Abraham Lincoln by an assembly of Manchester citizens in December 1862, assuring Lincoln of their unwavering support for the struggle for the freedom of all despite the cotton famine's effect on those assembled. The second instance refers to the multi-faceted practices of solidarity with the Spanish Republic and the International Brigades. Drawing on Stephen D'Arcy's 'language of the unheard' and Ananya Roy's 'civic governmentality', and on commemorative traces in Manchester's topography, the article reflects on how 'defiant worldings' are commemorated, subordinated and/or marginalized but also how the spirit of egalitarian, anti-racist and anti-fascist defiance is remembered and kept alive.

**Keywords**

defiance

international solidarity

Manchester

commemoration

cotton famine

Spanish Civil War

Dignity cannot be studied, you live it or it dies, it aches inside you and teaches you how to walk.

Dignity is that international homeland which we forget many times. (Subcomandante Insurgente

Marcos, CCRI-CG of the EZLN, June 1995)

The international homeland of dignity was evoked in an open letter from a movement that has become a game-changer for practices of international solidarity, the Zapatistas in the south-eastern part of Mexico. The open letter was addressed to a recipient in Europe and in it, the now defunct Subcomandante Marcos reflected on what a shared struggle might mean to people on different sides of the Atlantic. Referring to democracy, freedom and justice as crucial elements of dignity, he noted that these might look very different from each side of the Atlantic. Yet, he wrote,

[...] it is about the same thing: the right to have a good government, the right to think and act with a freedom which does not imply the slavery of others, the right to give and receive what is just. (Marcos 2004: 148)

I start with a quote from a movement that still exists today to suggest that the pre-figurative actualizations of the international homeland of dignity in the city of Manchester, Northern England, which I will discuss over the next few pages, do not stand alone, nor are they of the past. But in what terms and on whose terms we remember them is crucial to the work they can do as worldings that grew out of localized, specifically urban practices of transatlantic solidarity. Aihwa Ong has defined worldings as ‘projects and practices that have instantiated some vision of the world in formation’ (2011: 11). The worlds in formation that we will encounter here have still not been actualized and yet, the pre-figurative, however momentary actualizations of the international homeland of dignity have been important to the affirmation of the political-cultural identity of a city that often finds itself politically at odds with the rest of the country, and where citizens have often found themselves at odds with their own local elite and its followers. In the first instance discussed here, an assembly of Manchester citizens took a principled stance in support of the uprooting of slavery and wrote a letter to Abraham Lincoln to express their unrelenting support, thus positioning themselves against those Manchester and British citizens who were willing to support the

Confederacy during the American Civil War. In the second instance, citizens organized multi-faceted, material and ideological support for the Republican forces that defended against General Franco's coup d'état in July 1936 and the advance of fascism in Spain. These pre-figurative actualizations of worlds in formation – worlds that share many features with the international homeland of dignity evoked above – were possible only because some people were willing to follow their principles and defy authorities, governments, factory owners, traders, norms, rules, laws, and sometimes, even their fellow citizens, and it is to defiance that I now wish to turn.

Stephen D'Arcy, in a study on radical twenty-first-century movements that can be understood as descendants of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century citizens I will refer to, has pointed out that a defiant disposition is actualized through multiple tactics:

Defiance is a type of confrontational refusal, which attempts to undermine or weaken the hold of authority, either by symbolic or material means. In its symbolic variant, defiance takes the form of gestures of non-recognition, [...] In its material variant, defiance switches from gestures of nonrecognition to attempts to physically contest the capacity of an authority to impose its rule, [...] In both symbolic and material defiance, however, the basic intent is the same: to undercut the authority of institutions that claim the capacity or the right to dictate to others. (D'Arcy 2011: 29)

Defiance in its various manifestations is indispensable for what Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne described as 'the frictions and striations produced by non-elites', which 'created an unmanageable terrain for global governors rather than a radically reworked world of radical equality or indigenous sovereignty in any simplistic way' (2016: 8). As Burton and Ballantyne suggest, the tactics that actualize defiance rarely lead to a clearly defined outcome, which can be appreciated in easily comprehensible terms, or to the formation of subjectivities and collectivities that governments, corporations, cultural elites or institutions can engage with – quite the contrary.

Moreover precisely because defiant dispositions are so resilient to repression and so difficult to integrate or domesticate, elites, governments and corporations have gone out of their way to produce what Ananya Roy, with reference to twenty-first-century cities, has described as ‘civic governmentality’, an ideal ‘that produces governable subjects and governable spaces through norms of civility and civic virtue. These norms are not necessarily imposed by the activist state; rather, they are produced and disseminated through middle-class politics’ (Roy 2011: 266). Over the next few pages I want to look at two such instantiations of defiant worldings in the nineteenth and twentieth century and then at the ways in which normative, aspirational forms of memorialization expel the defiance from these worldings, posit them as isolated in their uniqueness, as pertaining to the past and integrate them into a performance of middle-class trust into normativity and governance. As one actualization of my own solidarity with these defiant worldings, and as a step towards non-cooperation with the production of civic governmentality by way of cultural practices, I take words written, spoken or chosen by these defiant citizens as signposts in the form of subheadings.

Leave no root of bitterness to spring up and work fresh misery to your children. (Assembly of  
Manchester citizens to Abraham Lincoln, 31 December 1862)

The first ‘world in formation’ – one in which all human beings would be equal, and all forms of slavery abolished – was articulated through an act of symbolic defiance and from a location of entanglement within the powerful forces that worked against the actualization of this world. On 31 December 1862, an assembly of several thousand – predominantly working class – Manchester citizens called by the Union and Emancipation Society endorsed a letter addressed to Abraham Lincoln. The assembly assured Lincoln of their support in what they understood as the Union’s struggle for freedom and equality and, therefore, for the abolition of chattel slavery.<sup>1</sup>

Those who endorsed this letter were deeply entangled in a system of global production and

trade predicated on chattel and wage slavery: that of cottons. As Giorgio Riello (2013) has shown, cotton was a groundbreaking commodity in establishing a system of global trade and production – and this was accomplished through the destruction of alternative forms of trade in Asia by the European cotton industry and eventually, by basing the agricultural and industrial production of cottons on various forms of imperialism and domination. Manchester – and Lancashire – were entangled within this system like few other places in Europe: about a third of the Lancashire population was directly employed in the cotton industry, and the area now known as Greater Manchester accounted for half of Britain’s cotton production (Riello 2013: 228). Popular parlance expressed the union of authoritarian state power and new capitalists in the term ‘King Cotton’. Cotton marked, formed and shaped the culture, the politics and the everyday practices of the city of Manchester, also popularly referred to as Cottonopolis. Most of the cotton that was processed by the Lancashire millworkers came from the slave plantations of the US American Southern States; thus, it was based on chattel slavery. The industrial processing of the raw material, and its conversion into sellable cottons, was based on wage slavery: the cotton industry was extremely labour-intensive, and Lancashire could provide a sufficient work force because non-propertied people in the region were wage dependent since the basis for most other forms of subsistence had been destroyed with the enclosures of the commons and because the cotton industry attracted many Irish people who were dispossessed and displaced by colonization within Europe. Because of their wage dependency, many of these cotton mill operatives lost both work and livelihood once the blockade against the Confederacy started to take effect.

With the letter to Lincoln, those assembled materially defied what they knew themselves as an urban, wage-dependent population to be intensely vulnerable to, and what would put them at the charity of those who had opposed their struggle for freedom and equality at home, famine. This defiance they articulated in the spirit of their own recent radical political struggles, such as the wide-spread support for the abolition of the slave trade, the protests for wider suffrage and against the monopoly on basic food stuff such as corn and bread on St Peter’s Field in 1819, and the

persistent long-term organizing and the uprisings of the Chartists for civil rights and universal suffrage. The authorities had responded to all these struggles with immediate violence and long-term persecution and the way in which the letter is written defies the attempts at intimidation and subjection that are always part of persecution. In their address, they declare themselves ‘citizens’ and express their ‘fraternal sentiments’ to the president and the congress of the United States, thus discursively establishing a relationship of equality between themselves and people in government. The citizens then repudiate racism and endorse the right to self-government for people of all races by commending Lincoln on his reception of ‘ambassadors from the negro republics of Hayti and Liberia, thus forever renouncing the unworthy prejudice which refuses the rights of humanity to men and women on account of their colour’. They praise concrete steps taken to end slavery on paper and in practice, and implore the president to continue on a radical course: ‘While your enthusiasm is aflame, and the tide of events runs high, let the work be finished effectually. Leave no root of bitterness to spring up and work fresh misery to your children’. Finally, they associate themselves with those who pursue freedom on the other side of the Atlantic and dissociate themselves from ‘those who oppose liberty at home’:

Moreover, our interests are identified with yours. We are truly one people, though locally separate. And if you have any ill-wishers here, be assured they are chiefly those who oppose liberty at home, and that they will be powerless to stir up quarrels between us, from the very day in which your country becomes, undeniably and without exception, the home of the free.

The full text of this letter is today not available in any public space in Manchester. One can read only a brief excerpt of it, on the side of a plinth on top of which stands a statue of Abraham Lincoln. The US American president is commemorated for his response to the letter of the Manchester citizens; he thanked them for their support and expressed his appreciation for their sacrifice. The

full text of his letter is also not fully available, except for a brief excerpt that is engraved on the other side of the plinth. In the parts of the letter that are missing from the public space, Lincoln collaborated with her Majesty the Queen and King Cotton in the production of governable subjects. While the Manchester citizens had mentioned the Queen only once and in passing, Lincoln hoped that ‘the demonstration you have given of your desire that a spirit of peace and amity [...] may prevail in the councils of your queen’. He enforces the authority that the Manchester citizens mostly ignored by stating that she is ‘respected and esteemed in your own country only more than she is by the kindred nation which has its home on this side of the Atlantic’. Once he had subordinated the Manchester citizens to the relevant authority figure, Lincoln could re-interpret as cordial relations between governments what had started as a pre-figurative actualization of transatlantic solidarity in the spirit of democracy and equality. Those who designed the inscription reinforce his overwriting of symbolic defiance and the appropriation of solidarity for the purpose of imposing civic governmentality by referring to ‘working people’, thus overwriting the citizens’ self-identification with Lincoln’s interpellation of them. Thus, Lincoln comes to dominate the space of memory and the defiant spirit of the Manchester citizens is acknowledged not on its own terms, but on those of a white man in power who gratefully acknowledged their defiance so that he could harness it for his own purposes.<sup>2</sup>

The People’s History Museum, a mostly autonomous institution that promotes memories of the people’s struggles for democracy in Britain, adopts a very different approach to the memorialization of the same struggle. The museum does have its own memorial. It is situated on one of the corridors, in a location that would make it very difficult to visit the museum without seeing it. The bronze sculpture foregrounds the brave and defiant spirit of the bodies of a slave, an adult worker and a child labourer. All three bodies are visibly in pain, and visibly defy the forces that push them down. In close proximity to the memorial stands one of the machines that workers used to clock in at the factory, to suggest that bodies were dominated by regimes of plantation and factory time. Chattel slavery and wage slavery are commemorated side by side in a horizontal

arrangement, which does not rank one above the other, but invites a reflection on relationality and solidarity between struggles for a kind of freedom that does not imply the slavery of others, and where non-elite subjects of history give and take what is just – no more, no less.

We shall not forget you, and when the olive tree of peace puts forth its leaves again,  
entwined with the laurels of the Spanish Republic's victory – come back. (Dolores Ibárruri,  
La Pasionaria, at the departure of the International Brigades)

Another instantiation of the international homeland of dignity was the multi-layered and multi-faceted involvement of Manchester citizens in the resistance of Spanish Republicans against the coup d'état carried out by General Franco and parts of the army in July 1936. Many European governments – including the British government – decided to not support the forces of the elected government of Spain or any other Republican forces, the Soviet Union supported the Communist elements of the Republican forces and the fascist governments of Italy and Germany supported Franco's fascist forces. Defying their government, many Mancunians actively supported the Spanish Republic from home and abroad. Among those who went to Spain was Madge Addy, who became Head Nurse in the hospital of Uclés; she played a pivotal role for fundraising in Manchester by sending a constant stream of letters and reports, and was the last British nurse to leave Spain. Among the 50 men who joined the armed struggle was Sam Wild, who became the commander of the British Battalion of the International Brigades. Others, among them Bessie Berry and Winifred Horrocks, stayed in Manchester and took on the often grinding, day-to-day labour of autonomous organizing, such as raising funds for food and medical aid; caring for the survivors of war, for example by bringing Basque refugee children to the United Kingdom and caring for them; and getting fellow citizens to see fascism for what it was (and still is), for example by bringing Picasso's *Guernica* to Manchester (Irving 2009; Jackson 2016). In these ways there was a cultural mutuality with the Republican cause, which enriched both everyday practices and the appreciation for

politically committed artworks in Manchester urban culture.

These diverse and concerted efforts from diverse standpoints and diverse roles are documented, commemorated and kept alive by groups such as the International Brigades Memorial Fund and the Association for the UK Basque Children, and independent institutions such as the Working Class Movement Library and the People's History Museum.<sup>3</sup> There is also a memorial plaque in a government-run space, the Manchester City Hall. The memorial for the 'International Volunteers for Freedom' was placed there by Manchester City Council and the Manchester branch of the printworkers' trade union SOGAT in 1983, during the Thatcher government. It is attached to the wall on the ground floor of the building. In carved and polished wood it shows the two hands of international solidarity reaching up, enfolding between their palms and fingers a circle that contains the star of the International Brigades, the clenched fist, and the inscription 'voluntarios internacionales por la libertad'. Placed underneath the circle and between the forearms is a quote from a speech given by Dolores Ibárruri:

Comrades of the International Brigades. Political reasons, reasons of state, the welfare of that same cause for which you offered your blood with boundless generosity, are sending you back, some of you to your own countries and others to forced exile. You can go proudly. You are history. You are legend. You are the heroic example of democracy's solidarity and universality [...] We shall not forget you, and when the olive tree of peace puts forth its leaves again, entwined with the laurels of the Spanish Republic's victory – come back!

When one wants to look at the plaque, one has to walk past the tables and chairs of the café that now surround it, and then read the inscription across the coffee and cake of the patrons seated at the table right underneath the monument. Café staff do their best to accommodate visitors of the memorial, but their personal disposition cannot fundamentally undo the effects of the systemic

quasi-privatization of formerly public space. The international homeland of dignity that people from many places pre-figuratively actualized with diverse tactics in their fight against fascism, that Dolores Ibárruri articulated and that a trade union held fast to during the Thatcher years has quite literally been pushed to the margins.

Honour good men and women. Be courteous to all, bow down to none.

(From *The Socialist Ten Commandments*, printed Bolton, Lancashire, 1912)

Defiance as a ‘type of confrontational refusal, which attempts to undermine or weaken the hold of authority’ (D’Arcy 2013: 29) is bristly to remember, especially for those who wish to govern other people, or for those who want to benefit from those who govern. With a defiant population, those who govern need to become part of processes of building consensus in high-intensity democracies, for which majority decisions are wholly insufficient. Moreover, when defiant populations de-link courtesy from submissive politeness, civic governmentality can no longer be implemented through norms of civility and civic virtue, and when populations stick to egalitarian principles, defiance cannot be coopted to accept pacts with those who do not share such principles.

In this article I have looked at two instantiations of defiant worldings in Manchester, one of which created an ungovernable terrain of the political imagination and one of which turned the city into a terrain for multiple, connected practices of defiance. In the first instance, the defiant worlding has been twice subordinated; in the second instance, it has quite literally been marginalized. In both attempts at submissive memorialization we see norms of civility and civic virtue at work: a ‘validation’ of symbolic civic defiance that is predicated on the selective invisibilization and the subordination of those who defied, and a marginalization of one memorialization of a defiant worlding by surrounding it with a depoliticized, over-busy space of commercial civility. Countering these strategies for creating governable subjects are those who keep this particular specific defiance alive by honouring good people in a spirit that contextualizes defiance within a freedom that must

not imply the slavery of others, where all give and take what is just, and where the difference between courtesy and deferential subordination to rules of politeness is practiced and acknowledged.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> There has been a controversial debate among historians on the positions taken by people in Britain towards the Confederacy, the Union and pro- and anti-slavery. While it is impossible to discuss this in sufficient detail here, it is important to note that Mary Ellison argues that support for the Confederacy was wide-spread among cotton mill operatives in Lancashire, although she argues that not necessarily all those who supported the Confederacy also supported slavery. R. J. M. Blackett, in contrast, argues that support for abolitionism and the Union was wide-spread and consistent among working people, and that it was indeed mostly working people who took that stance; members of the propertied classes tended to support the Confederacy.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Rice and R. J. M. Blackett hold a more positive view of the statue, if only as marking a departure from an even more complete silence on these events. Rice discusses the memorial in the context of other, more contemporary memorials and remembrances of slavery and the slave trade in Britain, and includes in his article an overview of the history of the memorial (2010: 92–96).

<sup>3</sup> The International Brigade Memorial Trust (<http://www.international-brigades.org.uk/>) keeps alive the memory of the people from Britain and Ireland who volunteered to fight in Spain, and of those who supported them from home. The Working Class Movement Library (<https://www.wcml.org.uk/>), originally based on the personal collection of Edmund and Ruth Frow, houses books, pamphlets, prints and other artefacts from working-class struggles and campaigns in Manchester. The WCML and the People's History Museum also document British fascism and the anti-fascist struggle against it. The Association for the UK Basque Children (<http://www.basquechildren.org/>) was set up in 2002 to preserve archival material on the 4000 Children who were evacuated from the Basque Country to the United Kingdom.