

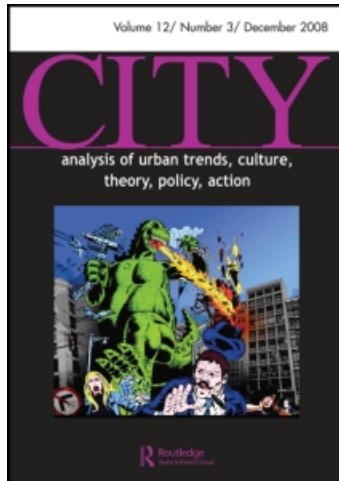
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Debates

The bantustan sublime: reframing the colonial in Ramallah

Nasser Abourahme

Ramallah has emerged as the de facto capital of a truncated Palestinian proto-state. The centralization of economic, political, cultural and recreational activity, the influx of migrants and diasporic returnees, the rise of new middle classes and a relative social openness all signal the possibility of the nucleus of real urbanity. The rhythms and patterns of everyday urban life are palpable; cultural and sub-cultural life are pronounced and women have achieved a relative degree of social and spatial freedom.

Yet Ramallah is a city under siege—encamped and militarily surrounded. It exists in a curious liminality: tethered between indirect colonial occupation and the restless mobilization of local urbanity—neither directly occupied nor free, besieged but somehow vibrant. In its spatialization of new Palestinian wealth and power Ramallah has rewritten the coordinates of local politics, generated new class and professional interests and forged new consumption-based subjectivities. Here, an elite-driven production of space intertwines with and often complements the changing mechanisms and tools of Israeli control by reinforcing a burgeoning ‘regime of normalization’. The city has begun to detach from wider scales of action and concern. Centralization, in this case, means an increased bantustanization and the disintegration of national strategy in return for local and contained micro-freedoms. The self-styled capital of the state-to-come becomes a node in the consolidation of precisely the colonial structures that will indefinitely delay such a realization. In this the most stark and physical manifestation of the singularity of ‘post-colonial colonialism’ a transience, at the heart of the crisis of Palestinian politics, consolidates: reality is suspended; national fates deferred; a solution postponed.

Key words: Ramallah; colonialism; neoliberalism; space; subjectivity; urban development

There is a recent story in the Israeli press that has gone largely unnoticed (Eldar, 2008). The proposed high-speed rail line between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv passes, it seems, at two points through the occupied territories of the West Bank. Over land that would have to be requisitioned. In its colonial conquest of

territory, Israel has at its disposal a complex arsenal of legal-institutional mechanisms that include the discriminatory use of Ottoman, British Mandate and Jordanian laws; in the case of major infrastructural change in the West Bank the mechanism most relied on is a Jordanian law that allows for state-led expropriation of land

for public use. However, there is a catch: the provision of the Jordanian law under which expropriation in the occupied territories is effected is subject to an explicit technicality—expropriation for public use is not legitimate unless the entire population regardless of race, nationality or religion benefits from such an action (B'Tselem, 2002). In a bid to get around this rail engineers and legal advisers from the Ministry of Defence conjured up an astonishing sleight of hand. The submitted plan was changed to have a new station added to it: Ramallah. Hypothetically, in the near future one could board a train in downtown Tel Aviv and get off, approximately half-an-hour later, in downtown Ramallah. Quite staggering for a city that was put under total military curfew for 22 days only six years ago, and is still fenced-in by concrete walling, checkpoints and roving patrols. The irony is striking: a regional rail network designed to fragment Palestinian urban space and tighten Israeli colonial control over the West Bank, ends up using a connection to Ramallah as a means of legitimization. That somewhere in Israeli perception, Ramallah, as place, has shifted is not only testimony to a multi-layered '(re)imagineering' of this city but also reveals just how radically the spatialization of new Palestinian power and wealth has reconfigured and confused the meaning of this place.

Ramallah is a space of ambiguity. A grey zone. A black box. Tethered between indirect colonial occupation and the restless mobilization of local urbanity, between encampment and the haphazard expansion of its urban fabric, it uneasily nestles in a distinctly liminal space—neither directly occupied nor free, besieged but somehow vibrant, neither the capital city of an emergent state nor just another squeezed and battered Palestinian town, rife with new social contradictions but still tentatively held together by a kind of residual 'national' solidarity, not really 'inside' but definitely not 'outside'. In the post-Oslo

morass new modalities of Palestinian 'representation, valorization and articulation'—what Derek Gregory (2004, p. 19) would call 'performances of space'—have emerged, with paradoxical effect, around and through this city (see Figure 1).

Today, Ramallah functions—in real and imaginary ways—as a political and cultural nerve-centre for millions of Palestinians, only a tiny fraction of whom are 'bound' by its built form and with the rest hesitantly and differentially plugged in through the reach of its political and economic institutions and the consumption of its mediatized and percolating imagery and repute (much of it spread by Israeli and international writers, flabbergasted at the thriving café and bar culture). In relative terms, Ramallah embodies an astounding centralization of commercial, cultural, research, administrative and recreational activities. For many of those who reside, work and attempt to reproduce their daily lives in the city, it is a space of increasing potentiality, a space of tolerance and relative freedom. For many of those who don't, it increasingly represents an aspirational space, the new 'promised land' of a cantonized and, more importantly, sealed West Bank. All evidence, anecdotal and otherwise, suggests that no other local conurbation offers as much 'breathing' space for women. It is one of the few places in Arab Palestine where traditional bonds of belonging—and with them the social circumscriptions of family, clan, village—can be, at least partially, dissolved and replaced with place-based, lifestyle and consumption-driven affiliations. It is no surprise that it experiences more in-migration than any other Palestinian city, and even less so that more than half of its current residents were born elsewhere. It is in Ramallah with its myriad of international (and internationalizing) organizations that a kind of diversity, even cosmopolitanism some would (hyperbolically) say, inflects the social atmosphere. In the haunts of the upwardly mobile, bilinguality and macaronic exchanges are commonplace and inebriated conversation

flows and oscillates freely and late into the early hours of the morning. Musicians, intellectuals, artists, filmmakers, activists pepper the place all centrally situated to ride the fundraising 'gravy train' that a distilled, serially imaged and feverishly peddled 'Palestine' has become. In this, the most fetishized of contexts, the art scene, a bit de-radicalized but diverse and markedly contemporary, buzzes and shoots above its weight, and the parameters of a kind of sub-culture, even a counter-culture can be traced.

Even without the social complexity and multiplicity or the critical mass of metropolitan life, there is at times a distinctly urban pace and temporal rhythm in central parts of the city: commerce buzzes, shoppers dart, hipsters loiter, young men ogle, music blares, odours mingle. On Thursday nights, a willed blindness—a kind of urban-veil—descends on the city, blotting out the settlements and walls, the precarity and daily contingency, and even their memory. The urgent vivacity of borrowed time lived to its full is patently, viscerally, palpable. Reality is suspended, abstracted ... postponed as people from all walks of life try to fashion a semblance of

conventionality, a moment of extraordinary ordinariness. For those in the middle classes (myself included), this means a kind of normalcy, a normalcy we associate with the urbanity of those places that most directly configure our coordinates of what is desirable, progressive, free: the cities of Western Europe and North America.

But at what price is normalcy attained in a radically and permanently exceptional reality? What underlying political project, sometimes opaque but often brazen, underwrites and intertwines with the physical expansion and discursive articulation of this city? In whose image is this concrete and virtual palimpsest being forged?

Ramallah is not just the story of new urban identities and possibilities, it is also a story of class, and still more a story of colonialism.

But first a caveat. No city can be reduced to a singular overriding logic, the ebbs and flows of counter-currents, weak as they may become (and in our 'end of history'/post-everything days they are more than often weak) are a part and parcel of urban life. However, it is clear that Ramallah, in multiple ways, has become a crucial node in the



Figure 1 Out with the old: discarded vending machines display some posters of leaders of the *ancien regime*.

consolidation, complexification and rationalization of the occupation. We can go further still: it is this role—mediated through multiple, conscious and unconscious, channels—that ultimately defines what the production of space in this city means.

At the level of formal politics this relationship is unabashed. Ramallah is the base of operations for the truncated fiefdom that the Palestinian Authority (PA) has gleefully accepted in return for taking over the day-to-day policing of Palestinians in the West Bank. If the occupation has been sub-contracted to the Authority then Ramallah is the factory. One academic dubbed it the Green Zone (Massad, 2006). He might have been a bit brusque, but analytically he is not too far off. That this obsequious relationship is becoming more clear to people is evident in the increasingly paranoid, and internally focused, securitization of the city. A coterie of carefully groomed politicians and administrators are anchored in the city and project their grip through mobilizations of coercive police power; as is clear in the bullish but theatrical deployment of various security forces across different points in the city—a sort of political performativity designed as a kind of symbolic embodiment of the sovereignty-less statehood exercised by the PA. Concomitant with this securitization of space, an atmosphere of growing hesitancy ripples in the air these days, and the sketchings of the proto-typical bureaucratic authoritarianism of the Arab political scene are beginning to spatially and forcefully take shape. Surreptitious arrests, torture, beatings, draconian overview are becoming part of the established canon of what some are describing as an evolving police state. In many ways Ramallah the city and Ramallah the authority cannot be distinguished.

At a popular level reality is, naturally (and reassuringly), more fuzzy. That the city displays a kind of collective coma or apraxia is not in its own right that problematic or entirely distinctive. Urban history is littered with examples of cities that ‘cognitively detach’ from wider environs and forge alter-

native links and identity formations in contradistinction to, or at least outside, national or regional configurations. Tel Aviv is something of such a phenomenon, often resentfully dubbed by many Israelis as a ‘bubble’. It has even become catchy to talk about Tel Aviv and Ramallah as parallel nodes of escapism and detachment. Twin bubbles. But this is a sophistic analogy. Ramallah the bubble, Ramallah the enclave is also Ramallah the bantustan, even if it doesn’t always feel like it. Fragmentation, here, is the name of the game not some benign side effect. This is not the story of a capital or main city overtaking or outgrowing its peripheral peers, becoming too cool, too hip for its ugly sisters; this is about active and directed fractalization. It’s a carving up. With the blunt side of a knife. The rest of the West Bank’s cities are besieged and coercively de-modernized, while Israeli mastery (or is it munificence?) and foreign, mainly European, aid keep Ramallah dependently and indifferently ticking along, like a junkie with a ‘benevolent’ dealer. The effect is in part a carefully orchestrated assassination of Arab Jerusalem, which feeds into the wider goals of making any kind of centralized and coordinated national-scale political mobilization impossible. This is nothing new. The derationalization of a coherent Palestinian national political community has always been an overriding imperative of the Israeli colonial regime. That the current movers and shakers, policymakers and powerbrokers in Ramallah passively or actively feed into this logic, however, is a shocking development and a damning indictment.

Perhaps the clearest indicator that Ramallah is given room to flourish is the drawn out construction boom—a banal but brash speculative concrete expansion powered by *laissez-faire* private contractors. At face value, the city, trapped in a sad state of mimesis, looks like a fledgling Amman—where a private-led building bonanza has produced a garish, consumption-heavy and class-fractured urban landscape that signals both the ascendancy of new elite formations and

the city's re-positioning as a nodal point in the imperial restructuring of the region. What first catches the eye in Ramallah is a phenomenal and, at times, chaotic building spree. With the enduring image as the half-finished apartment building that sprouts up almost over night and then takes years to finish; in some places these spectral monoliths fill entire streets, creating instant ghost-neighbourhoods with a built quality disturbingly reminiscent of the proximate and (clearly) overbearing settlements (Figures 2 and 3). It is precisely this relentless kinetic energy that Israeli MK Effi Eitam was picturing when he warned that Palestinians were waging a 'jihad of buildings' against the Jewish state. There is something incredible in the obdurate refusal to stop expanding against all odds, and, moreover, the vista of an active, living, metamorphosing city will provide timely affirmations to peering suburban settler-colonists of the futility of containment and the inexorability of change.

But there is something deeper and much more problematic to the underbelly of this concrete transmogrification, something that

goes beyond the aesthetic or ecological poverty of most of the buildings, and past the corrupt procedures that ease their construction.

It is clear that, on one level, the new urban developments sprouting on the edges of Ramallah are initiating a form of suburbanization meant to incubate new spatial and social structures. Like English-language schools before them, they are intended quite explicitly to 'modernize' or socialize upwardly mobile Palestinians. The Aspen Institute talked of one such project—the eagerly anticipated Rawabi: a 5000 housing unit complex planned just north of Ramallah with full Israeli blessing and Qatari capital and dubbed the 'first planned Palestinian city'—as a way of steering Palestinians into more moderate positions and changing people's voting patterns; Palestinian entrepreneurs have echoed these sentiments—higher living standards and 'happier' living environments they claim will improve stability and the prospects of peace (Holmes, 2009). This is not just the familiar story of



Figure 2 Red-roof echo: a 'ghost-neighbourhood' on the eastern fringe of Ramallah echoes the aesthetic sensibility of the back-grounded settlement of Psagot.



Figure 3 Spectral suburbia: another suburban development, this time on the northern fringe of Ramallah, is mostly uninhabited reflecting a building boom that has surged well ahead of consumer demand.

suburbanization as atomization, it is urban development as political subjectivation writ large. And the middle classes may be just about ready for it.

The current evolution of the built environment is, to a large extent, part of a clear and ostentatious mobilization of a middle class determined to become more socially visible (Taraki, 2008), a class that has little interest in 'old' politics or national projects—a class largely preoccupied with social distinction. With its ascension, new subjectivities premised on consumption as a social value have emerged and, as corollaries, discourses of non-violence and post-national/civil-society politics have been disseminated to reach an almost hegemonic level. It is a class with an outward gaze and strong transnational links. Their networks are broad and their ties multiple. Through the most mobile fractions of this middle class Ramallah is arguably better linked to Amman, the Gulf, Europe and North America than it is to the rest of

the West Bank. Every summer an influx of diasporic Palestinians converge on the city and consolidate the networked physical and experiential ties between it and what is becoming a regional and international matrix. It is this middle class—apolitical, consumption-driven, status-conscious, fetishistic, internationally oriented—that leaves its mark most heavily and legibly on the social spaces of the city. Ammanization here is not just a reference, it is the paragon.

But there is more to this picture. This evolution of urban class structure and the concomitant inequality and socio-economic polarization is symptomatic of wider economic restructuring in which Ramallah is heavily implicated. Ramallah is at the centre of the unpacking of a radical neoliberal project directed at Palestinian economic space and the relations contained therein. The reform plans endorsed by the PA (see the Palestine Reform and Development Plan—PRDP) make this abundantly clear. Already a smattering of

entrepreneurs are tied into this evolving regime and stand to make serious gains—as was ineluctably clear in the rapturous reception with which local businessmen greeted the Palestine Investment Conference in 2008. Beyond the customary voodoo that everywhere underpins the panacea of economic liberalization, this restructuring project is quite simply about the conjugation or coupling of colonial occupation and economic growth; coloniality cloaked and diffused through the seemingly apolitical and neutral expansion of (neo)liberalized economic relations. Take, for example, the case of the proposed, and much touted, industrial zones where Palestinian, Israeli and international capital are set to exploit a reserve army of Palestinian labour—already pauperized by Israeli closures—in totally unregulated, union-free conditions. While previously Israel has had to ease movement restrictions in order to exploit Palestinian labour, this model of ‘development’ is structurally predicated on the occupation’s twin strategies of military pacification and spatial control. A salient example of this concatenation is the case of the Jenin Industrial Estate which will be built on land confiscated for the ‘buffer zone’ around the Wall and whose northern border will actually be formed by the Wall itself (Hanieh, 2008). The industrial zones, thus, serve not only to normalize the occupation regime but in effect complement Israeli policies of impoverishment by rewarding Israeli capital with access to higher rates of return. Neoliberalization in Palestine means not just spiralling inequality but a stealthy consolidation and complexification of the colonial order. This is the hidden equation that underwrites Benjamin Netanyahu’s ‘economic peace’.

There is a paradox that is critical here. It is that the closure, and the ensuing centralization of Ramallah, is precisely what has allowed for the increase in the fortunes and social status of so many of the city’s middle and upper classes, for the emergence of new elites. The point is, and herein lies the tragedy, that it becomes in the interests of different social fractions to protect and protract

the status quo. Entrepreneurs, intelligentsia, think tanks, research centres, media outlets, official bureaucracy and policymakers form a kind of plexiform web embedded in Ramallah the enclave, not Ramallah the city. This is a city that purports to lead a nation yet offers no resistance or even alternatives to US and Israeli designs for the area. Quite the contrary, what is on offer, one way or another, is wholesale endorsement. Critical currents exist but are decentred and marginalized. No major alternative project is being mooted, not from the intelligentsia or from the arts and certainly not from the political establishment.

At heart what is emerging is an unchecked process of subject (re)formation—a desubjectivation–subjectivation synthesis—one that is premised on the trauma and shock of the radical violence and the desecration and dismantling of national and civil institutions unleashed during the Second Intifada. The power of shock writes Naomi Klein (2007) has been used to ‘clean the slate’, to ‘de-pattern’ societies and individuals before their ‘re-making’. In Ramallah shock therapy has laid the ground for a reformulation of Palestinian subjecthood built atop the debris of defeat and moulded through the twin pillars of statecraft–governmentality (and barely concealed repression) and commodity spectacle–lifestyle choice—this is the affective politics at the root of General Dayton’s ‘new Palestinian men’.¹

Still, restructuring, fragmentation and bantustanization are rationalized, (and implicitly endorsed) by some, as platforms or trade-offs for some kind of urban (and secular) modernity. This is illusory. The birth of a ‘real city’ here is a chimera. The radical anonymity—being a stranger in the middle of the crowd—which most critically marks urban modernity does not exist. Nor do the fluid and turbulent social dynamics that throw people and buildings into maelstroms of relentless renewal, that shatter established and sacrosanct norms, that turn existing givens upside down, that ‘melt all that is solid into air’; the city does not live the kind of

faceless perpetual becoming that characterizes the capitalist metropolises of our age. ‘Creative destruction’ in Ramallah is still most clearly expressed in the occasional, paroxysmal spatial interventions of the Israeli war machine not by capital unbound and new liberated social sensibilities. In fact most times there is a prosaic stillness and stubborn provinciality to the place; traditional bonds are still salient and the public-private (or bourgeois-citizen) split at best still embryonic, a public space, never mind a public sphere, is hard to pin down. Ramallah is not Cairo or even Beirut. Ramallah is as parochial as Amman will always be. Certainly, Ramallah is urbanizing, but in partial, deformed and highly costly ways. It is not at all clear that Ramallah represents a revival of the nascent urban modernity abruptly aborted by the Zionist colonial project in 1948 in Palestine’s coastal cities. This is not to say that Ramallah does not offer a space of relative freedom and open-

ness that is clearly in demand, nor is it a call for some kind of atavistic return to previous, more clear, rhythms and movements of socio-spatial life. Quite the opposite.

The right to normalcy, to the reproduction of daily life, to difference—all of which the occupation targets—are rights worth fighting for. As is the right to the trappings, potentialities and contradictions of urban modernity, no matter how intellectually problematic these can be. But beware the trade-off. Here, today, urbanization cannot be divorced from colonialism. Ramallah (if not its refugee camps) is spared the nightly incursions of places like Nablus and Jenin for a reason; if it is given room to breathe then to be sure there is a price to pay. Local and contained micro-freedoms are ultimately paid for with the disintegration of national strategy. Uncritical ingestion and passive adaptation have numbed us to the strategic profoundness of current change. Our critical faculties are emaciated. We are



Figure 4 Stuck between then and now: a traditional mural is juxtaposed against billboard advertising. Most expressive form in Ramallah seems captured either by over-signified, folkloric motifs or de-politicizing, consumerist spectacle.

fragmented in space, disconnected from place and static in time.

Normalcy carries too high a price to pay, if it means accepting the status quo. If it means swallowing an ultra-policed bantustan marked by social inequality and new camp-city polarizations; political apathy and the gaudy expression of elite supremacy; 'remote control occupation' and a co-production of colonial order. Even if this all comes with some of the localized accoutrements of actual cities.

These reflections are offered, not as distanced observation, but in part as the self-critique of an inhabitant of this space. And, in part, as a way of polemically stimulating an urgent conversation that can begin to pose some necessary questions: Can the energy and centrality of Ramallah, in large measure an effect of its isolation, be subverted to link and connect? How can this city and its relational dynamics be recast, so as to open up other potential urban narratives and transcend zero-sum relationality? Rather than being an arena for the percolation of statist power can it become a node in the evolution of urban networks of regulation that are designed contra to central(izing) power? At the same time how can this space reposition itself within the national question, still the critical frame of reference and scalar level for anti-colonial struggle? Can we (re)discover contemporary expressive form that is not jingoistic, folkloric and sloganeered and still conceptually rooted in the actualities of life under 'late colonialism' (see Figure 4)? Where can we begin to locate a local reflexive process of critique?

In a famous passage, French philosopher Henri Lefebvre proclaimed that space is much more than an object or static form, it is active both as instrument and goal, means and end. The production of space, he argued, involves the most fundamental processes of social life, including the experience and representation of place and the construction of identity. How we plan and articulate Ramallah has much to do with how we construct and articulate ourselves.

The design of this city and its relation to Palestine's other urban spaces is inexorably linked with, not only how we confront an inescapable 'colonial present', but also with what kind of society we end up living and dying in.

The railway may never be built; or more likely it will never reach Ramallah. Certainly Israel will continue to use differentially accessed infrastructure to 'splinter', to borrow Stephen Graham's term, Palestinian conurbations (2001; see also Graham and Marvin, 2001). The question that remains is whether Ramallah will reinforce the colonial-neoliberal logic of space and entrench this particular brand of 'post-colonial colonialism', or whether the city will use the inevitable openings that colonial performativity leaves behind to force genuine 'newness', to manifest an alternative political project in the interstices between colonial design and the failure of a national elite.

Note

- 1 Lieutenant General Keith W. Dayton is US Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority and is in charge of overseeing the training of Palestinian security forces. In his keynote speech at the Washington Institute's 2009 Soref Symposium he made a series of remarks about the 'creation' of new Palestinian men (www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/DaytonKeynote.pdf).

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CITY

VOLUME 13 NUMBER 4 DECEMBER 2009

EDITORIAL	379
Articles	
CITIES AS BATTLESPACE: THE NEW MILITARY URBANISM Stephen Graham	383
TRANSPARENT CITIES: RE-SHAPING THE URBAN EXPERIENCE THROUGH INTERACTIVE VIDEO GAME SIMULATION Rowland Atkinson and Paul Willis	403
NEO-URBANISM IN THE MAKING UNDER CHINA'S MARKET TRANSITION Fulong Wu	418
PROBING THE SYMPTOMATIC SILENCES OF MIDDLE-CLASS SETTLEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF GENTRIFICATION PROCESSES IN GLASGOW Kirsteen Paton	432
URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SMALL PLACES: SLOW CITIES AS SITES OF ACTIVISM Sarah Pink	451
'Cities for People, Not for Profit': background and comments	
EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION	466
PETER MARCUSE AND THE 'RIGHT TO THE CITY': INTRODUCTION TO THE KEYNOTE LECTURE BY PETER MARCUSE Bruno Flierl	471
RESCUING THE 'RIGHT TO THE CITY' Martin Woessner	474
THE NEW MIKADO? TOM SLATER, GENTRIFICATION AND DISPLACEMENT Chris Hamnett	476
CITIES FOR PEOPLE, NOT FOR PROFIT—FROM A RADICAL-LIBERTARIAN AND LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE Marcelo Lopes de Souza	483
CITIES AFTER OIL (ONE MORE TIME) Adrian Atkinson	493

Debates

THE BANTUSTAN SUBLIME: REFRAMING THE COLONIAL IN RAMALLAH

Nasser Abourahme

499

Scenes & Sounds

CHICAGO FADE: PUTTING THE RESEARCHER'S BODY BACK INTO PLAY

Loïc Wacquant

510

Reviews

THINKING THE URBAN: ON RECENT WRITINGS ON PHILOSOPHY AND THE CITY

Philosophy and the City: Classical to Contemporary Writings, edited by

Sharon M. Meagher

Global Fragments: Globalizations, Latinamericanisms, and Critical Theory,

by Eduardo Mendieta

Reviewed by David Cunningham

517

Endpiece

IS IT ALL COMING TOGETHER? THOUGHTS ON URBAN STUDIES AND THE PRESENT

CRISIS: (16) COMRADES AGAINST THE COUNTERREVOLUTIONS: BRINGING

PEOPLE (BACK?) IN

Bob Catterall

531

Volume Content and Author Index

551