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William T. Stead's Use of Published Dialogues in Modern British Politics

Catéchismes, interviews, séances, romans. William T. Stead et l'usage des dialogues publiés dans la politique britannique moderne

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The Link between the "New Journalism" and the Publication of Dialogues

- ¹ William Thomas Stead was one of the leading British journalists of the late 19th and early 20th century. As an editor of the London newspaper *Pall Mall Gazette* (1883-1890) he gained notoriety by launching press campaigns and creating scandals which rocked British society. Consequently, many works on Stead try to focus on his role in the "New Journalism" movement, neglecting him as an eminent social critic of his time.¹ In this essay, however, I want to give an impression of how Stead used political catechisms in national moral crises and to shed light on a striking similarity between political catechisms and three other dialogical forms used by Stead to address a wider public: interviews, spiritual séances and novels. To illustrate Stead's very specific attempts to shape politics and morality of modern Britain by publishing dialogues, I will take a closer look at three historical events :

- 1. His infamous interview with General Charles Gordon in 1884 which led to "Chinese Gordon" being sent to the Sudan to defend Khartoum against a Muslim rebellion led by the Mahdi.
- 2. Stead's political catechism entitled "Candidates of Cain" from 1900 by which he protested against the Boer War in South-Africa.
- 3. A spiritual séance with the ghost of the late British Prime Minister William Gladstone, organised by Stead in 1909 to obtain the views of the "Grand Old Man" of British Liberalism on the constitutional crisis over Lloyd George's "People's Budget". By the end of the 19th

century increases in literacy and consumerism led to government's increasingly using journalism to elicit public support.

- 2 William Stead had the perfect ideas to match these historical changes. He was one of the leading figures of the so-called "New Journalism". One of his contributions to the emergence of popular mass media was a clear indexing system, most newspapers had had a quite chaotic structure before, headlines for articles which were now usually signed by the authors, pictures illustrating the news stories and, particularly, the introduction of interviews. What might seem to us now as some of the most normal things in journalism was then scandalised as an unheard "Americanization" of the quality press.² As for the contents of his journalism, Stead was, as Ray Boston put it, a man with a mission, a messianic newspaper editor, or, as Stead himself described his role modestly, "God's weapon on earth".³
- 3 Born in 1849 as a son of a congregational minister, he became editor of the daily newspaper *Northern Echo* in Darlington at the age of 22. On recommendation of Prime Minister Gladstone he advanced soon to the position of Assistant Editor of the prestigious London newspaper *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1880 and became its sole editor in 1883. After having left the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1890, he founded several magazines like the *Review of Reviews*, consecrated himself to the international peace movement, publishing the book *The United States of Europe*, and was sent to the international peace conferences at the Hague. In 1912, Stead sailed from Southampton for New York on the "Titanic" to address the Congress on "Universal Peace" and was among the 1600 people that sank with the ship. Despite having a first class ticket, witnesses claim that he was the one that instructed the orchestra to play farewell songs until all women and children had left the ship.⁴ William Stead is still seen as the prototype of investigative "New Journalism", actively making news and rousing public opinion against political and social grievances since he livened up his newspapers with press campaigns, social crusades and scandals, e.g. the "Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon" scandal about child prostitution in 1885, the "Truth about the Navy" campaign in 1884 or the "Chinese Gordon for the Sudan" campaign.

Interviews on Imperialistic Adventures

- 4 In 1881, a former Egyptian official and slave trader, Mohammed Ahmed, declared himself to be the "Mahdi", a kind of Muslim messiah, and launched a religious-nationalist uprising against the Egyptian rule in Sudan. Having defeated an Egyptian army under British command in 1883, the government of Prime Minister Gladstone was under pressure from all sides to avenge this insult to Britain and re-conquer the Sudan. Gladstone himself was highly reluctant to any further adventure there but his own cabinet was divided. It was, as we know now, Reginald Brett, then assistant to Lord Hartington, the Secretary of the War Office, who organised a collaboration between the imperialists in government and William Stead's *Pall Mall Gazette*.⁵ General Gordon, the man who was to be the central figure in the Sudanese drama, has been described as "perhaps the finest specimen of the heroic Victorian type – a Bible taught Evangelical, fearless, tireless, incorruptible, following the call of duty through fields of desperate adventure". At that time, he was already something like a popular hero in England since he had been given command of the Imperial Chinese army in 1863 and managed to extinguish the Taiping Rebellion.⁶ In January 1894, in the midst of Stead's Sudan

campaign, “Chinese Gordon”, arrived in England to prepare for his next colonial adventure: Serving the Belgian King Leopold in his Congo Free State. Stead lost no time in agreeing on an interview, clearly trying to convince the British public of the necessity of the Sudanese adventure.⁷

Gordon: “I am convinced that it is an entire mistake to regard the Mahdi as in any sense a religious leader: he personifies popular discontent. ... The movement is not religious, but an outbreak of despair ... The danger is altogether of a different nature. It arises from the influence which the spectacle of a conquering Mahommedan Power, established close to your frontiers, will exercise upon the population which you govern. ... Placards have been posted in Damascus calling upon the population to rise ... it is quite possible that if nothing is done the whole of the Eastern Question may be re-opened by the triumph of the Mahdi.”

Stead: “But if we have not an Egyptian army to employ in the service, and if we must not send an English force, what are we to do?”

Gordon: “You must either surrender absolutely to the Mahdi or defend Khartoum at all hazards. The latter is the only course which ought to be entertained. There is no serious difficulty about it. The Mahdi’s forces will fall to pieces of themselves; but if in a moment of panic orders are issued for the abandonment of the whole of the Eastern Soudan a blow will be struck against the security of Egypt and the peace of the East, which may have fatal consequences.”

Stead: “There is only one thing that we can do. We cannot send a regiment to Khartoum, but we can send a man who on more than one occasion has proved himself more valuable in similar circumstances than an entire army. Why not send Chinese Gordon with full powers to Khartoum, to assume absolute control of the territory, to treat with the Mahdi, to relieve the garrisons, and do what can be done to save what can be saved from the wreck in the Soudan?”

- 5 On his return to London that night, Stead dictated this interview with General Gordon to his secretary, and the following morning it was checked by a Captain Brocklehurst, who had been present during the interview. Brocklehurst was intermediary between Stead and Reginald Brett, the organiser of the press support for the imperialistic government faction. “A truly marvellous effort of memory”, Captain Brocklehurst later wrote to Stead’s daughter Estelle, “for Gordon talked very fast and your father did not take a note”.⁸ Stead’s publication of the interview on January 9, 1884, with a special leader on the first page “Chinese Gordon for the Soudan” was a journalistic scoop quickly taken up by all British newspapers and a memorable moment in the history of journalism for it had the desired results: Gladstone and his foreign secretary Lord Granville bowed to the press clamour and reluctantly agreed to send Gordon to the Sudan with very vague instructions.⁹ Having made it to Karthoum through the gigantic armies of the Mahdi, Gordon turned again into the “man on the spot”: He ignored orders from London and Cairo and organised the defence of Khartoum with a view to force the British government to send a relief army that would also re-conquer the Sudan – under Gordon’s leadership. When, after numerous delays, a relief army finally reached Khartoum on January 28, 1885, they found the city had been overrun two days earlier and that during the ensuing massacre Gordon had been killed and decapitated.¹⁰
- 6 Despite the political and military disaster of Gordon’s Sudan adventure, Stead now saw himself as one of the most important members of the “Fourth Estate of the Realm”, the Press. In the first six months of 1884, following the sensational Gordon interview, the *Pall Mall Gazette* ran no less than 80 interviews with such diverse personalities as Edward Benson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the American economist Henry George and the French writer Emile Zola. Stead returned quite often to his favourite

journalistic topic “the interview and its values”, calling it “the most interesting method of extracting the ideas of the few for the instruction and entertainment of the many which has yet been devised by man... Many notable men are more or less inarticulate, especially with the pen, and to them the intervention of the Interviewer is almost as indispensable as that of an interpreter is to an Englishman in China”. The means, Stead said, to convey the talk of the “best men” to the public had been discovered “with all humility, in the interview”.¹¹

Catechisms against Wars

- 7 Some years later, in 1900, Stead had turned from jingoist imperialist to one of the leading figures of the international peace movement.¹² Yet his belief in being “God’s weapon on earth” had not been shaken at all. It was therefore a deep moral disturbance to him when the British government declared war on the Boer republics of South Africa in 1899 and, as he put it, “let hell loose – by order” against white people of Calvinistic faith in the Bible. Stead responded to this moral crisis by publishing the political catechism *The Candidates of Cain. A Catechism for the Constituencies* in order to influence the British General Election in 1900. The following extracts from the catechism might illustrate both Stead’s moral and rhetorical strategy and the heated public discourse.¹³

– “What is your contention?

In one word this: That to insist on an appeal to the sword rather than an appeal to arbitration is a crime against civilisation and Christianity, the authors of which ought never to receive the vote of any civilised man... A Government which defiantly refuses to refer a dispute to Arbitration in order to appeal to the Sword, is an enemy of the Human Race, and all who support it are Candidates of Cain.

– Was arbitration possible in the present case?

It was not only possible but easy and obvious. The dispute between us and President Kruger was one of all others most suited for reference to a Court of Arbitration...

– Where is the evidence of that?

In the 16th Article of the Convention of Arbitration ratified by Her Majesty’s Government at the Hague immediately before the war began and confirmed by them and all the other powers just as it was closing. ... We have incurred the hatred and contempt of all European nations; we have alienated the loyalty of the majority of our own subjects in Cape Colony; we have sacrificed our moral position among the nations, and we have created a blood-feud inextinguishable for generations, between the two races which inhabit South Africa.

– And what have we gained?

We have succeeded in demonstrating at this enormous cost of blood and treasure that an army of 250.000 trained British soldiers, equipped by the richest Government in the world, is actually capable, after eleven months hard fighting, of defeating 40.000 untrained farmers, and of overrunning their country.

– What is the chief peril in the way of peace?

The abandonment of the control of international policy to the man in the street, whose ignorance and vanity are played upon by the unscrupulous demagogues who pander to his passions and inflame his prejudices in the daily Press.

– What is our greatest need at the present moment?

The awakening of the moral sense of the nation, the return to sanity and the substitution of sobriety of judgement and careful knowledge of facts in place of the drunken debauch through which we have just been passing.

– What was Mr. Gladstone’s view on the subject of the annexation of the Transvaal?

...He said: There is no strength to be added to our country by governing the

Transvaal; it is a country where we have chosen most unwisely – I am tempted to say insanely – to place ourselves...”

- 8 Not being blind to contemporary Realpolitik, Stead fundamentally questioned the morality of the Boer War. The British electors, he argued, were still religious enough “as to believe that coldblooded conspiracy to slay one’s neighbour in order to seize his vineyard or his gold mine is not exactly the highest of Christian virtues”. “There are many”, he said, “who will be scandalised at this attempt to describe in the plain and simple language of the common people the unspeakable infamies of which our rulers have been guilty in South Africa.” The ruler most responsible to him was Mr Joseph Chamberlain, then British foreign secretary, whose involvement in the infamous Jameson Raid and the beginning of the Boer War Stead pointed out again and again. “Can any language”, Stead asked, “be too strong, any condemnation too severe for such treachery and crime?” What might be for the reader of his catechism, Stead said, “an utterly incredible calumny is to me, alas, known only too well to be a plain statement of the absolute truth....And some day all the world will know it.” The British voters had to stop the “international highway robbery” of the empire and to turn the Liberal party back into “that great instrument of human progress” it used to be under Gladstone.¹⁴

Séances with Political Ghosts

- 9 It was nine years later, in 1909, Gladstone had been dead for more than 10 years, that a constitutional crisis emerged over Lloyd George’s “People’s budget” which introduced Old Age Pensions for the first time and was the foundation of the Welfare State in Britain. The budget was blocked by the Conservatives in the House of Lords and the whole country was divided over the constitutional conflict between the Lords and the House of Commons. Now, Gladstone’s budgets were remembered as masterpieces of financial wisdom and Liberal thought. Britain was on the eve of a general election again “and Mr. Stead”, one of his spiritual adherents recalled, “formed a powerful focus for the forces then drawn earthward by sympathetic vibration”. The liberal newspaper *Daily Chronicle* facetiously invited Stead to obtain the views of Gladstone on the crisis. Acting with what some regarded as almost suicidal indifference to common sense, Stead called the bluff and organised a séance to do just that, proving that there is sometimes just a thin line between citation and evocation of a famous historical figure.¹⁵ Accordingly, a small circle met and the medium, a Mr. King, transmitted a communication between William Stead and William Gladstone’s ghost. The shocked British public learnt on the following Monday morning from the *Daily Chronicle* that an effort had been made to “interview the august shade of the great Liberal statesman”. Stead announced that in fact he had been in touch with the “Grand Old Man”, who sounded as though he were speaking through a faulty long-distance telephone.¹⁶

“What course he would advise the Liberal party to adopt”, Stead asked Gladstone’s ghost, “if a collision arose between the Lords and the Commons over the Budget.”

“I can only give you”, Mr. Gladstone’s ghost answered, “my broadest and widest opinion on the general principles at stake ... the battle when it is fought will be upon the one side an appeal for the primitive rights of man as man, and on the other by an appeal to the most sordid, the most self-interested, the most materialistic motives by which human nature in its baser aspects can be tempted and seduced. ... And in the event of our party being restored to office, my own action would have been ... to urge the creation of a sufficient number of life peerages to override the static element of determined and hostile opposition on the

part of the House of Lords. ... For the greater the extent to which you make it evident to the nation that is a battle – a hand-to-hand struggle between powerful class monopoly and the evolution of the human reason, between Privilege and Justice – the more certainly do you strengthen your cause; ... If, however, you must inevitably fight, then stand firm as in the days of '76 and onward, and may God be with the issue! ...”¹⁷

- 10 According to the *Times*, one of Gladstone’s grandsons when delivering a public speech at the Liverpool Reform Club was, “filled with resentment to think that the great causes that underlay the Budget should be thought to need substantiation from such a farcical source”. Naturally, Gladstone would have been on the side of the people and not on the side of the peers. But to come to these conclusions one did not need to “rely on necromancy, but on the living necessities of the democracy”. The public, however, was also informed by Stead that Gladstone once even accepted honorary membership of the “Society for Psychical Research”¹⁸ saying: “It is by far the most important work that is being done in the world.”¹⁹ Stead was not very troubled by his critics scandalising this unheard abuse of metaphysical belief. “Those”, he criticised the religious belief of his contemporaries, “[who] profess themselves to be immeasurably shocked by the suggestion that instead of spending eternity in dignified idleness, Mr. Gladstone still feels a keen interest in the welfare of our country.”²⁰

Telling Stories: Published Dialogues in Modern Politics

- 11 Publishing catechisms, interviews and séances, I argue, Stead made use of the dialogical form to convey answers to fundamental moral and political questions of his time. While constructing a perfectly subjective point of view, interviewer, catechist and spiritualist can still pretend to be a medium of objective knowledge, “absolute truth...and someday all the world will know it”, as Stead put it. Furthermore, having an intuitive appeal to readers, dialogues are more entertaining than monologues because they play with a certain candour, provide for revelation of sensations, moral education and political claims in one go. As well, published dialogues, especially political catechisms, had a long tradition in political propaganda. It was for this reason that Stead was usually not seen by his contemporaries as an eccentric madman. He was rather described as an outstanding pamphleteer in the tradition of Daniel Defoe and such democrats as Thomas Paine and William Cobbett.²¹ Albeit he never hesitated using the press for political and moral purposes, Stead was at the same time very much part of the intricate web that connected politics with journalism. His life-long alliance with Reginald Brett, later Lord Esher, the grey eminence of British Politics, sheds new light on the sometimes surprisingly close relationship between social critics and professional politicians.²² Still, Stead seriously believed that a journalist like him could and should exercise as much political power as a cabinet minister, even the king himself. “I now see”, he claimed, “that I am called to found for the Nineteenth Century a City of God which will be to the age of the printing press and the steam engine what the Catholic Church was to the Europe of the 10th century... It will be father confessor, spiritual director, moral teacher, political conscience... It will be the mother of mankind.” What he hereby envisioned was the “first step to a world-wide journalistic civil church”.²³ There was even a fourth dialogical form through which Stead tried to gain influence on contemporary politics and morality: William Stead’s novels, all based on dialogues. He wrote several, including *The Splendid Paupers* and *Blastus, the King’s Chamberlain* which

were, as one of his female admirers put it, “in fact sparkling political dialogues strung together on the slenderest of plots. I suggested that those who read it as a story would skip the political dialogues, and those who read it as a political manifesto would skip the story”.²⁴

NOTES

1. Frederic Whyte, *The Life of W.T. Stead*, 2 vls. (London 1925). The best work on Stead's journalistic career is still Raymond L. Schults, *Crusader in Babylon. W.T. Stead and the Pall Mall Gazette* (Lincoln 1972). A great digital resource for Stead's newspapers articles and pamphlets is www.attackingthediabol.co.uk
2. Schults, *Crusader in Babylon*, 29-65.
3. Ray Boston, *W.T. Stead and Democracy by Journalism*, in: Joel H. Wiener (ed.), *Papers for the Millions. The New Journalism in Britain, 1850s to 1914* (New York and London 1986), 91-106, quotation from 93.
4. Victor Pierce Jones, *Saint or Sensationalist? The Story of W.T. Stead* (Chichester 1988), 81.
5. Joseph O. Baylen, *Politics and the New Journalism. Lord Esher's Use of the Pall Mall Gazette*, in Joel H. Wiener (ed.), *Papers for the Millions. The New Journalism in Britain. 1850s to 1914* (New York and London), 107-143.
6. Quoted in Schults, *Crusader in Babylon*, 69-70. For a critical account of Charles Gordon and the Khartoum adventure see Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London and New York 2002), 221-305, first published in 1918. Gordon had been British governor of the Sudan in the 1880s as well.
7. Extracts from the front-page story by W.T. Stead “Chinese Gordon for the Soudan” and the interview on page 11-12, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 January 1884.
8. Schults, *Crusader in Babylon*, 72.
9. Baylen, Stead and Lord Esher, in Wiener (ed.), *The New Journalism in Britain*, 111.
10. Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, 221-305.
11. Schults, *Crusader in Babylon*, 86-87.
12. Pierce Jones, *Saint or Sensationalist*, 72-78.
13. W.T. Stead, *The Candidates of Cain. A Catechism for the Constituencies* (London 1900).
14. All quotations from W.T. Stead, *The Candidates of Cain. A Catechism for the Constituencies* (London 1900).
15. An account of the Gladstone séance is given by one of Stead's spiritual adherents. Edith K. Harper, Stead. *The Man. Personal Reminiscences* (London 1918), 179-197.
16. Pierce Jones, *Saint or Sensationalist*, 90-93.
17. Extract quoted from the sequel to the “Gladstone interview”. Facing public outrage, the “Daily Chronicle” refused to publish this second séance. Harper, Stead. *The Man*, 185-187.
18. Then the lobby for Spiritualism in Britain.
19. *The Times*, 4 November 1909, page 10.
20. Harper, Stead. *The Man*, 193.
21. Joel H. Wiener, *The New Journalism in Britain*, XV.
22. See the excellent essay by Joseph O. Baylen, “Stead and Lord Esher”, in Wiener (ed.), *The New Journalism in Britain*, p. 107-142.

23. Stead even negotiated in dead earnest with his long-time friend Cecil Rhodes to finance such a socio-moral enterprise, starting with a daily newspaper that needn't be sold anymore but would be sent to every citizen for free. Schults, *Crusader in Babylon*, 248-55.

24. Harper, *Stead. The Man*, 193-194. William T. Stead, *Blastus, the King's Chamberlain. A Political Romance* (London 1898), 150-151.