

Power in Politics  
and Academia in  
Jonathan Coe's Novels



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By

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# CONTENTS

Foreword and Acknowledgements .....	viii
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction	
1.1 Explaining the Use of the Concept of Politics and Academia.....	5
1.2 Critical Reception of Jonathan Coe’s Work.....	5
1.3 Realism or Postmodernism?.....	10
1.4 <i>Text, Context</i> and <i>Power</i> in Recent Literary and Cultural Studies .....	11
1.5. <i>Text</i> and <i>Context</i> in Jonathan Coe’s Fiction.....	13
1.6 Thesis / Intention .....	14
1.7 Corpus.....	15
1.8 Structure of the Book .....	18
1.9 <i>Power, Ideology, Resistance</i> – Theoretical Framework.....	20
1.10 Limitations of my Approach .....	36
Chapter Two .....	37
The Dismantling of the Social-Democratic Consensus in the 1970s	
2.1. British Cultural Studies and the Marxist <i>Zeitgeist</i> of the 1970s....	38
2.2 Ideological Distance between the Time of the Narration and the Time of the Narrator in <i>The Rotters’ Club</i> .....	43
2.3 Britain’s “Particular Situation” within the <i>Marxist Zeitgeist</i> in <i>The Rotters’ Club</i> .....	45
2.4 The Dismantling of the Dominant Discourse of the Social- Democratic Consensus .....	48
2.5 The Liberal-Democratic Ideology – Benefits and Limitations.....	54
2.6 “Pastoral Power” in <i>The Rotters’ Club</i> .....	57
2.7 Sites of Resistance .....	58
2.8 Inclusive, Community-Based Ideologies versus Individualistic, Fragmentarian Ideologies – The “Socialist Dream” versus Racism and Fascism.....	90
2.9 Social Resistance in the 1970s .....	115

Chapter Three .....	138
Thatcherism	
3.1 “Thatcherism” – an ideology proper? .....	138
3.2 Ethical Relativism and Ideological Opportunism .....	147
3.3. The Role of the ISA Represented by the Media in Maintaining and Disseminating the Dominant Ideology.....	155
3.4 Intentional Unpower .....	170
3.5 <i>The Regressive Path</i> from the <i>Intentional Unpower</i> Stage in <i>The Accidental Woman</i> and <i>A Touch of Love</i> .....	207
3.6 The Human Toll: Human Life – a Commodity in the “ <i>Quality is Quantifiable</i> ” Equation .....	220
Chapter Four .....	227
“Post-Millennial” Ideologies	
4.1 <i>Globalism</i> as the New Ideology – Introducing the Concept .....	227
4.2 <i>Blairism</i> and the “ <i>Third Way</i> ” – The New Dominant Discourse.....	234
4.3 The New “Resistance” .....	241
4.4 <i>Fascism</i> in Post-Millennial Times .....	244
4.5 No Longer the “Centre of the Earth” .....	246
4.6 Anti-War Political Resistance.....	249
4.7 Power Elites and Intensive Transformation of Social Values into Commodities .....	254
4.8 The Socio-Political “Causality Chain”.....	256
4.9 “Capitalism really has conquered everything” .....	259
4.10 Power, Media, Hyperreality – the ISA of the New Ideology .....	266
4.11 <i>Intentional Unpower</i> as a Generalised Modus Vivendi in the New “ <i>Slippery Matrix of Beliefs</i> ” .....	270
4.12 The Frail Cultural Resistance against Political “Non-Entities” ....	285
4.13 Societal Resistance and Solidarity in the Context of “Globalism” .....	289
4.14 An Individual Response other than <i>Intentional Unpower</i> .....	295
Chapter Five .....	298
The New Ideology of “Globalism”	
5.1 The New Consumerist <i>Zeitgeist</i> – Old versus New Generations....	298
5.2 A Culture of Blame or a Concrete “Causality Chain”?.....	304
5.3 Post-Resistance in the Context of the New Ideology of Globalism.....	309
5.4 The Dominant Political Discourse – Banished from the Text?....	312

5.5 Beyond a Class Society – Social Fluidity and the Lost Guarantees of <i>Academia</i> .....	313
5.6 Another Form of Regressive Path from the <i>Intentional</i> <i>Unpower</i> Stage – Building an Entire Society on “Air” .....	318
Conclusion.....	325
Bibliography.....	339
Appendix - List of Publications.....	355

## FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*“For the sake of humanity, we’ve all got to change our tune.  
The profit motive has to play second fiddle.  
It’s no use the band just playing on while the Titanic sinks.  
Somebody’s got to start rearranging the deck chairs.”* (Coe: 2010: 95)

The present book has a long and sinuous history, which spans over five years of research, many countries and experiences. It was completed in January 2011 and it represented my PhD thesis.

Looking over the thesis, in September 2017, I cannot help but notice how little has changed on the global political scene from the atmosphere evoked in *The Closed Circle*, Jonathan Coe’s novel of 2004. On the contrary, recent political events seem to generate an eerie feeling of a “copy-pasted” atmosphere from Coe’s socio-political fiction, a weird loop in which humanity seems to have revolved complacently for almost two decades now, in a generalised state of apathy and defeatism for which I have coined the term *“intentional unpower”*.

Thus, without any effort on my part, it seems that the questions my thesis raised remain just as “acute”, present and unanswered as when it was written. It addresses a growing number of concerns which have become by now universal, and thus, constitute an urgent appeal to social and political awareness, convergent with ideas suggested by some key focalisers in Jonathan Coe’s fiction.

The fact that my thesis saw the light of day has a long story of its own, and, as so often happens, it would not have come about without the support of some wonderful people.

Among the people I would like to thank, I shall start with my family: my mother, my father and my maternal grandparents. For everything. This book is a very small tribute to the memory of my grandfather, who passed away at the end of my first semester of research abroad, and it represents a small token of my appreciation for all that he was.

My gratitude goes to Prof. Martin Heusser for his constant and generous support before and during my research at the University of Zürich (August 2009–December 2010) and to Prof. Lidia Vianu for encouraging me to study Jonathan Coe’s fiction.



Moreover, I would like to thank Jonathan Coe himself, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in 2012, half a year after I had defended my thesis and received my PhD from the University of Bucharest. His novels turned my PhD research into a pleasant experience and I am honoured to think of him now as a friend.

I would also like to thank my long-time friends back home and the ones I have met during the past three years in the Netherlands and with whom I have shared priceless experiences of kindness and humanity. Although there have been six years since this material was written, I would not have published it without my best friend's support, her constant pleading and encouragement. I thank her for not having given up and for helping me edit my work.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank the representatives of Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their infinite patience and understanding, and for having waited for me to complete my teaching contracts abroad, which kept me away from my thesis. The present publication represents an accurate reproduction of the thesis I defended in 2011, at the University of Bucharest, with very few added explanations and updates.

Bucharest, September 2017



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

Power and narrative share a long and complex relationship which has found its expression in countless forms over the centuries. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, H. Porter Abbott uses the concept of *power* in the definition of narrative, pointing out two important aspects of this relationship:

“If, with its immense rhetorical resources, narrative is an instrument of power, it is often about power as well.” (Abbott: 2002: 51)

The first and most obvious aspect is that power is intrinsically related to narrative, in the sense that almost all works of fiction touch upon one element or another associated with power, whether as subject matter or indirectly.

The other aspect, which I will engage with throughout this book, is that the relation between narrative and power has also been regarded as reciprocal and mutually influential. There are many theorists and researchers who follow Abbott’s line of thought, considering narrative “an instrument of power” with clearly-defined social or ideological functions (usually of either supporting or resisting the dominant discourse)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the overwhelming amount of research in the field, I have restricted the following references to several studies of theorists who follow what has come to be labelled “the sociology of literature”, a critical approach to literature which borrows concepts from sociology. My own approach follows a similar interdisciplinary line, subordinated to Cultural Studies. For a detailed analysis of the relationship between literature and politics, see, for example: Louise Blakeney Williams (2002). *Modernism and the Ideology of History: Literature, Politics, and the Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Bernard Crick (1989). *Essays on Politics and Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; Patrick Colm Hogan (1990). *The Politics of Interpretation: Ideology, Professionalism, and the Study of Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press; Irving Howe (1992). *Politics and the Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press; Caroline Merz and Patrick Lee-Browne (2003). *Post-war Literature: 1945 to the Present: English Literature in Its Historical, Cultural and Social Contexts*. London: Evans Brothers;

The present book does not aim to explore the multiplicity of means by which these ideological functions have been achieved, nor does it intend to diagnose the general state, tendencies or failures of the contemporary British novel.<sup>2</sup>

As the title of my book suggests, it concentrates on the work of Jonathan Coe, a contemporary British novelist whose socio-political fiction encapsulates a particular shift in today's realist fiction, in the way a increasingly elusive and problematic "reality" (both past and present) is addressed, focusing on *power* as the central aspect around which this "reality" seems to revolve.

Many of Coe's protagonists are either already published young novelists themselves, who have come to a standstill in their careers, or unpublished novelists who have dedicated their lives to discovering that formula that would bring together technical artistry and a straightforward political message. His heroes reject a novel that has no political content, for the sake of formal perfection, and their passionate debate on the role of literature proves particularly useful for our study.

The reason for choosing Coe is not simply because he writes "about" power.

There is a huge number of writers who have approached power, usually along the dominator–dominated dichotomy. The perspective we have become used to, in recent years, is clearly the one of the "dominated", the writer who exposes the injustice of an oppressive system. If in my home country, Romania, power has long been associated with the totalitarian and repressive discourse of communism, the discourse of power in Britain has been a different one, since it has always positioned itself as anti-totalitarian par excellence on the ideological map of the world. Michel Foucault himself has acknowledged Britain's unique anti-totalitarian status in European history:

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Maureen Whitebrook (1995). *Real Toads in Imaginary Gardens: Narrative Accounts of Liberalism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>2</sup> For this, there is a vast amount of prestigious publications: see, for instance: Richard Bradford (2007). *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing; Peter Childs (2005). *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction since 1970*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan; Andrzej Gąsiorek (1995). *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and after*. London: Edward Arnold; Dominic Head (2002). *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Philip Tew (2000). *The Contemporary British Novel*. London: Continuum; Philip Tew and Rod Mengham eds. (2006). *British Fiction Today*. London: Continuum.

“If there is one country that was not totalitarian in the history of Europe, it is undoubtedly Britain.” (Foucault: 2000b: 293)

In Britain, most of the post-1970s novels that deal with power are by authors who give a voice to “the marginal”, either defined in terms of ethnicity, in a post-colonial key, as in Salman Rushdie’s or V.H. Naipaul’s novels, or in terms of social position, as in the works of Pat Barker, Zadie Smith, Jeanette Winterson, Bernadine Evaristo, Andrew O’Hagan and Will Self, among many others. The rediscovery in postmodernism of the marginal and marginality has been acknowledged by critics and researchers alike.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Jonathan Coe is not the typical author who embraces the “marginality” trend in recent fiction as the only place where “the vitality of the novel can still thrive”, as Childs has suggested (Childs: 2005: 274). Coe’s uniqueness consists in giving a broader, more complex sense of perspective to power relations in society, which includes, but is not restricted to, the voice of the oppressed. He attempts to expand the horizons of his analysis, not to restrict them, and thus to avoid a biased position.

Moreover, his white, British-born, middle-class status would have made such intent artificial and hollow. It is for this status that his complex exposure of the falseness and manipulative techniques behind liberal mainstream power discourse becomes even more interesting, because it is rendered, all the time, through an aware and profound sense of guilty privilege in most of his characters.

His subtlety is rendered through the coexistence in the same novel, sometimes on the same page, of tendencies which have been regarded for a long time in the study of power, as excluding each other. His novels are like breathing and living organisms which accommodate contrasts, and not the reflection of rigid, monolithic theories. The secret is that he rarely makes his characters define *power*, he prefers instead to reveal “the place of power” gradually, through the constant interplay of *ideology* and *resistance*, which both transpire in the text in a series of ways (mostly indirectly, through their social impact).

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<sup>3</sup> See Peter Childs’s introduction in *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction since 1970* (2005). Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Malcolm Bradbury’s in *The Modern British Novel: 1878–2001* (2001). London: Penguin and Ian Haywood’s in *Working Class Fiction: From Chartism to Trainspotting* (1997). Plymouth: Northcote House. For an overview of “marginality” in the British context, with which I shall engage throughout this book, see Nicola Allen (2008). *Marginality in the contemporary British novel*. London: Continuum.

The concept of *power* has been foundational to Cultural Studies, and central to all social sciences and humanities: from Philosophy to Sociology, from Anthropology to Political Theory, from Psychology to Literary and Cultural Studies.

Any recent discussion of power in a work of literature is, therefore, bound to be interdisciplinary in nature. First of all, because the object of my analysis – contemporary literature – seems to have attained an unprecedented theoretical convergence with all other major social sciences,<sup>4</sup> and Coe’s socio-political work in particular reflects these tendencies. Under the influence of postmodernism, the realist novel has changed, becoming increasingly socially engaged. As Dominic Head put it, “The novel has clearly been shaped by non-literary ideas that go beyond the frame of reference established by the more self-contained intellectual debates”<sup>5</sup> (Head: 2002: 4).

Secondly, this is because all theoretical traditions have undergone similar transformations. Recent Cultural Studies (but also the other critical traditions as well, including Marxism, Post-Structuralism, and even narratology<sup>6</sup>) have become syncretic, continuously borrowing terminology and methodology from each other and from all the above-mentioned social sciences, in order to attempt, as Mieke Bal put it, “to answer the big questions concerning the world and the power inequities that ravage it” (Bal: 2004: 2).

The present book aims to be in line with this tendency in recent research. From many points of view, the object of my analysis has imposed the choice of the most appropriate methodological approach in the form of Cultural Studies. At the same time, I have considered it relevant for my analysis to explain, in the text, the instances where

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<sup>4</sup> Among others, Edward Said has explicitly expressed this idea with respect to contemporary narrative: “Narrative has now attained the status in the human and social sciences of a major cultural convergence” (Edward Said, quoted in Clayton: 1993: 11).

<sup>5</sup> Dominic Head goes on to state that novelists were often obliged to think through their themes in terms of the blunt opposition of political systems (the Cold War or the political discrepancies between Eastern and Western Europe, for instance). In *The Rotters’ Club*, this is briefly illustrated, but this is not the essence of power struggles in Coe’s work.

<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to the 3rd volume of *Narrative Theory. Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2004), Mieke Bal admits that the heydays of classical “narratological developments began to wane” (Bal: 2004: 2) under the pressure of “more socially-engaged approaches – Marxism, feminism, anti-racism” (Bal: 2004: 2) which, in her view, narratology also has to engage with in a more immediate way.

Cultural Studies has borrowed and internalised some of its most widely used concepts from the tradition of Marxism and Post-Structuralism and their associated ideological framework.

## 1.1 Explaining the Use of the Concept of Politics and Academia

In Coe's novels, power in *politics* is mainly presented indirectly, from the perspective of its social effects, although *What a Carve Up!* offers insights into the perspective of "power elites". It is in this context that this book assesses the influence of power in *politics* and *academia* – understood at large, as the "product" of the Oxbridge educational system: the intellectual protagonist in their evolution. In my discussion of *academia*, I shall refer both to Coe's socio-political<sup>7</sup> novels and, more briefly, to his "academic novels" or "campus novels". My main point of analysis is the intellectual, the "product" of the educational system. Education, especially at Oxbridge, has traditionally been regarded as guaranteeing a certain access to professional and social positions and thus, to *power*, or has been considered a form of power per se.

The following part of the introductory chapter indicates the present status and tendencies in critical studies and research regarding Coe's novels, the original intent of the present study, but also its limitations.

## 1.2 Critical Reception<sup>8</sup> of Jonathan Coe's Work

Jonathan Coe's fiction appears under usually brief, but positive remarks in prestigious literary anthologies and a few dissertations on the contemporary British novel. His novels have been labelled under a variety of titles, such as "social" (Hutchinson: 2008: 2), "political" (Head: 2002: 47), "socio-political", interchangeably with "state-of-the-nation" and "condition-of-England" novels (Tew: 2008: 53; Thurschwell: 2008: 29; Head: 2002: 47) or simply "realist" novels (Bradford: 2007: 47). Whatever the label, there seems to be general agreement that Coe, through his originality, has made a significant contribution to the socio-political novel.

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<sup>7</sup> The term shall be used in Dominic Head's acceptance. Thus, he groups under this category novels "that treat contemporary history and society" (Head: 2002: 2), dealing with contemporary "socio-political phenomena", which "yield a special insight into the most important areas of social and cultural history" (Head: 2002: 1).

<sup>8</sup> As explained early on in the Introduction, this book analysed the critical material published up to January 2011.

His novels have received the most extensive attention from two prestigious literary critics: Dominic Head and Philip Tew, whose observations, although mainly centred on form, sometimes attempt to go beyond this level, making content-related remarks.

Dominic Head describes Coe's contribution metaphorically, acknowledging his role in the development of the political genre: "The state-of-the-nation novel, it seems, struggles to survive in its conventional guise. It now requires the rare ingenuity of a Jonathan Coe to breathe life into the corpse" (Head: 2002: 47). After highlighting Coe's valuable contribution to reviving the genre, he then goes on to comment on Coe's powerful impact on young novelists, saying that he "is beginning to emerge as the instigator of this still-persisting school of political fiction"<sup>9</sup> (Head: 2002: 47). This is remarkable since, in another critical contribution, he questions the depth of the impact of today's political novel on society, its capacity to still "be taken as significant forms of influence" (Head in English: 2006: 244). Throughout *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000*, he mentions Coe's work several times – sometimes comparing him to other contemporary political novelists, such as Margaret Drabble (Head: 2002: 46).

Philip Tew himself includes Coe in all of his recent books (Tew: 2004, 2006, 2008), presenting him as a "sophisticated social critic" (Tew: 2004: 18) and as a specific "example of literature incorporating notions of postmodernity in structuring its textual awareness" (Tew: 2004: 18). He is also the first to have noticed in *What a Carve Up!* the "bizarre causality chain of events" (Tew: 2004: 48), which the present book will look into as well. As Tew explains, they involve "the incongruous, and the utterly inconsequential and apparently banal minutiae of life", and thus the effect, in his view, becomes "comic, almost grotesque" (Tew: 2004: 48).

With these two exceptions, most remarks remain very frugal and very general in character in literary anthologies, restricted mainly to the novel *What a Carve Up!*. Thus, Nick Bentley remarks that "Jonathan Coe has been critical of both Thatcherism in his *What a Carve Up!* (1994) and New Labour in his 2004 novel *The Closed Circle* which includes a cameo of Tony Blair" (Bentley: 2008: 6), continuing with moral and ethical criticism.<sup>10</sup> Nick Rennison, in his turn, confirms that the critical and commercial success of *What a Carve Up!* (1994) gave Coe the status of

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<sup>9</sup> One such example is Tim Pears with his novel, *A Revolution of the Sun*, which, as Dominic Head proves, contains echoes of Coe's two novels *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* (Head: 2002: 47).

<sup>10</sup> "Coe evokes the sense of outrage the event caused in Birmingham at the time" (Bentley: 2008: 7).



“one of the funniest and cleverest novelists of his generation” (Rennison: 2005:46), he then goes on to summarise Coe’s novels, unfortunately sometimes incorrectly.<sup>11</sup> Merritt Moseley emphasises Coe’s coquetry with postmodernism, when he defines Coe’s novels as “original and entertaining novels that combine an interest in postmodernist fiction [...] with the narrative urgencies of the best popular movies and fiction” (Moseley: 2001: 67).

But perhaps the most spectacular and controversial assessment is Richard Bradford’s, in which he reduces Coe’s valuable political message to a critique of Thatcherism, submerged in technical artistry:

“One might argue that Jonathan Coe, for example, would not be the considerable literary presence that he is, were it not for Thatcherism. In his fiction and his biography of B. S. Johnson he flirts wistfully with the indulgent attractions of experiment yet in practice maintains a solid commitment to realism. The fascinating grotesquery of the Britain in which he reached adulthood has ensured that for him writing about it has been far more important than writing about writing.” (Bradford: 2007: 47)

While I fully agree with the fact that Coe maintains a “solid commitment to realism”, and that he merely “flirts” with experiment<sup>12</sup> (for which reason my focus shall not be on form), I argue that it is unfair and inaccurate to reduce his work to a critique of Thatcherism. First of all, because in Coe’s work there is a continuity, an evolution, a “before” and “after” Thatcherism, and there are two other “openly” political novels (*The Rotters’ Club* and *The Closed Circle*) which have been unfairly ignored by literary critics and, as we shall see, by researchers alike.<sup>13</sup>

To sum up these points, critical discussions seem to be focused on the formal level and almost exclusively on *What a Carve Up!*.

Here, two observations are necessary. On the one hand, the importance of this novel is undeniable, and I will give it its due place in the present book. It consecrated Coe’s international reputation as a novelist and managed to place him in that rare category of “popular-literary” authors (Hutchinson: 2008: 2).

On the other hand, what is unjustly ignored is that his political fiction has a global effect and message as a whole. His political novels bring a lot

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<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, page 45, where he mistakes the novelist Michel Owen for Mortimer, who is the one who actually takes “revenge upon them by acting out the film, murdering each member of the family in a way that makes the punishment fit the crime.” (Rennison: 2005: 45).

<sup>12</sup> This statement regards Coe’s fiction up to 2011, when my thesis was written.

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 12.

more than artistry at the formal level, in the sense of delivering a strong message regarding the way the contemporary human subject responds to surrounding structures of power.

They are not only realistic descriptions of “recognisable times and places”,<sup>14</sup> they also constitute valuable testimonies of the postmodern condition (both in political and human terms), ideal subjects of analysis for a project regarding the texture and fabric of power in contemporary times.

In this light, I fully support Philip Tew’s objection to the claim that “Coe’s novels have been considered by some to represent simply a stylistic pastiche” (Tew: 2008: 53).

### 1.2.1 Jonathan Coe’s Fiction in Recent<sup>15</sup> Academic Research

It is, therefore, surprising that Coe’s work has prompted relatively little serious academic discussion, beyond remarks referring mostly to technical artistry and his use of irony and pastiche, which goes beyond the scope of the present research. The most remarkable article along this line is Pamela Thurschwell’s analysis of Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve Up!* which “centers in part upon the details of the text’s architectonics, the formal aspects that engage in a frantic genre-mixing and double-structuring” (Rod Mengham and Philip Tew: 2006: General Introduction: XVI). Besides analysing technical aspects, Pamela Thurschwell argues that Coe’s “novels borrow motifs from classical tragedy”, and that “history and individual tragic fate seem inescapably intertwined for Coe, much as they were for Thomas Hardy” (Thurschwell: 2006: 28).

I argue that Coe’s political novels are written from a contemporary post-millennial,<sup>16</sup> “post-ideological”<sup>17</sup> perspective and often highlight ideological distance with the 1970s and the 1980s. They are the proof of the postmodern condition, with contemporary dilemmas induced in the individual by postmodern times, where the “sense of helplessness that large-scale political and economic forces engender in people” (Thurschwell: 2006: 28) is very different from classical tragedy. This is in part the direct

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<sup>14</sup> Statement quoted from <http://www.complete-review.com/authors/coejo.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Please see previous footnotes (8, 12, 13). “Recent” refers to everything published before January 2011.

<sup>16</sup> In the present book, the determiner “post-millennial” shall be used with the acceptance of “contemporary, post-2000”, when describing fiction or ideology.

<sup>17</sup> Later on in the book, I shall attempt to prove that there is plenty of evidence in Coe’s text that this “post-ideological” stance is actually ideological, just as much as the “classical” ideologies of the twentieth century, and that it operates under a new guise.

effect of the individual's own incapacity to react, or as I shall attempt to prove, his/her own refusal to react, even when he/she is highly aware of a particular socio-political situation, and from this point of view, I distance myself from Thurschwell's otherwise brilliant analysis, mainly focused on form.

In *Money, Speculation and Finance in Contemporary British Fiction*, published in 2007, Nicky Marsh discusses *What a Carve Up!* together with Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*. While she highlights the "authority of the money economy" in fiction, Marsh fleetingly alludes to the "critique of the ideological mystification" (Marsh: 2007: 80), yet decides not to pursue this path.

The most recent<sup>18</sup> academic discussions were published in 2008 when two researchers included Coe among other novelists in their dissertations.

Thus, Nicola Allen, in *Marginality in the Contemporary British Novel*, includes Jonathan Coe among "Blincoe, Evaristo, Zadie Smith, Jim Crace, [...], Nick Hornby, Toby Litt, Will Self and Adam Thorpe" in the category of "marginal authors" dealing with "marginal" themes and misfit/grotesque subjects. She defines marginality as belonging to those "who are not permitted for some reason to express their authentic voice within mainstream discourse" (Allen: 2008: 30). In her approach, Allen does not envisage the existence of a "centre" which would configure the position of these margins. I shall engage with her thesis in the following chapter, when I argue that Coe does not refer to marginality in this sense.

Colin Hutchinson, in his *Reaganism, Thatcherism and the Social Novel* (2008), groups Jonathan Coe with Martin Amis, Iain Banks, Iain Sinclair, Ian McEwan, Irvine Welsh, Alan Warner and Julian Barnes and discusses them in parallel with works of American fiction by Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Bret Easton Ellis, Douglas Coupland and Tom Wolfe. He shares the marginality vision, from the perspective of what he claims to be the political orientation of the authors: "white male novelists with a broad left-liberal political perspective who, in the context of the New Right ascendancy, began to share the relatively unfamiliar experience of feeling marginalized by virtue of their political orientation" (Hutchinson: 2008: 2). While discussing the novels from the perspective of the author's political orientation is an ambitious line of research, in practice it brings more disadvantages than benefits and a lot of speculation. The New Critics were the first to question this approach with their "intentional fallacy" theory; others have since followed suit. My own research gives priority to evidence in the text.

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<sup>18</sup> See previous footnotes (8,12,13,15) for the explanation given for the use of the adjective "recent" in this book.

Although these researchers' contributions are valuable, as they attempt to go beyond a mere discussion of form, my perspective varies greatly from theirs and I distance myself from their conclusions and perspectives on several grounds.

First of all, none of the above-mentioned critics and researchers analyse the basis of political fiction in Coe's work: the power relations which construct both the social system and the individual. The present book attempts to do precisely that, to cover this undeserved gap in academic research until the beginning of 2011.

Secondly, I do not share Allen's and Hutchinson's view of Coe as the textbook example of a "marginality" author. As I shall argue throughout this book, marginality is just the illusion of the existence of a "constitutive outside", a concept used in the acceptance of the sociologist and political theorist Saul Newman: a place entirely "untouched" by the nets of power (Newman: 2005: 3).

On the contrary, Coe's political novels are the perfect proof that there is no such thing as marginality in the sense of a "pure", "untouched" place where power does not penetrate in any way. And even if there were such a place, I shall argue that Coe's protagonists do not belong there. They are not the typical "social outcasts", nor are they "anti-social". On the contrary, they are very representatives of a generalised, postmodern condition. Moreover, collective power structures (as manifested in politics) do not manage to erase individual awareness at intellectual or mental level, even when interfering with the lives of the individuals.

### 1.3 Realism or Postmodernism?

Jonathan Coe's socio-political fiction could be grouped under the general heading of contemporary realism. As Alison Lee demonstrated in her *Realism and Power*, today's realism is heavily influenced by postmodernism, which she defines, quoting Linda Hutcheon, as the "contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges"<sup>19</sup> (Hutcheon quoted in Lee: 1990: Preface: X).

Coe's novels, although subscribed to realism, reflect postmodernist influences both in terms of technique and ideology. He often breaks the boundaries of genre, experiments with form and narrative technique, drawing the attention to his own narrative mechanisms while still trying to

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<sup>19</sup> As the traditional borders of Realism get blurred throughout her book, Alison Lee uses sometimes interchangeably the two terms "Realist" and "Postmodernist" to describe the same novel.

preserve a sense of “vraisemblance”. Coe’s novels question reality, while being very careful about the way he formally constructs it, about accuracy and legitimacy of historic detail. Although narrative experimentation exists in his work, in Coe’s socio-political fiction, form is only subservient/secondary to content and political message/critique, and has a clear role (limited to) questioning power structures from their foundations.<sup>20</sup>

### **1.4 Text, Context and Power in Recent<sup>21</sup> Literary and Cultural Studies**

The starting point of my research is the widely accepted position in both literary and cultural studies regarding the interconnectedness between contemporary art – *the text* (literature, in particular) – and the socio-political context in which it was created, and which it reflects.

This position was the core of nineteenth century realism and can still be found in contemporary realism as well. In *Realism and Power*, Alison Lee begins her discussion of contemporary realism as “limited to the literary conventions (and their ideological implications) which were developed in nineteenth-century England and France as a formula for the literal transcription of ‘reality’ into art” (Lee: 1990: Introduction: IX).<sup>22</sup> Remarkable at this point is that, from the phase of definition, Lee recognises that such an intention, of transposing “reality” into art, engages ideological effects, an idea which we will develop throughout this book.

While emphasising its “often contentious and polemical” nature, Pam Morris notes, in her turn, that “realism almost always involves both claims about the nature of reality and an evaluative attitude towards it”<sup>23</sup> (Morris: 2003: 2), and “undeniably realism as a literary form has been associated

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<sup>20</sup> In *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000*, Dominic Head was the first to have alluded to this idea when stating that the use of narcolepsy in *The House of Sleep* as a plot device, serves to “suggest some broader social amnesia” (Head: 2002: 47).

<sup>21</sup> As defined in previous footnotes, “recent” refers, in this book, to works published before January 2011.

<sup>22</sup> This of course, does not mean that Lee claims that contemporary Realism should be reduced to its historical pre-cursor of the nineteenth century. Her own views, applied to Literary Studies, offer a quintessence of Michel Foucault’s principles which constitute his core contribution to social sciences (see page 35).

<sup>23</sup> Even in its most general acceptance, Pam Morris insists that the term is “frequently invoked in making fundamental ethical and political claims or priorities, based upon perceptions of what is ‘true’ or ‘real’” (Morris: 2003: 2).

with an insistence that art cannot turn away from the more sordid and harsh aspects of human existence” (Morris: 2003: 3).

Cultural Studies as a methodological discipline itself has a long history of analysing the interconnectedness between art and life, or between *text* (meaning any cultural production, under any form) and *context*. Thus, from the work of the most influential figures of British Cultural Studies, Raymond Williams<sup>24</sup> and Stuart Hall<sup>25</sup> up to recent theorists, such as Graeme Turner,<sup>26</sup> little seems to have changed with respect to the idea that “we cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice” (Williams: 1980: 44).

Among French theorists, Pierre Bourdieu takes this relationship one step further, explicitly introducing *power* into the equation. Thus, he argues that “change in the space of literary or artistic possibilities is the result of change in the power relations which constitutes the space of positions” (Bourdieu: 1993: 32), thus establishing not only a connection, but also what Thurschwell and Head call a “causality” relationship.

In defining the same relationship, Andrzej Gąsiorek highlights the difficulties any representation of reality triggers, and at the same time, the importance of such a cultural enterprise for a society’s understanding of itself.

“History and politics lie close to the fore in post-war writers’ accounts of reality because they are central to any society’s understanding of itself and thus become hotly contested terrains.” (Gąsiorek: 1995: 191)

Departing from the awareness of entering a “hotly contested terrain”, the following subchapters attempt to locate the relation between *text* and *context* in Jonathan Coe’s fiction and introduce the thesis of the present book.

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<sup>24</sup> This idea, refined throughout the years, is a constant in Raymond Williams’s work (See Williams: 1958, 1965, 1977, 1980, 1989), explicitly expressed in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (1980). London: Verso, pp. 44.

<sup>25</sup> Among many of Stuart Hall’s writings I shall refer to, for an elaborate discussion of the relationship text-context, see: Hall, Stuart (1996b). “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without guarantees”, in D. Morley and K.-H. Chen (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London and New York: Routledge: pp. 25–46.

<sup>26</sup> See Graeme Turner: 2002: 22. In his book, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, initially published in 1996, Turner dedicated a whole chapter to explaining the inter-connections between texts, contexts and discourses.

### 1.5. *Text and Context in Jonathan Coe's Fiction*

In the interview with Professor Philip Tew, Coe acknowledges the two conflicting tendencies which coexist in his work.<sup>27</sup> Thus, on the one hand, Coe admits that his imaginative work starts only after the historical background of what he is writing about has been carefully documented or, in his words, “set in stone”<sup>28</sup> (Coe in Tew: 2008: 39), to the point of pedantry of detail even for the least important scenes. He also admits that he feels “great responsibility to historical fact” in his fiction (Tew: 2008: 39).

On the other hand, there is the axiomatic truth, emphasised both by Allison Lee and Pam Morris, that any novel, even a contemporary realist one, remains a work of fiction,<sup>29</sup> and Coe constantly draws attention to this point as well, sometimes even making one of his narrators say it explicitly in his novels.<sup>30</sup> Literary critics have already acknowledged this duality in

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<sup>27</sup> However, this is not to say that this combination of opposite narrative devices is an element of originality in Coe's work, as there are many contemporary Realists who draw on this famous narrative technique.

<sup>28</sup> Coe's own statement is worth quoting at length, not in order to fall into any intentional fallacy temptations, but because his confessions constitute a valuable starting point for our analysis of the way in which Realism is approached in his novels which tackle socio-political themes. For this purpose, the statement is self-evident for Coe's pedantry in documenting even less important scenes in the novel. “Historical accuracy is very important to *me*. Actually I find it impossible to work imaginatively unless the actual underpinnings of what I am writing are absolutely set in stone. In *The Rotters' Club*, everything is quite precisely dated, worked out almost week by week for certain months of the 1970s. The most extreme example is a scene where Benjamin and his girlfriend go to the cinema. Originally they saw *Annie Hall*. Subsequently I discovered newspapers of the period that it wasn't playing that week so I changed it to *Star Wars*, which was. It was crucially important to me that whatever I wrote could have happened factually, which will probably always remain the case given I feel such great responsibility to historical fact in my fiction.” (Coe in Tew: 2008: 39, italics in the original)

<sup>29</sup> As Pam Morris noted: “There is one distinction between realist writing and actual everyday reality beyond the text that must be quite categorically insisted upon: realist novels *never* give us life or a slice of life nor do they reflect reality. In the first place, literary realism is a representational form and a representation can never be identical with that which it represents. In the second place, words function completely differently from mirrors” (Morris: 2003: 4, italics in the original).

<sup>30</sup> Several characters discuss the nature of the relation between fiction and reality in: *A Touch of Love*, *What a Carve Up!*, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*.

his work, and have assessed it as a postmodernist feature. Thus, although he paradoxically reduces Coe's artistic worth to a critique of Thatcherism, Richard Bradford makes the fleeting remark that "Coe has produced two other novels [*The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*] which offer a portrait of Britain since the 1970s, while subtly pointing up the fact that, in doing so they are, like all fiction, being playfully dishonest" (Bradford: 2007: 43).

## 1.6 Thesis / Intention

Having absorbed all these points, the present book aims to analyse Jonathan Coe's novels as sites and testimonials of the major political power shifts which have taken place in contemporary Britain since the 1970s: from the dismantling of the social-democratic consensus, to the societal impact of the structure and values of Thatcherism and the New Right, leading to an apparently "post-ideological", post-power, globalised, consumerist society. His novels do not only register the struggle of contending ideologies, but also represent sites which attest the formation of new ideologies (not in the sense of prefabricated sets of ideas which are artificially applied on the unsuspecting "dupes of history") but active, "live" phenomena, with their own life cycles.

I shall depart from the premise that within the same country, with each political regime, in each social context on the one hand, and under the influence of the *zeitgeist*, on the other, the representation of *power* has changed dramatically over the decades, as has the individual's response to it. The same happened to the plethora of ideas, principles, values and discourses each structure officially promoted; in other words, the ideological mantle of each political regime. Moreover, if in the 1970s, *power* was associated in the minds of individuals with the *state*, Coe's post-millennial fiction shows a dramatic shift towards the supremacy of the market over everything else.

I will argue that *power* cannot be discussed other than in strict connection to its justifying *ideology*, which, instead of having found its imminent death (proclaimed in 1987 by Jean Baudrillard in *Forget Foucault*), is thriving under a new guise, more alive than ever.

All novels will be analysed in terms of *ideology* and *resistance*. I will argue that the postmodernist context has created in its evolution (which Coe has illustrated in his socio-political novels) a *specific response to power*, a specific form of resistance, crystallised in the typical position of Coe's *intellectual* protagonist. Thus, beyond the classical dichotomy of support/opposition, which political fiction has abounded in, I shall argue



that there is a third possibility, which is, factually, none of the above. In order to describe it, Chapter 3 coins the concept of “*intentional unpower*”.

Starting with Chapter 3, I shall demonstrate that there are three possibilities regarding the evolution of this type of social response: one is the progressive path from the *intentional unpower* stage, presented by Coe in *What a Carve Up!*. By *progressive* I do not mean upward mobility, although this is, in itself, a possible outcome, but simply moving on from a state of apathy, by channelling social and ideological energies in a certain direction, by re-activating the attributes of power, which have been intentionally cancelled.

The second possibility I am going to explore in this chapter is a *regressive path from the intentional unpower* stage, which leads to a cancellation of all attributes of power and, ultimately, of life itself.

Last but not least, there is the stage in which *intentional unpower* becomes a generalised *modus vivendi*, which characterises the contemporary post-millennial, “post-ideological” phase, which constitutes the core of *The Closed Circle* and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, and which will be discussed in the final chapter.

This *intentional unpower* response is an individual reaction to power, which is preceded in Coe’s fiction by another type of *resistance*, manifested in the social activism of the 1970s and illustrated in *The Rotters’ Club*, a novel centred on the working class, which reveals the non-revolutionary nature of the British working class.

*Resistance* in this case means *consolidating the class struggle*. It consists not in altering, but in preserving the status quo of the welfare state and its “*pastoral power*” *vision*, which becomes in practice devotion to *solidarity, communion, brotherhood and community* (words which appear frequently in *The Rotters’ Club* whenever Bill Anderton becomes the focaliser).

## 1.7 Corpus

The present book focuses on four of the author’s novels: *The Rotters’ Club* (2001); *What a Carve Up!* (1994); *The Closed Circle* (2004); and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010), although parallels will be made with Coe’s other novels<sup>31</sup> and there will be very brief references to other writers (Saul Bellow and Margaret Drabble). Chapter 3 also looks at Coe’s campus novels *The Accidental Woman* (1987); and more extensively, at *A*

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<sup>31</sup> Coe’s other fictional works (until January 2011), in the order of their publications are: *The Accidental Woman* (1987); *A Touch of Love* (1989); *The Dwarves of Death* (1990); *The House of Sleep* (1997); and *The Rain before It Falls* (2007).

*Touch of Love* (1989) which illustrate the regressive path from the *intentional unpower* stage, as a social response to institutional power, which the main characters perceive as oppressive and unbearable.

For the first three novels, there seems to be general agreement among literary critics, who have labelled them in their anthologies as “state-of-the-nation” or “condition-of-England” novels.

At the moment of writing this book (finalised in January, 2011) *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010), had just been published and critics had not pronounced themselves at length, nor had they included it in any anthology.

There are two reasons for the choice of the novels. The first and the most obvious is their nature as socio-political novels, and campus novels, respectively. The second reason is that, put together, these novels show the stages in the profound transformations and mutations over the four decades, mirroring the changes whose “causality” relations at both political level and at the level of the minutiae of life, have brought us to the present “faceless” *power*. These novels have been chosen because they clearly show the points of articulation of this transformation, not only at the level of what power *is* but also at the level of how the individual reacts to a faceless/collective power.

Many readers would definitely argue that *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* is not so clearly and openly a “state-of-the-nation” piece, as it does not tackle socio-political themes with the directness of the other three novels. And I would fully agree. I would also add that, even if the British society in which this last novel is set differs from the three preceding decades in which the other books were set, it is not so different in tone and theme (modern loneliness and a crushing feeling of insignificance) from Coe’s first book, *The Accidental Woman*, initially published in 1987. This is the reason for my choosing to dedicate analytical space to this novel: I will argue that, ideologically speaking, it is, in fact, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* which indicates the true “closing of the circle”, and not the homonymous novel, which is simply a sequel of *The Rotters’ Club*, and which marks a point of evolution in the journey of a nation which is about to lose its defining traits, moving swiftly towards globalisation.

The largest part of the present analysis will be based, therefore, on these four novels, which, in my opinion, are the most appropriate to be grouped under the title of “political novels”, a genre whose definition and classification has been itself the subject of many contending theories.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> For a wide range of theoretical perspectives on the political novel see the titles indicated at page 3.

Some researchers, among them Thomas Kemme (2003: 16), make the distinction between “pure” political novels, with entirely political plots and real-life characters and “other” political novels, more fictional in nature.

However, I will go along the more moderate line opened by Dominic Head, who calls political fiction any fiction tackling socio-political themes and phenomena and Linda Hutcheon’s theory of historiographic metafiction, where “verisimilitude” has priority over any “objective truth” (Hutcheon: 1988: 105).

At the same time, one has to admit that, with Coe, social themes are always present as/at the background of each novel,<sup>33</sup> accompanied by political comments, which makes it difficult to draw a definitive, clear-cut distinction between his political and non-political novels. What makes the distinction even more difficult is that, with Coe, there are no “clear phases” of creation, of political and non-political inspiration.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, his entire international reputation as a political novelist (or “*écrivain engagé*”, as his French readership has called him) was based, until the beginning of 2011, solely on the tremendous success of *What a Carve Up!* (1994), which was greeted enthusiastically by both critics and the general public.

His non-fictional works,<sup>35</sup> ranging from biographies of famous actors to an analysis of the work of B.S. Johnson, although an interesting focus for a separate study, are irrelevant to the present discussion.

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<sup>33</sup> This is valid even for the ones which he calls “micro-novels” and which Coe states he didn’t intend as socio-political fiction, as *The Rain before It Falls*, which focuses on a family history (Coe in Tew: 2008: 41).

<sup>34</sup> After three non-political novels enjoying relatively modest success: *The Accidental Woman* (1987), *A Touch of Love* (1989), *The Dwarves of Death* (1990), Coe had his breakthrough with his first “openly” political novel, dealing with the Thatcher period: *What a Carve Up!* in 1994, which brought him, at last, instant recognition, both from the public (as it became a bestseller) and from the critics (the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize), and a tremendous success in France where he was awarded the *Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger*, and became a favourite of the French public. However, his next novel, *The House of Sleep*, (1997) would be non-political, and although it garnered literary distinctions (the *Prix Médicis*), we would have to wait until the beginning of the new millennium for Coe to decide to tackle political subjects again. His next novel: *The Rain Before It Falls* from 2007 was, again, non-political, while *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010) would tackle the general condition of modern solitude and insignificance.

<sup>35</sup> His non-fictional work up to 2011, includes: *Humphrey Bogart: Take It and Like It* (1991). London: Bloomsbury; *James Stewart: Leading Man* (1994). London: Bloomsbury; *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson* (2004): London:

All novels will be examined in terms of the ideology (or rather coexisting and even clashing ideologies, as the case may be) which transpires as having a primordial role in Coe's work. Ideology determines power relations at a political level, which, in the end, invariably have an impact at a social and individual level, no matter how hard the individual tries to escape its net. The causality chain always seems to be top–bottom (where the top is the political level and the bottom is the social and, ultimately, the individual level) and never bottom–top, never really inspired or inclined towards the needs of the individual. Moreover, these novels were chosen precisely because they show the *evolution* of society, and of political response, in its complexity.

### 1.8 Structure of the Book

In order to give a complete answer to the question, “*What is power?*”, in each decade, I will be analysing each of the selected novels at two levels.

Firstly, I shall be analysing political regimes in strict connection with the ideology they promoted. Secondly, I will be assessing their social impact, as it transpires from the reaction of the protagonists. In the two novels in which the protagonists are Oxbridge-educated, most of them (forever) aspiring (unpublished) novelists, I will also analyse the relationship between knowledge and “real” power, in the sense of a potential impact on the “real world”, which proves particularly sensitive, especially since the contemporary, postmodernist times are all under the sign of the Baudrillardian “hyperreal”.

I shall thus aim at answering a series of questions that will help us define and extract Coe's vision of power: Are the protagonists politically involved or even aware of the contemporary political agendas, contending ideologies and power plays? Do they ever talk about power? Does Coe or any of his narrators or focalisers analyse what happens in the political life of the country in terms of who has power and who does not? How does it function? Are any of his protagonists ever in the position of holding power, under whatever form? Do they adhere to any ideology? Do they resist? Or do we witness a “post-power” era, as has been said about its “post-ideological” counterpart? Does power still manage to stir the intellectual protagonist, or does he/she remain repulsed by it?

As this book aims at showing first the development, and then the evolution of ideology in society as it appears in Coe's novels, the order in

which the novels are going to be analysed is chronological in the sense of the historical periods they cover, and not from the point of view of their year of publication.

Although there are significant variations from chapter to chapter, each one will draw upon several theorists in order to substantiate its claims, and each one is based on textual analyses of the novels, largely organised along a dual structure. Thus, in the first part, socio-political events or phenomena are analysed on the one hand against the background of the *zeitgeist*, and the ideology they promote and, on the other hand, from the ideological distance imposed by the narrator. The second part focuses on the individual's response (or lack thereof) to the current political situation.

Chapter 2 begins with *The Rotters' Club* (2001), which deals with the late 1970s, and analyses the dismantling of the social-democratic consensus. As this novel is set 30 years before the time of narration, we shall be getting a full taste of the Marxist-dominated *zeitgeist*, of the atmosphere of the working classes, yet at the same time, we shall be constantly reminded of the ideological distance which separates the two perspectives. *The Rotters' Club* presents a world in which the future post-millennial intellectuals are just teenagers, *power* is still associated with the state and the social response is very active (strikes, terrorist attacks, racism), clearing the path and giving political fuel to the upcoming Thatcher years.

Chapter 3 analyses both Coe's most famous political novel, *What a Carve Up!* (1994) and Coe's "campus novels". Short references shall be made to *The Accidental Woman* (1987); and more extensively, to *A Touch of Love* (1989). *What a Carve Up!* takes us full-blast into the middle of Thatcherism, and its political and social effects. In the attempt to establish whether we are dealing with a proper ideology (one of the characters actually uses the term "ideological hijack"), we shall depart from evaluating whether the principles and values promoted by the Thatcher government converge with or are reflected by the actions of the characters who seem to be thriving in the new system and the socio-professional milieus they represent. The second part will focus on the attitude of the academia represented by the Oxbridge-educated intellectual, and introduces the concept of "*intentional unpower*".

In both *The Rotters' Club* and *What a Carve Up!* the benefit of hindsight in political commentary from his various narrators is a widely used narrative device, and I shall be analysing the effects of this technique. This chapter starts from C. Wright Mills's theory<sup>36</sup> of *power elites* which

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<sup>36</sup> His influential book, *The Power Elite*, was initially published in 1956.

was initially formulated for the American space, but I believe it can be successfully applied to the British context.

Chapter 4 brings us into the new millennium with *The Closed Circle* (2004), dealing with political opportunism in the Blair Period and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010). The chapter also assesses the “post-ideological” claim, and follows the position according to which this is a very influential form of *ideology in itself*. By now, Coe’s intellectuals, who were only teenagers in *The Rotters’ Club*, are adults, at the peak of their political involvement and awareness, or, as we shall see, lack thereof. This chapter continues to develop and apply the *intentional unpower* concept introduced in Chapter 3, claiming it has become a representative, permanent stage for the post-millennial individual. Unlike the previous novels, *The Closed Circle* opens the road to novels which are set in the time of their conception or shortly before publication, which lack the benefit of hindsight, but bring about other (just as powerful) ideological implications.

The second part of Chapter 4 analyses *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, which, like *The Closed Circle*, presents the contemporary situation in the form of a globalised, depersonalised world. Because, just as in *The Rotters’ Club*, the protagonist is not an intellectual, the implication of living in 2009 is assessed at the level of political awareness and involvement of the common person. Paradoxically, the level of disenchantment and political inactivity has become similar to the attitude of the intellectual 30 years ago. It seems that globalisation has petrified the feeling of insignificance to the point that the modern individual does not even try to make his/her voice heard anymore.

But before focusing on the analysis of the novels, it is important to look at the theoretical framework, to clarify the way in which the main concepts are going to be defined and used, and also establish the critical approach.

### **1.9 Power, Ideology, Resistance – Theoretical Framework**

The concept of *power* has been one of the most complex in the entire history of social sciences and there have been endless debates on how to define it.

The criteria of classification in themselves have been endless, and it is simply beyond the scope of this book to summarise the existing tendencies. However, a few examples are eloquent: *sociological and anthropological criteria* (individual versus collective power or “societal power”: Amitai Etzioni, Dennis Wrong), *moral-ethical criteria*: the