

Department of Anthropology

Goldsmiths Anthropology Research Papers



## The People's Puzzle: crosswords and knowledge politics

Olivia Swift

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Editors: Mao Mollona, Emma Tarlo, Frances Pine, Olivia Swift

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## The People's Puzzle: crosswords and knowledge politics

Everyday, millions of people lose themselves in the world of crosswords. This paper considers their motives for doing so and the effect crosswords have on their lives. It stems from my idea that the bars of the crossword grid represent the prison-like Culture Industry, as described by Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School of critical theorists (1991)<sup>1</sup>. I do not know whether Adorno did crosswords, but were he to have theorised about them, I suspect he would have seen them not as devices with which solvers are free to boost their brain power and to enjoy a few moments escape from daily life over a cup of tea, but rather as alienating tools that dictate knowledge, rationalise lived experience and maintain the status quo of socially-circulating information.

This pessimistic view of the function of crosswords was what first encouraged me to think more about crosswords. I then wanted to see whether it rang true, by tracing the cultural politics pervading the relationships between those involved in the production and consumption of crosswords. What I discovered were opportunities for freedom, escape, inspiration, innovation, mediation, subversion and critique, which existed alongside the potential for alienation, colonial domination and even

a possible role in contemporary forms of Empire. Rather than presenting crosswords as a challenge to Adorno's Culture Industry model, I argue that all this potential is entirely compatible with it, so long as the Culture Industry is understood as complex rather than simply as a grim, all-encompassing, impenetrable and alienating social construction.

The research for this paper included interviews – mostly one-to-one - with crossword solvers, setters, editors and publishers, as well as archival research. The solitary nature of crossword solving meant that there was no one obvious site in which to conduct my investigations, although during the course of the study I did discover a variety of communities formed from a love of crosswords. Although I advertised for research participants in locations attracting wide-ranging demographics such as community libraries, the majority of crossword *solving* research

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<sup>1</sup> The term was coined by Adorno and Horkheimer, exiled from Nazi Germany to the U.S. where they found capitalist democracy to be as brutal a regime as that they had left behind. The term refers to a shift in the concept of 'culture' – associated in its ideal state with art, with something set apart from industry – to a conception of 'culture' as a commodity, subsumed within capitalism, that has lost its ability to critique the rest of life. Among the implications of the Culture Industry are the collapsing together of high and low art and, critical to this paper, that 'work' and 'leisure' are not independent of one another but that leisure reproduces work.

participants were either known to me prior to this study or introduced to me for its purpose. Therefore, they do not reflect necessarily the true variety of those doing crosswords. Many for example were men, whereas the majority of solvers are in fact women (if statistics provided by a puzzle publisher quoted later are representative of crossword solvers at large).

I hope neither to have overly reified crosswords nor to have neglected the actual people solving them. As Appadurai notes 'no social analysis of things can avoid a minimal level of what might be called methodological fetishism' (1986: 5). However, I intend crosswords to act merely as a means of glimpsing one way in which people interact with one another using an object, an object all too readily dismissed as solitary in its usage and therefore outside the realm of anthropological study. The solitary nature of crosswords is more apparent than real however<sup>2</sup>, because like all companionless activities, crosswords involve institutional processes and shared values (Long 1989: 185).

Since crosswords are objects made from bars, squares and also words, I also hope to avoid the overly common separation of words and things, (notably reconciled by Foucault in *Les Mots et Le Choses*, 1966), thereby minimising the methodological fetishism described by Appadurai. A

crossword without words (or the promise of words) is just an object on a page. In crosswords, things and words are one.

Although words and things are one in crosswords, other dichotomies are inherent within this study. References to the black and white and the 'down and across' structure of the crossword grid came up time and again in interviews, and echo the use of opposing binaries in structuralist and cognitive anthropology by the likes of Levi-Strauss and of Mary Douglas – whose social model contrasts group with grid – and also by the lesser-known Monica Heller (1994) who makes specific use of contrast within crosswords as a metaphor for the interweaving of form that is a part of ethnographic research in general and her study of language, education and ethnicity in French Ontario in particular.

While this study is not an exercise in finding metaphors for the discipline of anthropology, the fact that crosswords are built around contrast makes them a useful tool for thinking about anthropology, most notably that unlike crosswords themselves, an anthropology of crosswords is not black

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<sup>2</sup> Competition, while not a theme specifically explored in this paper, appears to mediate the dynamic in crossword consumption between the individual and others/the group, in the form of competing against the self, friends, for a prize, against the clock, the Culture Industry and capitalism.

and white. Rather, it is grey. Not grey as in a boring shade between extremes of colour but grey as in a grey area, a space of interesting uncertainty in which crosswords emerge neither exclusively as the product of a Culture Industry that dictates knowledge in a one-way direction as a means of rationalising and standardising human life, nor as sources of recreation and knowledge, free from cultural politics.

This paper forms four sections. The first examines crosswords as social agents that mediate relationships and communities. The second asks what types of people form these communities, and what this might tell us about the role of crosswords as alienating devices within the Culture Industry. The third argues that the making and use of crosswords demonstrate the complexities of Adorno. The paper ends with speculations about the role of crosswords in a postcolonial, global context.

### **Crosswords as social agents**

Crosswords are not designed to be shared. In the words of one research participant, 'I like to be in control of the pen so sharing a crossword is tricky'. I think that it is for this reason that sharing the crossword is for some, an act of intimacy. Another interviewee reflected that he 'wouldn't do crosswords with a stranger. I usually do them alone but sometimes also with my girlfriend over breakfast in bed at

weekends.' 'Crosswords are a way of communicating', concluded another, 'a jumbo crossword is the saving grace of a trip to my parents'. *The Guardian* underestimated the importance of crosswords to relationships when it moved its cryptic and quick crosswords to the same page, much to the annoyance of couples no longer able to do a crossword each, simultaneously.

Beyond the most intimate of relationships, crosswords surely play a part in imagined communities formed by readers of newspapers (cf. Anderson 1983) and also in similarly anonymous relationships between setters and solvers, fondly described in the following words of setter Edmund Akenhead: 'Setters are of course sadists (although in the nicest possible way) and since all solvers appear to be masochists this leads to a rather beautiful relationship' (quoted in Greer 2001: 13). Adam Reed, in his study of enthusiasts of the author Henry Williamson, recounts research participants describing the act of reading as hosting the author's consciousness (2002: 7). In a related vein, solvers to whom I spoke seemed to instil crosswords with personhood, despite the anonymity of some crosswords or the pseudonyms used by others that actively distance solvers from setters. One 'blames the crossword' when he is stuck on the final few clues. Another associated crosswords published on

different days of the week with different setters: 'I get on well with Monday's and Friday's crossword but am still at odds with Tuesday's'.

These comments all suggest an awareness of the person who created the puzzle within the puzzle itself. Among my research participants, this awareness had not motivated them enough to actually contact a setter or editor. However, one setter spoke of being taken out for lunch on a regular basis in payment for the pleasure his crosswords brought to one man and his wife.

Can anthropology help us here?

Anthropomorphising of the grid may suggest loose similarities with that of decorative art described by Alfred Gell (1988). Like the psychological appeal of decorative art that results in what Gell describes as 'abduction of agency', the imbuing of crosswords with personhood may also be related to some kind of draw to the grid. 'Opening up the crossword page of the paper is like the draw of fresh snow to feet' said one enthusiast. Another was attracted to the symmetries of puzzles. Several participants referred to crosswords as 'little black and white squares', reflecting perhaps the universal appeal of the two colours as established by Berlin and Kay (1969)<sup>3</sup>.

Ultimately though, what perhaps makes a grid come alive is that most human of qualities: humour. During my research I heard repeatedly that a good (cryptic) clue is one that brings a smile to a solver's face. To present humour as a social gel in relations between setters and solvers begs a look at Adorno's take on humour. For him, humour is a 'parody of humanity...to laugh at something is always to deride it' (1979: 141). Quoting further, 'The triumph of beauty is celebrated by humour... There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh at' (ibid.: 140), and 'In a false society laughter is a disease which has attacked happiness and is drawing it into its own worthless totality' (ibid.: 140). Importantly then, humour, as a social gel, and humour as a smokescreen for emptiness, are not independent of one another. I consider the former to be contained within the latter.

Just as crosswords mediate relationships between solvers and setters, they also bring together groups of setters. Such groups seem to provide comfort to those sharing in the experience of setting, especially its symptomatic 'insanity', described by one setter thus: 'everything has cluing potential, your head never stops playing with words. It makes you question your sanity'. Since most crossword professionals work long hours on a freelance basis at

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<sup>3</sup> Although black and white are not technically colours.

homes geographically far apart from one another, relationships between them seem to be based upon sporadic email, telephone and chatroom contact, punctuated by meetings at specific events and competitions, such as the Azed<sup>4</sup> gathering – a society of crossword setters, editors and enthusiasts - which has met regularly for the last 20 years.

Solvers also form, or reinforce, real (rather than imagined) relationships with one another. In spite of most participants stating a preference for using pen and paper for the setting and solving of crosswords, online crosswords and associated chat rooms do exist. Some participants had specific friends who they would text when needing help solving clues. Others were part of physical groups formed from a common love of crosswords. 'At college there was a group of us who would do the crossword over fry ups' said one solver. 'Even now, three of us meet every Saturday and do the crossword together.'

### Just a game?

Having considered some of the forms of community mediated by crosswords, the next question to answer is what type of persons comprises such communities? Undeniably, the majority of crossword setters and editors are white, middle-class men in possession of Bourdieu's cultural

capital (1989), accumulated via family, diffuse and institutionalised education. For example, among the setters and editors taking part in this study were a civil servant, cricket umpire, statistician, novelist, and barrister. Of the setters I spoke to, almost all described growing up around a crossword-solving parent or grandparent as influencing their own crossword habits. One held a particularly clear image of his grandfather cutting out *The Times* crossword every morning,

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<sup>4</sup> Azed is the pseudonym of Jonathan Crowther, crossword setter for *The Observer*. The Azed crossword appears in *The Observer* every Sunday and the Azed honours list awards points for 1st, 2nd and 3rd placings in the monthly clue-writing competitions, as well as for VHC (Very Highly Commended) clues. A full listing of clues and detailed comments by Azed are available in the monthly Azed Slips. These date back to the start of the Azed series in 1972 and continue a tradition begun by Azed's predecessor Ximenes. Once a year, the Slip includes the Annual Honours List of competitors who have accumulated the most points in the course of the year. A silver salver is passed on each year from the holder of first place in the Honours List to his or her successor, and a small silver cup is likewise passed on from the winner of each monthly competition to the next. Each Slip also includes Azed's comments on the current competition and his ideas on crosswords in general, giving advice on clue-writing and answering solvers' queries. In this way a dialogue between setters and solvers is maintained. Approximately every five years, milestone numbers in the Azed crossword series are marked by dinners for solvers and their partners and friends. The Slip subscribers list is used to inform solvers of these events (which are also announced in *The Observer*), enabling keen solvers to meet each other and Azed. See [www.crossword.org.uk/azed.htm](http://www.crossword.org.uk/azed.htm)

attaching it to his mirror, shaving while mentally solving the puzzle, before calmly going down to breakfast.

Family influences were rarely described as active influences but rather like osmosis. 'I don't remember sitting down to learn how to solve crosswords. It just sort of happened', pondered one setter. 'Learning crosswords was part of learning the facts of life', suggested another. A third recalled a favourite schoolteacher starting each lesson with a crossword clue. Another said 'crosswords are just things you end up doing at school. It was that kind of environment'.

The demographic make up of those solving crosswords is however more varied. Crosswords are carried not only by national broadsheets but also by an endless array of 'low-brow' publications, many of which are aimed at the female and/or 'grey' markets. According to puzzle publisher Bauer, 85 percent of their readers are female and on average are at least 50 years of age<sup>5</sup>.

It hardly needs stating then that crossword solving is not exclusively the pursuit of the bourgeoisie but also of the working class, not only of men but also of women, not only of the employed but also the unemployed and retired. How then are we to understand crosswords in relation to work as opposed to leisure, a binary central to Adorno's Culture Industry? In Adorno's words:

The difference between work and free time has been branded as a norm in the minds of the people, at both the conscious and the unconscious level. Because, in accordance with the predominant work ethic, time free of work should be utilized for the recreation of expended labour power, then work-less time, precisely because it is a mere appendage of work, is severed from the latter with puritanical zeal (1991: 189).

The categorising of crosswords as leisure is well established. 80 percent of readers of Bauer puzzle titles, for example, agree that puzzles (including crosswords) help them relax and unwind<sup>6</sup>. Many interviewees associated crosswords with being on holiday. As a peaceful and positive means of filling leisure time, crosswords top the UK's Home Office list of approved recreational activities for prison inmates (Balfour 2003: 38). And the categorising of crosswords as leisure is of course reinforced by their placement among back pages of publications, far removed from the news stories and features that dominate earlier sections.

So entrenched is the equating of crosswords with leisure time that crosswords have attracted criticism for diminishing economic

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<sup>5</sup> [www.tpconline.co.uk/website/puzzle.cfm](http://www.tpconline.co.uk/website/puzzle.cfm)

<sup>6</sup> [www.tpconline.co.uk/website/puzzle.cfm](http://www.tpconline.co.uk/website/puzzle.cfm)

productivity. A 'crossword widow' in Chicago, for example, sued her husband for neglecting his financial responsibilities by spending too much time solving crosswords and was ordered by a judge to limit himself to three puzzles per day (Greer 2001: 3). A more public complaint was made against crosswords by *The Times* in 1924: 'All America has succumbed to the crossword puzzle. It is a menace making devastating inroads on the working hours of every rank and society'. The paper estimated that Americans spent five million hours every day doing crossword puzzles, many of which, it scolded, should have been working hours (quoted in Balfour 2003: 115).

From Adorno's perspective however, *The Times* missed the point. Leisure, he argued, is an artificial concept. Although opposed to work in the minds of the people, leisure in fact reproduces it, by refreshing workers and increasing productivity while at the same time fuelling the economy with the profits of the leisure industry: 'Free time must not resemble work in any way whatsoever, in order, presumably, that one can work all the more effectively afterwards' (Adorno 1991: 189).

While crosswords are not inane in the same way as those leisure activities to which Adorno primarily referred (and perhaps for this very reason), they could be conceived of as a means of easing workers

into the mental requirements demanded of them in the workplace, particularly in the contemporary knowledge economy (Castells 1996)<sup>7</sup>. Solvers I spoke to supported this position. One presented a theory that *The Times* crossword is purposefully less difficult at the start of the week as a means of easing in workers, becoming increasingly more taxing as the week goes on as a means of maximising solvers' mental potential. Another (a composer) described how doing the crossword in the morning indicates that he 'was not hung-over and that it would be a good composing day'.

If crosswords reproduce the logic of labour, would we not expect the majority of those solving them to be workers? And if so, what are we to make of the marked popularity of crossword solving among women and the elderly? While I cannot answer these questions, I can only concede that neither Adorno nor Bourdieu are able to explain the scope of crossword consumption (examined in

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<sup>7</sup> Hence why I do not distinguish different degrees of inanity in leisure activities in this paper. Instead, I argue that while crosswords appear a more 'productive' use of leisure time vis-à-vis other activities, they must be understood as part of a homogenised leisure category that reproduces work, in order that their guise as providing opportunities for individuals to better themselves outside of capitalism, might be critiqued.

the next section)<sup>8</sup>. This is partly because, as Adorno himself made clear, a study of consumption in isolation of production is necessarily blinkered. Adorno understood audience responses as mere functions of production (1991: 67, cited in Hutnyk 2000: 48). Given the limits of this research paper, I am unable to describe relations and processes of crossword production, as ideally I would in a larger project. However, while I focus on crossword consumption, I do not abandon Adorno. Indeed, I now review the commodification of crosswords, in order that they qualify for analysis using his Culture Industry criteria.

### Trapped in the grid?

Crosswords are found not only in newspapers but also in magazines and books and on websites, NTL, digital TV, CD Roms and pocket electronic games. In terms of newspaper sales, the old maxim rings true: 'They come for the news, they stay for the features and in particular they stay for the obituaries and the crossword' (Balfour 2003: 54). Almost all my participants quoted crosswords as a motive for buying a paper, one facetiously said 'finishing the crossword quickly on a long train journey is really annoying. It means having to read the rest of the paper that the crossword was an excuse to buy'. Given that in the US alone, an estimated 27 percent of the population do crosswords (Balfour 2003: 121), the proportion of publications

bought because of the crossword must be staggering, and of particular concern to the editor of *The Times* in the late 1920s who found himself in a circulation war with a rival paper which, like *The Times*, was priced at two pence but unlike *The Times* at that point, boasted the crossword puzzle that readers craved (Greer 2001: 5). Furthermore, crosswords offer not simply a means of selling publications but also of advertising a publication's ethos. The more liberal nature of *The Guardian* crossword for example differs markedly from the classical conservatism of *The Times* or *The Telegraph* crosswords, both styles reflecting the wider ethos of each newspaper. Research participants considered information in *The Guardian* crossword, for example, more contemporary and more liberal in its political bias than that of *The Times* crossword. They described the latter as 'more traditional and conservative'. These differences matched participants' impressions of the two publications overall. Crosswords in newspapers are not found

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<sup>8</sup> They may be more useful if crosswords are conceived of as a series of types (e.g. cryptic and quick, those in puzzle books, popular magazines, etc.) instead of one single category. This heterogeneous approach however misses what is inherent and interesting about crosswords (e.g. the notion of contrast, grid, hidden meaning and so forth), and renders crosswords mere representative parts of wider publications, each of which is more readily associated with a specific class than the crossword puzzle is in isolation.

in isolation from other crossword products. Many crosswords are linked to other fundraising gimmicks that create new opportunities for profit. Almost all British crossword-carrying national newspapers, for example, also have an online crossword section requiring subscription fees, along with a 60 pence-per-minute clue answering hotline. Some newspapers also seek sponsorship for their crossword, a further chance for generating income. Although the total revenue generated by crosswords is impossible to calculate, the specialist puzzle publishing market alone, of which crosswords are a major part, is worth some £50 million<sup>9</sup>. As an industry, crosswords involve not just setters but a huge web of employees including editors and publishers, puzzle consultants and media services employees (who act as middlemen between puzzle producers and publishers).

Viewing crosswords as commodities allows us to assess them as a product within the Culture Industry as understood by Adorno. Here, I consider several aspects of this functioning, the first of which concerns standardisation (Adorno 1979, 1991: 68) (of cultural products rather than production processes) and rationalisation. Others, that I come to later, look at the relationship between crossword producers and consumers; the way in which consumers use crosswords to critique power within language; crosswords as sources of

innovation rather than restriction; cultural products spun-off from crosswords (themselves part of the Culture Industry); and the potential of crosswords for political subversion.

Adorno explains his use of the term 'rationalisation' as referring not to technological production processes but to the incorporation of industrial forms of organisation within a cultural, rather than manufacturing, realm (1991: 100–1). While this is true of the crossword industry, I prefer to treat the rationality of crosswords as part of the rationalisation of crosswords as industry.

### **Standardisation and rationalisation**

Crosswords at first appear prime examples of the processes of standardisation and rationalisation. Their ordered design and the unambiguous nature (of cryptic clues) are inherently rational. Crosswords can be seen as part of a 'cult of facts' that Adorno described as replacing 'the cult of God' (2001: 157). Amid a sense of uncertainty that is a prime co-ordinate of modernity, the Culture Industry, argued Adorno, maintains social order by promoting rationality, and crosswords could be seen as one way of doing so. Crosswords arguably also perpetuate the idea that 'solutions' exist for all 'problems' and that

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<sup>9</sup> [www.puzzlemedia.com](http://www.puzzlemedia.com)

those in authority have privileged access to these solutions (whether politicians, state intelligence officials, crossword setters, newspaper editors and so forth). Thus, they encourage a blinkered loyalty toward those in positions of power (cf. Adorno 1991: 105).

Certainly, crossword commentator Barnard attributes the psychological appeal of crosswords to their comforting rationality:

It is strange in a world beset by real problems of inescapable clamancy, man should choose to set himself still more problems in the form of patterns and clues... It may be that he finds it a welcome challenge to grapple occasionally with some challenge, which, unlike so many of the world's problems, really can be met – something which really has got an answer, and can be solved (Barnard, quoted in Greer 2001: 9).

My research participants also alluded to something therapeutic about crosswords: 'solving crosswords is easier than solving problems in real life' brooded one. 'When I was growing depressed in Berlin they were the only thing that kept me sane'. Another (quoted in Birkner 2003) described losing himself in crosswords: 'It's an escape to venture into the world of little white boxes. You feel far removed from all the things you have to do that day.'

Crosswords also initially appear to function, like Adorno's Culture Industry, to maintain the status quo of capitalism in the minds of the people. They demand mental attention and then appear to dictate limited knowledge in return. Consider, for example the type of knowledge conveyed in the crosswords of popular magazines. It hardly needs stating that celebrity magazine crosswords carry knowledge about celebrities and that music magazine crosswords carry knowledge about music. Men's popular magazine have crosswords containing information about computer games, popular music, cars, film and sport; *Private Eye's* crossword involves satire; the crossword in *The Lady* (long-running, British women's title) holds knowledge about art, flora, fauna and literature. The types of knowledge in each reinforce in the minds of readers the information status quo upon which the publication's culture is built.

Such a stance goes against the belief held by the solvers I spoke to that crosswords are a device for learning, rather than reinforcing existing limits to, knowledge. When, however, I pressed participants about what they had learned from crosswords, no one could recall examples other than what Berry (2004) describes as 'crosswordese': words favoured by crossword setters because of their arrangement of letters but which are too

obscure to arise in day-to-day situations. Examples include 'smee' (a kind of duck), 'ulu' (a knife used by native Alaskans), and 'esne' (a medieval English labourer). Stanley Baldwin referred to such words at a Press Club lunch in the 1920s:

I as Prime Minister and you as journalists are engaged in the common work of trying to elevate the people in this country, and you are doing it today through that marvellous medium, the crossword puzzle. There is hardly now a man, woman or child in this country who is not familiar with the name of Eli. The fact that Asa was King of Judah can be concealed now from none (quoted in Greer 2001: 4).

This kind of knowledge serves only to better equip solvers as they answer clues but as a means of developing practical knowledge it is redundant. According to industry specialists however, 'crossword-specific' knowledge is in decline. We can assume therefore that crossword knowledge in general is less likely than ever to teach a solver something they do not already know. After all, and as setters stress, crossword clues should be battles of wits, not tests of knowledge (Greer 2001: 30).

What are we to make then of the insistence of both setters and solvers that crosswords are a means of learning? And if crosswords

were not effective vehicles for learning, why would teachers use them as education devices? The advice given to setters of *The Times* crossword reads as follows: 'Vocabulary should be familiar to a person of a reasonable level of education and knowledge... On the other hand, one of the benefits of doing crosswords is learning new words, so an occasional less common word is justifiable' (quoted in Greer 2001: 52).

Clearly, there is a case for the crossword as a teaching device and although it may only be a fraction of a puzzle's clues that further a solver's knowledge, it would be premature to dismiss crosswords as maintaining status quo without first considering the active effort on the part of setters to further their own knowledge and that of their solvers. As Will Shortz, crossword editor of *The New York Times* writes:

There is so much knowledge in the world and I try to encompass all of it – literature, opera, classical music, geography – up to modern subjects like movies, TV, rock 'n' roll and sports (quoted in Birkner 2003).

Appadurai, in his account of the standardisation of technical production knowledge, acknowledges that secondary or luxury commodities incur greater variation in production knowledge due

to 'taste, judgement and individual experience' (1986: 42) when compared to primary commodities such as grains and fuels. Following this formulation, I suggest crosswords fall into this luxury category. Other than having to conform to a publication's house style, most setters describe themselves as free to choose themes and content of crosswords. Indeed, many include secret messages to friends or loved ones within their puzzles on a regular basis. In one well-known example, the *The New York Times* crossword once carried a marriage proposal.

One setter I interviewed claimed starting each crossword with a word from the dictionary he did not already know. Similarly, the themes he chose were inspired by things he had read elsewhere or by personal experiences: 'for example I was at a concert in Chester Cathedral last week with my wife and heard a piece by Benjamin Britten about bird song. I knew little about the topic so it seemed an interesting theme for a crossword'. And sure enough, a short while later *The Spectator's* 1,677th puzzle was published with the theme 'Dawn Chorus'.

Ultimately, setters have to produce puzzles that stand out from others received by crossword editors if their puzzle is to be published (in much the same way as an author's work has to catch the

eye of a publisher). This then demands that crosswords involve an element of innovation, which in turn guarantees that the knowledge they impart is more than a repeat of what has gone before. For all these reasons, viewing crossword producers as silent collaborators in the workings of the Culture Industry may be naïve. This should not of course be taken as a critique of Adorno, who makes clear the scope for innovations contained within commodity production, but rather a reminder that within the Culture Industry, such innovations are contained (Adorno 1979: 18–22).

### **Other ways in which crosswords demand complex readings of Adorno**

There are other ways in which crosswords require a complex reading of Adorno. First, crossword knowledge does not flow in a one-way direction from producers to consumers. Sometimes, editors receive letters from solvers, writing to challenge the accuracy of information. Although this goes against a simplified view of the Culture Industry as too mighty to be challenged, I consider it also an example of what Adorno calls 'secret omnipresence of resistance' (Adorno 1991: 67, cited in Hutnyk 2000: 7, 203). Similarly, boundaries between producers and consumers are blurred. Several participants calling themselves solvers, had also tried, or hoped to try, setting. On the other hand, setters

claimed to 'relax by solving crosswords'. *The Times* online crossword club hosts a regular clue-writing competition for its solvers. *Birmingham Evening Mail* used to publish a crossword set by its readers. The Azed group actively encourages dialogue between setters and solvers (see footnote four). Clearly, solvers and setters, like writers and readers, are co-constituting. To view solvers as distinct, and at the mercy of the Culture Industry and its crossword producing pawns, is misleading.

Secondly, an overly-simplistic reading of Adorno might also expect solvers to be passive players. I suspect though that Adorno would have preferred the word 'complicit', knowingly caught within a totalising society but not without some element of reflexivity and resistance. Instead of passivity, I found solvers spoke of the way crosswords help them deconstruct and critique language in other arenas in which power resides (cf. Bourdieu 1991)<sup>10</sup>. One of my interviewees claimed for example that, 'doing crosswords makes me constantly deconstruct language in daily life'. 'It's as though language is made up of molecules and doing crosswords helps break it down into atoms, protons and electrons – into the smallest units of truth.' Another said: 'crosswords make you aware of hidden meanings in language. They make you more sensitive to say, political slogans.' Viewing solvers as passive also

makes no sense of the personal narratives evoked when solving clues. As Balfour writes, a cryptic crossword clue 'when read straight...should be the sort of phrase that triggers memories, or thoughts, or extracts an emotional response' (2003: 86).

Even if it could be said with certainty that (cryptic) crosswords allow no scope for individual interpretation or agency in the process of solving clues, inherent within cryptic clues *themselves* is a source of hope that goes against the closed and controlled, overly-simplistic image of crosswords as Culture Industry products. Cryptic crossword clues draw unrelated strands of knowledge together, as do metaphors, and are hence in Nietzsche's and Aristotle's terms, a source of innovation and of truth, rather than of restriction and falsehood (Culler 1981: 204–5; Lakoff & Johnson 1980). A more complex reading of crosswords recognises tolerated, contained 'agency' and 'hope', as freedom that leads to the limited diversity upon which the Culture Industry thrives.

Furthermore, crosswords are also a source of artistic inspiration. 1920s songs included 'Crossword Puzzle Blues' and 'Crossword

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<sup>10</sup> Adorno might however have interpreted this sensitivity as a kind of parodying of political sloganeering, in which crosswords function as a riddle that distracts from the critiquing of political wordplay at higher levels.

Mamma You Puzzle Me (But Papa's Gonna Figure You Out)'. One solver I spoke to contemplated choreographing dance based on the symmetries of crossword grids. Such examples are far removed from a simplified understanding of Adorno that sees these artistic pursuits as disqualifying crosswords from the dampening Culture Industry, but not from a more complex understanding, one which views them as spin-off products contained within it.

A final point demanding a complex understanding of Adorno is the opportunity crosswords provide for political statements and subversion. While this appears at odds with a superficial view of the Culture Industry as crushing (Adorno 1979: 126), a more nuanced understanding sees subversion contained within the Culture Industry and so again, does not disqualify crosswords from being a part of it. One example is a crossword that appeared in *The New York Times* on Election Day in 1996, which contained the clue 'Lead story in tomorrow's newspaper (7,7)'. The answer appeared to be 'Clinton elected' but because of the intended ambiguity of interacting clues, the answer could also have been 'Bob Dole elected'. Will Shortz, the crossword's editor, said:

It was the most amazing crossword I've ever seen. As soon as it appeared, my telephone started ringing. Most people

said 'How dare you presume that Clinton will win!' And the people who filled in 'Bob Dole' thought we'd made a whopper of a mistake! (Shackle 2002)<sup>11</sup>.

A similar case arose in *The Daily Telegraph* with the clue 'Outcry at Tory assassination (4,6)', to which the answer is 'blue murder'. While in itself perhaps not all that objectionable, the fact that the clue happened to appear in a crossword published on 30 July 1990, the day that Ian Gow, a junior minister to Thatcher's government was killed by a bomb planted by the Provisional IRA, caused uproar (Balfour 2003: 120).

The most famous example of crosswords as subversive however is the case of crosswords containing code words for the D-Day operation. Over a period of months, solutions to clues of crosswords published in *The Daily Telegraph* included words such as 'Juno', 'Gold' and 'Sword', all of which are common in crosswords but which also happened to be code words. Then came 'Utah', a less common crossword solution and another code word. After it, and only days before the planned landings, the crossword delivered code words 'Omaha',

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<sup>11</sup> This anecdote perhaps is also an example of the 'secret omnipresence of resistance' (Adorno 1991: 67, quoted in Hutnyk 2000: 7, 203).

'Overlord', 'Mulberry' and finally 'Neptune'. Warning bells rang at MI5, especially as the *Telegraph's* crossword had been drawn to its attention two years previously.

An explanation for the appearance of the code words was not discovered until 1984, by which point the story had become something of a modern legend, claiming the crosswords to have almost caused the landings' cancellation. It transpired that the man responsible for the puzzles, Leonard Dawe, taught at a school where he set puzzles from words that students inserted into blank crossword grids. The school was located close to camps of soldiers awaiting the invasion. The codewords apparently were well known days before the invasion and picked up with excitement by the students, who in turn used them in Dawe's grids without any intended agenda (Gilbert 2004).

Whatever the explanation, the story illustrates the potential of crosswords to comment on and influence political events and hence resists a view of crosswords as grids imprisoning solvers in much the same way as a narrow view of Adorno sees mass culture terrorising the public at large. Crosswords may comprise a series of rules and rationalities but I argue that these examples (although many are serendipitous), show that within the Culture Industry, genuine opportunities

for freedom, creativity and sabotage exist. Adorno would not be surprised. He himself admitted that it was an unresolved as to whether art, or other creativities, might escape the totalising Culture Industry (1997: 251–2). 'The real interests of individuals' he wrote, 'are still strong enough to resist, within certain limits, total inclusion' (1991: 197).

Before concluding, let us take stock of the argument. My study of crossword consumption reveals them to be not simply commodified instruments of outright domination but also objects of pleasure and possibility. While these oppressive and liberating aspects of crosswords struggle to cohabit within an overly-simplistic understanding of Adorno's Culture Industry model as despairingly soulless, I argue that the pleasure and potential of crosswords is very much part of what qualifies crosswords for membership within that same model. A notable exception may be when crosswords involve black humour or irony – such as the 'Tory assassination' clue mentioned earlier – something for which the Culture Industry, or any serious analytical frame, cannot account.

### **Crossword colonialism**

In this final section I broaden the geographical context of this discussion, looking back at the origins and export of crosswords around the world. I end by

speculating about the place of crosswords in shifting forms of Empire.

Although found all over the world, crosswords retain an association with Britain. They are thought to have begun in New York in 1913 when an English émigré, Arthur Wayne, editor of the then *New York World* needed to fill space in the 'fun' section of the newspaper, and so devised what he called a 'word cross' which required readers to fill in the diamond-shaped grid with words matching the listed definitions (Balfour 2003: 114). The 1920s, however, was the time when crosswords truly took off, thanks to two young graduates, Simon and Schuster, publishing the *Cross Word Puzzle Book* in New York, which was an immediate success.

Five years after the publication of Simon and Schuster's book, all British national daily newspapers carried a crossword<sup>12</sup>. Over the last seven decades, crosswords in Britain in particular emerged in their cryptic form<sup>13</sup>. As a result, cryptic crosswords in general have become associated with Britain and British cryptic crosswords differ notably from those of other nationalities. *The New York Times* cryptic crossword, for example, is more literal and less narrative in its clues than British cryptic varieties (Balfour 2003: 103). The clues of the British cryptic crossword are characteristically unambiguous, perhaps reflecting the

peculiarly British notion of fair play (Balfour 2003: 116).

Originating in the USA, adopted by other nations' media and by that of the British in particular, crosswords have subsequently spread to far-flung corners of the earth, aided in recent decades by the Internet. At the time of my research, *The Times* crossword also appeared in *The Press* (New Zealand), *The Australian* and *South China Morning Post*. *The Guardian* crossword was carried by *Hindustan Times* (India), and the *Evening Standard* crossword by the *Khaleej Times* (UAE). American media syndicates provided both *The Daily Observer* (Antigua) and *The Times of India* with their crosswords.

The significance of these examples of crossword export perhaps lies in the nature of the knowledge communicated by crosswords. *The Times* crossword for example carries classical knowledge about Greek mythology, flora and fauna, the arts, literature, and so on, much of which is Euro,

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<sup>12</sup> The wider British crossword industry began later however. The market leader in puzzle publications for example dates back only to the 1970s ([www.puzzlemedia.com](http://www.puzzlemedia.com)).

<sup>13</sup> This development is commonly credited to the punning potential of the English language. It should however also be noted that cryptic crosswords are found in other languages such as Hebrew, Welsh and Bengali (Greer 2001: 15).

if not Anglo, centric. In order to solve it, one needs, according to a crossword expert: 'The remnants of some Latin... some 'Kubla Khan', quotations from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*... Some cricket, the titles of a few musicals, and the stock is almost complete' (Norton, quoted in Greer 2001: 54).

This list is of course not to be taken literally. However it is listed though, crossword knowledge such as that carried in *The Times* and exported elsewhere is primarily accessible to those educated in Europe or preferably Britain, or in locations where British control has had a lasting impact on everyday knowledge.

Such knowledge is also subject to censorship along lines according to a very British type of sensibility and must fit within the parameters of what *The Times* house style describes as acceptable 'drawing-room conversation'. Loosely, this means that words labelled by the dictionary as 'vulgar, disparaging, or offensive, and words that relate to topics such as sex, bodily functions, death and disease, and drug use' (Berry 2004: 113) are discouraged, though according to my participants 'bad taste' is tolerated today more than it used to be.

Moreover, it is not uncommon for British crosswords to require knowledge of British subjects such as cricket in order to

understand the mechanics of a clue, before the actual answer can be reached. The presence of the word 'leg' in a cryptic clue can for example indicate 'on' (as in the cricket term 'leg on'). Or 'maiden' can carry the hidden meaning 'over', as it would in cricket (Balfour 2003: 109, 150). Even the golden rule of crossword setting – that setters need not mean what they say but must say what they mean – is based upon a quintessential British literary character, Lewis Carroll's Mad Hatter<sup>14</sup>.

By giving a message about what constitutes expected and desirable everyday knowledge to readers internationally, crosswords create or perpetuate colonial structures of domination between nations, unchallenged because of their guise as harmless leisure. In so doing, crosswords support the case for the continued significance of the nation-state in world politics (if politics is understood as power relations between people rather than world governmental affairs). Such an argument perhaps goes against that of Hardt and Negri (2000) for whom contemporary Empire takes a new form in which the power of the nation-state is in decline and is superseded by tiers

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<sup>14</sup> Who pointed out to Alice that to say that "I mean what I say" means the same as "I say what I mean" is as illogical as to say that "I see what I eat" means the same as "I eat what I see"" (Greer 2001: 7).

of power, the third of which houses the media<sup>15</sup>. Crosswords, of course, are part of the media but unlike the rest of it retain content and an identity firmly associated with one or two nation-states (Britain primarily, but also the USA). They therefore offer at best a point of crossover between old and new forms of Empire, reminiscent of Castells' notion of nodes between networks in society (2004). And like Castells' nodes, crosswords are all the more potent for their status within two worlds. A more modest reading of crosswords' dual status is that it demonstrates a reality (which Hardt and Negri acknowledge, 2000: 311) in which the media, rather than representing the global People, independent of the grasp of nation-states, is in fact rarely free from state control.

This paper began with individuals - with the people wielding the pen - and found that no one theoretical mode of analysing crosswords accounts for similarities and variations in their consumption across the class spectrum. It ends with Empire - with the nations wielding world power - and here too I am unable to explain the differences between nations in crossword habits (class and nationality not necessarily being mutually exclusive factors determining crossword consumption). The idea of historical relations between nations continued in relations between their media is a part of why crosswords

are a product spread unevenly around the world. But so are socialisation processes that lead to cultural capital accumulation among individuals comprising those nations, not to mention variations in experiences of modernity: the rationality of crosswords appealing in different places at different times to different people for different reasons. The puzzle set at the start of this paper was why people do crosswords and how crosswords affect their lives. Words have been offered, some of which help solve the question. Some boxes rightly remain unfilled however, for black and white box filling is not what anthropological questioning is about.

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<sup>15</sup> For a critique of Hardt and Negri, see Hutnyk 2004.

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### **Puzzle postscript**

This study has placed crosswords within anthropological and other theory. The crossword on the front cover places anthropology, theory and its theorists within a crossword. Thank you, Doc (Tom Johnson) of *The Spectator*, for setting it.

### **ACROSS**

- 1 Is this anthropologist's work a grind? (6)
- 4 German critical theorist has to decorate with love (6)
- 9 Fixing ship's ropes (7)
- 10 Excessively inappropriate (5)
- 11&21A Throw measures to this Spanish sociologist (8)
- 12 Significant narrative? (7)
- 14 He's dedicated to a monastic life with the Round Table, maybe (6)
- 16 Portuguese currency (6)
- 19 Civilization's beliefs and values associated with vultures and Club (7)
- 21 See 11 across (4)
- 23 Incites (5)
- 24 Free time with wreath. Certainly! (7)
- 25 Indian Dravidian language (6)
- 26 Carnivore that goes pop! (6)

**DOWN**

- 1 Spoil unknown author of *Das Kapital* (4)
- 2 Asymmetrical attachment to 9 (7)
- 3 Cited incorrect order (5)
- 5 Anthropologist on the Isle of Man (7)
- 6 More than one spoke (5)
- 7 Get too big – for one's boots? (8)
- 8 Gemstone, silver, worn away (5)
- 13 Philosopher's pendulum (8)
- 15 Is a gust the making of an anthropologist? (7)
- 17 Mutual change with small accents (7)
- 18 Kingdom's genuine male (5)
- 20 Lawful version of 22A (5)
- 21 Banishment from Sussex – I left! (5)
- 22 L-leg up for art anthropologist (4)

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