Remaking Our World: China Miéville’s Bas-Lag Novels


Socialism and fantasy, according to China Miéville, are both about imagining the (apparently) impossible, they are both based on counterfactual thinking. Miéville is a card-carrying Trotskyist who ran for the Socialist Alliance in Regent’s Park and Kensington North in the 2001 local elections, winning 1.2% of the vote. He also has strong theoretical leanings: he obtained a doctorate in International Relations at the London School of Economics, his thesis was published under the title *Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). His fiction, which crosses the boundaries between fantasy, science fiction and supernatural horror, has long been popular with a cult audience, but has only recently begun to be noticed by the literary mainstream. The 2009 novel *The City and the City*, published by Macmillan, constituted a turning point in the reception of Miéville’s work, with numerous reviewers comparing it to the works of Orwell and Kafka. The counterfactual premise of the novel is that two cities exist in the same physical space, separated only by the social convention that prevents inhabitants of each city from noticing the buildings and inhabitants pertaining to the other. “Breach” – visibly noticing or interacting with the other city without first obtaining a visa and passing through the border controls, re-entering a space which is physically the same but discursively different – is a serious crime. Here, the counterfactual premise is used to explore the extent to which reality is always shaped discursively. *The City and the City* is easily read as a political parable, the more easily as it lacks overtly fantastical (in the sense of supernatural) elements. Miéville’s previous work has not yet, to the same extent, been explored by the literary mainstream. The Bas-Lag trilogy, consisting of the novels *Perdido Street Station* (2000), *The Scar* (2002) and *The Iron Council* (2004), all published by Macmillan under the Pan imprint, uses
the fantastic mode to generate counterfactual premises in narratives that are socially and morally realistic and attempt to explore the process of historical change itself rather than just a specific conjuncture. The society of Bas-Lag’s greatest city-state, New Crobuzon, is profoundly riven by social and political conflict, and Miéville uses his novels to explore the extent to which historical conjunctures always contain the seeds of their own transformation.

New Crobuzon: A Multiethnic Metropolis

Many of New Crobuzon’s inhabitants are human, yet the metropolis is also inhabited by so-called “xenians”: the khepri, for instance, whose body is human but whose head is a scarab beetle (though the khepri, of course, think of humans as having khepri bodies with the heads of shaved baboons). There are other races, most, but not all, hybrid from an anthropocentric perspective, though whole from their own. The garuda are nomadic desert dwellers, humanoids with birds’ wings, beaks and claws. There are cactacae, cactus men and women with bones of wood and sap instead of blood, who carefully prune their spines in order to better shake hands or manipulate objects. Vodyanoi dwell in water and have some human and some amphibian characteristics; they are often employed as stevedores in the city’s docks. New Crobuzon is, thus, multiethnic.

Miéville does not portray the city’s races in an essentialist or exoticist way - specific character traits are not regarded as typical for certain races, unlike, on the one hand, the racial and social stereotyping often encountered in realist works and, on the other, fantasy à la Tolkien, where hobbits are almost invariably jolly and elves melancholy and dignified. In The Scar, the grindylow are initially represented as inherently cruel primitives, only for essentialist and primitivist explanations of their behaviour to be debunked later on in the novel. The novels’ social and international conflicts are shown to have a history, and, more often than not, this history is influenced by economic factors.

Though New Crobuzon is multiethnic and, to a certain extent, multicultural, the novel does not invoke an ideal of multiculturalism: many of the city’s inhabitants are deeply racist. The city’s non-human races are collectively referred to as “xenians.” In Perdido Street Station, the male human protagonist, Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin, attempts to disguise his relationship with the female khepri artist Lin, as cross-loving between humans and xenians is considered taboo and openly acknowledging the relationship might jeopardise his ability to work for the university of
New Crobuzon as a freelance researcher. Isaac’s own emotions towards Lin, furthermore, veer between desire and disgust in the early stages of their relationship, though by the time when the novel is set, two years into their relationship, he is deeply in love with his partner. The khepri and garuda of New Crobuzon can be read as literalisations of the animalistic stereotypes of racist discourse. In thus defamiliarising ‘race’, the novel also raises questions concerning the apparently natural basis of ‘racial’ distinctions.

**Containing Dissent: Militia Violence and Remaking**

While New Crobuzon is populated by creatures that are, in some ways, alien, the social inequality and corruption that beset the city are familiar. New Crobuzon’s economy is based on industry and mercantilism. The government contains dissatisfaction among the lower classes by sowing discord between the races. When vodyanoi and human dock-workers nevertheless decide to fight side by side against the bosses in *Perdido Street Station*, the strike is brutally quelled to discourage similar occurrences in the future.

*Ranks of militia charged the open spaces where the pickets were congregated. Men and vodyanoi wielded placards like badly designed clubs. Within the disorderly mass were brutal skirmishes, as militia agents swung spiked truncheons and whips coated with man-o’-war stings. Twenty feet from the front line of the confused and angry demonstrators, the first wave of uniformed militia dropped to their knees and raised their mirrored shields. From behind them came the gibbering of a shunn, then quick arcs of billowing smoke as their fellows hurled gas grenades over into the demonstration. The militia moved inexorably into the clouds, breathing through their filter-masks. (365-6)*

The city-state is governed by a mayor and parliament; an electoral system is in place, but only the rich are automatically entitled to a vote. The majority of the population can only vote if they win the suffrage lottery, and as the middle-aged editor of the illegal left-wing newspaper *Runagate Rampant* has only been able to participate once in his life, it appears that only a relatively small number of votes are allocated in this way. Order is enforced by the militia, and crimes as well as overt dissidence are ruthlessly punished. Besides death and imprisonment, remaking is a particularly insidious form of punishment in which the bodies of those found guilty are reshaped
– either to fit them to a particular purpose as labourers, or to symbolise the nature of their crime. There are remade that are both taxi-driver and taxi as well as remade prostitutes with a multitude of breasts. On the other hand, a young mother who has strangled her baby, driven mad by destitution, is sentenced to have her child’s arms grafted to the sides of her face. The grotesqueries of remaking raise the question whether assuming the right to reshape another in any way, whether physically or through (re-)education, always implies the other’s objectification.

Remaking is one of many aspects of life in New Crobuzon that are horrifically violent – the militia are ruthless in killing and maiming dissidents, but violence is also used by radicals and (would-be) revolutionaries. It is the very ubiquity and extremity of violence in this world which raises the question whether and under what circumstances violent actions on the part of the state or of the radicals are acceptable.

Agency, Responsibility and Choice

Miéville uses the fantastic scenarios of his plots to explore a series of recurring concerns, among them agency and responsibility. Miéville’s rejection of essentialism implies that anyone can, in principle, be corrupted, whether wittingly or unwittingly. Thus, in *Perdido Street Station*, Isaac’s hubris and recklessness in raising an exotic grub pertaining to an unknown species in a universe populated by fabulous beasts leads to the slake-moth plague, which kills many people and leaves Lin, his lover, mentally impaired. Bellis Coldwine, the protagonist of *The Scar*, believes herself to be acting independently only to repeatedly discover that she has been manipulated by an agent of the New Crobuzon government, Silas Fennec, and by Uther Dhoul, a mercenary acting for the pirate city Armada. Unwittingly, she, too, brings about events that cost lives - and when she pleads ignorance, Uther’s question whether she really did not know what she was doing sparks the insight that she at least partly chose not to query her motivation and the implications of her actions. Judah, in *The Iron Council*, is ultimately shot by former-prostitute-turned-revolutionary-leader Ann-Hari because he takes it upon himself to choose for others, to know best, and thus assumes a role that it is not his right to play. Thus, his actions are not entirely unlike those of the New Crobuzon government, remaking the lives of others at will by choosing for them. The wings of Yagharek, the garuda, are cut off by his community for a crime they dub choice theft in the second degree. Its closest equivalent in human terms is said to be rape. A number of other plot strands also problematise choice, responsibility and agency.
Nevertheless, agency is also at the root of change and renewal, and therefore of the highest importance, in spite of the potential for corruption it contains. Even those who have been objectified through being Remade may wrest back control of their lives by leaving the society that, after Remaking, permanently denies them civil rights. Renegade Remade style themselves fReemade, a pun which highlights the importance of discursive struggle along with direct political engagement. The rebellion of Remade, labourers, and prostitutes which leads to the formation of the Iron Council, furthermore, is also called a Remaking, another instance of the subaltern attempting to wrest back discursive control along with agency from those in power.

**Change and Renewal: A Revolutionary Hope**

*Perdido Street Station* is pervaded by images of transition and transformation: the harmless grub that pupates to turn into a slake moth, the crime lord Motley, who, as his name suggests, is an amalgam of body parts no longer recognisable as having belonged to any particular race or species, the idea of crisis energy that Isaac explores through his research. In *The Scar*, scarring signifies both the wounding that accompanies transformation and the first step towards healing, a new stability. Individuals, communities, the universe itself are marked by scars that constitute a form of memory. *The Iron Council* is a name that refers both to a train and to the community of rebels - Remade, labourers, and prostitutes - who take possession of it as the embodiment of their labour. The iron councillors use the train to flee from the arm of the government, who would oppress them. The train, long associated with modernity and progress, becomes the novel’s most powerful political image, a symbol of revolutionary force.

The Iron Council’s utopia is not romantic. When dissidents from New Crobuzon find the train that has, to them, become the very symbol of hope, they realise that the life led by the community that has arisen around it is both entirely like and entirely unlike the life they know:

*There were no cognates of this life. There was nothing like this. Cutter was agitated. He could not remember a time he had not known of the Council. As a child it was a strange story, as an older boy an adventure, as a man come to politics it had been some kind of possibility. And now he was here and though he could not have quite expressed his disappointment, he felt it.*
He could not map the alterity he felt. He raged silently that he could see little in this life he had not seen before, and that yet each moment those he watched were farming, looking after animals, writing, arguing, and helping children and performing a thousand actions he had seen all his life, they looked and felt like new things. He could not understand why this man stripping and repainting the train was doing something Cutter had seen before. (374)

Judah, the leader of the group of dissidents, is a founding member of the Iron Council who had lived in New Crobuzon for years before setting out to find the Council and warn the councillors of imminent discovery by the government. Upon hearing these news, but also reports of the formation of a possibly revolutionary movement in New Crobuzon, the councillors decide to return to their city of origin. In the course of their journey, evidence mounts that the revolutionary moment has passed, its energies have been contained. The councillors, nevertheless, refuse to abandon their plan, hoping their return to New Crobuzon will catalyse an uprising among the inhabitants. Judah, horrified at the prospect of the Iron Council’s destruction, uses his golemetry, the ability to manipulate matter, elements and dimensions, in order to freeze the train in the instant just before it reaches the waiting militia, while all around it, time continues. In doing so, he has preserved the train as an image of revolutionary hope, but simultaneously robbed it of all possibility of agency. This is why he is shot by Ann-Hari. The novel nevertheless ends on a note of hope:

Years might pass and we will tell the story of the Iron Council and how it was made, how it made itself and went, and how it came back, and is coming, is still coming. Women and men cut a line across the dirtland and dragged history out and back across the world. They are still with shouts setting their mouths and we usher them in. They are coming out of the trenches of rock toward the brick shadows. They are always coming. (614)

Polyvalence and Aesthetic Integrity
China Miéville’s Bas-Lag novels engage with political concerns pertaining to the world we live in on many levels, through imagery as well as in many of their narrative events. However, the novels cannot be reduced to allegory; their images are polyvalent, overdetermined. The narrative
universe of Bas-Lag is not a caricature, it has coherence and integrity, and it is described including a wealth of detail. The links between Bas-Lag and our own world are evocative and multifaceted rather than straightforward; the Bas-Lag novels are not maps to a political terrain, they are landscapes in their own right. This is what lends the three novels their power.