

Privatising the rain

# The Big Sellout—a documentary film by Florian Opitz

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“No one can, without committing a crime, exclusively expropriate the goods of the earth or of industry”—Followers of Gracchus Babeuf, 1796

At the hospital bed of a patient, a relative stands and operates an artificial respirator. By hand, he pumps air into the lungs of the patient. Any brief interruption and the man dies, a physician explains. This unbelievable scene occurs in the documentary film *The Big Sellout* (*Der große Ausverkauf*) by Florian Opitz. The director travelled to four continents to draw attention to the destructive consequences of the wave of privatisation carried out internationally in the 1980s and 1990s.

The earliest concerted campaign against state-operated sectors began in Britain. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s government began in 1984 with the mines, then followed with other key areas. In 1997, under her successor John Major, it was the turn of Britain’s railways.

In Opitz’s film, train driver Simon Weller explains how the former state enterprise and its employees were divided up into about 150 companies. He went to a company called Connex; when the latter lost its licence, he moved to Southern—and then again to a new company.

In the beginning, everyone was spending money, he explained—however, only on different colours, so that it looked as if things had changed somewhat. They invested in uniforms; each change of firm meant a new uniform, sometimes in “submissive blue” with a tie, sometimes in green.

The tracks and signalling were bought by a company named Railtrack, which employed relatively few staff. The maintenance contracts were put out to subcontractors, who then in turn subcontracted them out again. The result—the major train accident in Hatfield (2000); the cause—a broken rail.

Today, it is a “logistical nightmare” to travel across Britain by train. “Extraordinary damage was done in the last 20 years.” In the past, it was more like a calling to be a rail worker, serving the needs of passengers and freight; one was proud of it; today, it is only a dishonour, Weller tells us.

We took over the railways from our forebears, to continue operating them in the public service. “Today we have bad working conditions, bad service, less security for passengers.” This has nothing to do with freedom and democracy. And Labour is continuing the course set by Thatcher: “It is not over.”

The hospital scene described above takes place in Manila. At the end of the 1980s, the Philippine state began to gradually sell off the previously nationalised health system. Now, alongside the poorly equipped state-run hospitals for the ordinary population, there are modern private hospitals for the well-heeled customer.

However, hospital personnel are so underpaid everywhere that they can’t live on their earnings. In the last 10 years, some 100,000 nurses as well as 5,000 physicians have emigrated. Medical training in the Philippines enjoys a good reputation internationally. There are 20,000 to 30,000 graduates each year. Emigration means that 1,000 hospitals have had to close totally or partially in the last years.

Nineteen-year-old Jinky Lorando needs twice-weekly dialysis. His mother Minda has had to sell her house and use up all her savings to pay for the treatment, without which the boy would die after 10 days. In the meantime, she is living with her children and grandchildren in a slum area, where the inhabitants illegally tap the power lines. Now and then, the lines get overheated because of the overload; there is a permanent fire risk. Without power, candles are used in dwellings where many people live, including numerous children, and where there are many flammable things.

Each day, the mother sets off to find money. She asks at the social service office for a letter of recommendation for a donation from a congress or senate deputy. This time, she just manages to get the money together—a donation from a congressional representative—but the boy is doing very badly. Then he is attached to the machine that cleans his blood. Next time, he needs another blood transfusion, the sister tells her mother. The social service department, the latter angrily explains to the viewers, has told her to accept that her son will die.

Electricity and water were privatised under the Nelson Mandela government. The new owner, ESKOM, has increased prices, which meant that many households in Soweto, Johannesburg’s largest and poorest district, that were only just able to get by before, now experience difficulties paying their bills. If they fail to pay, their power is cut off.

A woman who worked for more than 20 years in a courthouse cafeteria had saved up for her own house; now, she lives on a miserable pension that also has to provide for her unemployed sons. The cost of electricity, which she can’t afford to pay, amounts to more than a third of her pension.

Within one month, ESKOM has cut off 20,000 homes, the film explains. The prepay system introduced in 2001 is even more brutal. People cannot get into debt because the electricity supply is immediately cut off when the credit on their card is used up. Even in the winter. A man curses the ANC government that introduced privatisation.

Johannesburg Water also turns off the water supply if households cannot pay. “Our government simply gave someone the ownership rights to the water!” a man shouts indignantly.

The SECC (Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee) and the APF (Anti-Privatisation Forum) are initiatives that are conducting a war of attrition against ESKOM. The SECC consists of activists who reattach households illegally to the electricity mains. Without us, Soweto would have long ago sunk into darkness, they explain proudly. ESKOM pursues them pitilessly with the help of the state.

The young wife of Bongani Lubisi, an SECC activist who has already been in prison, explains her fears for her husband. They have a small daughter. Months after shooting the film, her 34-year-old husband, who had wanted to stand in the local elections, dies in mysterious

circumstances.

The Bolivian municipality of Cochabamba sold off its water services in 1999 to the US corporation Bechtel. Drastic price increases of up to a quarter of people's incomes rapidly followed. At the same time, the contract between the municipality and Bechtel forbade people from drawing water from brooks, rivers and lakes and even made catching rain water an illegal act!

"How can one privatise water," one woman asks, "a thing that is necessary for everyone's survival, without which even animals cannot live. Water should not be privatised, either here or in any other country."

In 2000, there was virtually a popular uprising. In an historical flashback, the film shows how the police and army move brutally against the population. To enforce the contract with Bechtel, the government imposed martial law in the city, also deploying snipers. There were many injured, and some were killed. They were ready to die for the water, explains 60-year-old Rosa de Turpo, who was present at the time.

Opitz graphically and tangibly shows the dramatic consequences of vital services such as water, electricity, healthcare and transport being put into private hands. His moving film is not just motivated by a desire to awaken understanding for the victims in an unfair world: "The film seeks to arouse the public and draw attention to an insidious and dangerous development that concerns all our lives."

In the recent past, using a work of art to engage in social struggles has generally been scorned by German filmmakers. Wagging a moral finger, the filmmakers and others warn constantly about the alleged "power of images" under fascism and Stalinism. Historical responsibility forbids the manipulation of the public using pictures. No director may presume to offer his personal opinions as the truth. It was no surprise then when some German filmmakers reacted coolly to Michael Moore's "propaganda films."

In the meantime, the reality exposed, for example, in Moore's *The Big One* (1997), which graphically shows social tensions in the US, the indignation of ordinary people regarding social iniquities, the cold ignorance of corporate representatives and politicians concerning social questions, is increasingly the experience of the western European population. More forcefully than in years gone by, the capitalist economy is perceived today as a global threat.

*Jarmark Europa* (2004), directed by Minze Tummescheit, produced before the accession of the eastern European countries to the EU, was strongly characterised by a view of "rich West—poor East." The young director was a little ashamed of filming the struggle for existence of poor people in Russia and Poland. Filming was made more difficult by the distrust that she encountered from the people living there, who presumed that here was someone who had come from a place of prosperity and wanted to exhibit their misery in the West.

This intellectual dividing line does not exist in Opitz's film. Thus, he better succeeds in showing the protagonists on their own terms. They are very self-confident before the camera, openly displaying their rage over social iniquities and governments that sacrifice the public weal in favour of private profit.

Weller sees his commentary as a warning to the population in other countries, where there are perhaps still illusions in privatisation. Without shame, Minda shows an international public her pitiful dwelling, whose inhabitants are not disturbed in the slightest by the cameras.

The question of cultural differences, religion, etc., which are given such huge importance in public discussions in Germany, shrink into insignificance before the power of simple social facts: thus with Opitz, the misery of Manila rubs up against the modern infrastructure of a large city, such as now exists on every continent. The film cuts sharply and directly from one country to another, so that impressions overlap. Following a sequence about Britain's railways, in a modern industrialised country, one

suddenly sees old, dilapidated tracks that pass through the slums of Manila.

Regardless of its strengths, Opitz's film contains some obvious contradictions. While it shows very graphically the consequences of globalisation, and some scenes suggest the necessity for a fundamental change in social conditions, it also presents a platform for the view that the problems shown can be overcome by reforms and minor adjustments to existing conditions. Opitz sympathises with the Attac anti-globalisation movement, and this shapes in part his film.

Thus, Opitz presents the American Nobel Laureate for economic science, Professor Joseph E. Stiglitz, as a consistent fighter against privatisation. The former chief economist of the World Bank (1997-2000) and opponent of George W. Bush's neo-liberal economic policies now fumes against the IMF and today's World Bank, which he says are only interested in profits and make poor countries completely dependent—as though the IMF and World Bank were bastions of selfless humanity until they were seized by rampant free market "ideology."

There is no talk about any struggle against privatisation between 1993 and 1999, when Stiglitz was economic adviser to Bill Clinton—which the film does not mention—and he was instrumental in pushing through welfare cuts.

Stiglitz stresses that, above all, neo-liberal policy has ideological origins, the old errant faith that the free market leads to more efficiency. The fact that train driver and trade unionist Weller shares the same view as a former World Bank boss appears at first surprising.

For Simon Weller, neo-liberalism is also an ideology, a misguided notion, that suddenly emerges apparently like a marvel from the void, employing false promises, first in Britain and from there spreading all over the world, also infecting the World Bank and the IMF—a kind of conspiracy theory.

"People," according to Weller, "believe in the myth of privatisation." Today, many now know better. Weller's conclusion: the disastrous state of Britain's railways is the best proof that the big corporations are only interested in the money.

The notion that globalisation, with all its negative consequences, is a kind of conspiracy created and maintained by wealth-obsessed profiteers and politicians is widespread in political organisations such as Attac. The chairman of Germany's Left Party, Oskar Lafontaine, also spreads such notions, according to which social problems can be solved within the existing social order. It only depends on applying the necessary brakes to "neo-liberalism" and "turbo-capitalism."

On this basis, Opitz conveys the illusion that rank-and-file movements and resistance from below are sufficient to resolve the problems. Thus he does not forget to positively note that after the determined resistance of the Bolivian population, the water supply is again under local control; that Britain's rail track infrastructure was again nationalised (2001); that the electricity continues to flow in Soweto thanks to the resistance of the SECC. Supporters of the South African APF, a rainbow coalition of different social initiatives and trade unions, dance, applaud and shout: "Down with capitalism!" Even the word "socialism" is mentioned. But nothing is analysed.

Instead, a publicity flyer for the film states: "Participate! *The Big Sellout* shows that you can strike back and make something happen.... You can resist, 'guerrilla electricians' subvert electricity supply cut-offs in South Africa. British trade unionism fights the horrors of privatisation." Then, organisations are named in which one can become active, most prominently, Attac.

In reality, globalisation is an objective social development, embodying an enormous development of the productive forces, and thus has very great progressive potential. However, under the conditions of the capitalist profit system, this development leads necessarily to ever-greater poverty and exploitation, as Opitz's film shows very evocatively.

At the same time, globalisation has undermined the policy of social reformism, which the film puts forwards as a solution. For every example of a temporarily successful rank-and-file union struggle, there are hundreds of examples in which the union bureaucracy played a crucial role in pushing through privatisation—especially in the privatisation of Britain’s railways.

Despite its serious shortcomings, *The Big Sellout* by Florian Opitz is a provocative and stimulating film that should be seen and will no doubt contribute to a discussion about what must be done to overcome today’s social problems.



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