

The future is subhuman

Malcolm Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche*, Verso, London & New York, 2011. 256 pp., £14.99 hb., 978 1 85984 574 5.

This is an intriguing book, and its principal thesis is highly provocative. My reaction to it is an ambivalent one: there are aspects of the book that are to be greatly welcomed, such as its exposition of Nietzsche as a deeply anti-Left thinker and of what is required to resist Nietzsche; but there are other aspects that are regressive, including some of the methods the author deploys to execute his exposition.

For Bull although there have been an abundance of post-Nietzscheans keen to appropriate Nietzsche for their own agendas, there have been few post-Nietzschean anti-Nietzscheans – ‘critics whose response is designed not to prevent us from getting to Nietzsche, but to enable us to get over him’. Everything depends, according to the author, on how we position ourselves in relation to Nietzsche’s reactionary agenda. For Bull it is clear that Nietzsche is the enemy of the Left, and of the progressive forces of socialism and feminism. His core argument is that Nietzsche does not solve the problem of nihilism and bring it to a point of completion – Heidegger’s thesis, which construes Nietzsche as the fateful last metaphysician of the West – but rather merely arrests it. How do we understand the ‘sense’ of the world? Surely it must reside in it, as when Wittgenstein says, as cited by Bull, that ‘everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen’. If the sense of the world lies indeed in it, then, argues the author, the meaning of the world can only be given by the things in it. For Bull this means that ‘the meaning of the world is a question of population, and that arguments about its meaning must be determined through its demography and ecology’.

Why the emphasis on nihilism? Because, the author contends, nonsense has taken the place of sense and we have a condition where meaning is located outside the world as it is. For Nietzsche this is due to the ‘slave revolt in morals’, and results, as he puts it in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, in a situation where the sight of the human now makes us tired and weary. This is nihilism. For Bull the task is not to save Nietzsche or ourselves from the need to work through nihilism, so as eventually to conquer and overcome it, but to make thought as negative as possible and to

do so by espousing the cause of what the author calls ‘negative ecology’. Bull thus contends that Nietzsche’s ecology ‘can always be undermined by one that is more negative still’. The innovation of the book’s argument is to suggest that there is no good reason why the nihilism of Nietzsche should continue to function as the limit-philosophy of the modern imaginary. Moreover, a humanist response to what Nietzsche exposes and provokes is inadequate, necessitating the move to a negative ecology that is *subhuman*, and in which nihilism moves beyond scepticism and toward failure.

Bull follows Geoff Waite in holding that the main impediment to the development of an anti-Nietzscheanism is that readers trust him. Nietzsche offers his readers an identification with the ‘masters’ and so an imaginative liberation from the social, moral and economic constraints that usually confine individuals. Most readers are thus reading for victory, ‘struggling to wrest success from the text by making themselves the heroes of Nietzsche’s narrative’. Did Nietzsche not want future ‘masters of the earth’, and have not the majority of readers, including those of a left persuasion who are so denigrated in Nietzsche’s texts, taken themselves to be such masters? Bull proposes a drastic alternative to the established strategy: to read Nietzsche like a loser. The task is to read for victory against ourselves, to make ourselves the victims of the text in which we don’t accept the argument but turn its consequences against ourselves. We do not, then, conceive ourselves as dynamite but regard ourselves as getting hurt from an explosion and so feel, as readers, powerless and vulnerable. So, when we read Nietzsche excoriating the victims of life, the downtrodden and broken ones, we will think primarily of ourselves. Rather ‘than being an exhilarating vision of the limitless possibilities of human emancipation, Nietzsche’s texts will continually remind us of our own weakness and mediocrity’. Instead of identifying ourselves with hard creators, we will identify only with the fragile creature in the human being. And, perhaps most perversely, we will regard ourselves as philistines unable to appreciate the so-called aesthetic dimension of life. The task in life, then, is to fail and to affirm

the failure. In contrast to Nietzsche's fantasies about species perfection and purification through selective breeding, we will position ourselves not only outside contemporary culture but outside the human species altogether. If the superhumanization of man fills us with dread, then the dehumanization of man into a herd animal strikes us 'as offering a welcome respite from a cruel predator and opening up new possibilities for subhuman sociality'. In short, the ultimate task is not to become more than human but to become less than human.

The heart of Bull's book is to be found in chapters 3 and 4, on 'Negative Ecologies' and 'Subhumanism' respectively. Here the author shows himself to be a skilful and instructive reader of the problem of nihilism. As he rightly notes, Nietzsche transforms a recent neologism into a world-historical category. Bull further contends that Nietzsche's interest in nihilism – whose writings on it are largely confined to his *Nachlass*, as the long opening part of *The Will to Power* testifies – needs to be viewed in the context of a wave of international anxiety evident at the time; one which can be compared to the fascination we have seen since the start of the new century with Islamic terrorism. Again, he rightly notes that Nietzsche is novel in locating the origins and causes of nihilism not on some remote steppe (the Russian nihilists) but deep within the course of European civilization itself, namely in the Christian-moral interpretation of the world and the entire morality of compassion that he sees as heading towards a European Buddhism. (Here, I would add to Bull's account: is Nietzsche not guilty of, according to Schopenhauer's metaphysics, a world-historical significance it hardly merits?) Bull notes well Nietzsche's difficulty in responding to European nihilism: how does one find a way out that is not itself nihilistic? If nihilism is yet to be completed, then attempts to bring it to an end may serve only to perpetuate it. Nietzsche is not the only thinker in the latter part of the nineteenth century to be perturbed by growing pessimistic suspicion towards the human animal grounded in statements on the futility of human existence. In a remarkably progressive text of 1887, which Nietzsche read, *The Non-Religion of the Future*, Jean-Marie Guyau reflected critically: 'If all is vanity, nothing, after all, is more vain than to be completely conscious that all is vanity.' However, Nietzsche is the only philosopher I know of this time to welcome nihilism and actually embrace it. In one sketch he conceives nihilism as a tremendous purifying movement in which nothing could be more useful or more to be encouraged than a thoroughgoing

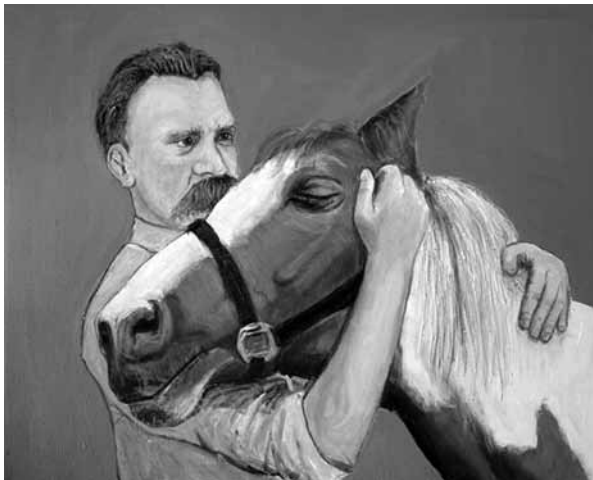
practical nihilism (also conceived by him as a contagious nihilism). Furthermore, he castigated all attempts to avoid a confrontation with nihilism, holding that such developments only served to make matters worse. As a form of 'incomplete nihilism', he included socialism in his list of such nihilisms. For Nietzsche, socialism is a teaching addressed to transient individuals who devote all the energies of existence to living a solely ephemeral life and a life of socialization. It aims at a this-worldly solution to the problem of existence that is designed to pacify, placate and make things as easy as possible. Because it seeks only to preserve life, a socialist society would have to be one that is anti-life. Socialism has its roots in life, as it must do so, and yet it would cut off its own roots. Although it aspires to create the secular counterpart to Jesuitism, in which everyone is to be a perfect instrument, the purpose and the wherefore of existence have not been ascertained.

As Bull notes, Nietzsche's most fundamental project is the revaluation of all values. He contends that this can be regarded as an ecological project on account of the fact that it recognizes the interdependence of values and considers the question of value in biological terms, specifically from the standpoint of conditions of both preservation and enhancement for complex forms of relative life-duration within the flux of becoming. In particular, the ecological task for Nietzsche, according to Bull, is one of cultivating – or 'breeding', in more sinister terms – a master species that will enslave the rest of the world (since the higher type is only possible through the subjugation of the lower). Bull cites from *The Will to Power* where Nietzsche outlines the task of a new aristocracy that is based on the severest self-legislation as one of employing democratic Europe as a pliant and supple instrument 'for getting hold of the destinies of the earth, so as to work as artists upon "man" himself'.

Bull deals explicitly with the question of whether his own anti-Nietzsche programme of negative ecology amounts to little more than the most perverse of dystopian agendas. He thinks this would be to commit a hasty judgement. He sees Nietzsche himself already dealing critically with a burgeoning negative ecology in his own time, centred on the influence of Rousseau (whom he wrote contra), the French Revolution (which he was decidedly anti), and the abolition of slavery (which he regarded as undermining the values and happiness of a different and higher human type). Nietzsche's ecology of value is a specific one, and here Bull seems to me to capture it accurately: 'Only if society is detotalised and redivided into the community

of the strong and the undifferentiated mass of the weak can the conditions for value creation be sustained.' Or, as Nietzsche himself wrote, society should not be allowed to exist for the sake of society but rather as the foundation and scaffolding on which a select type of being can raise itself to a higher task and higher state of being (see *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 258). As Bull astutely notes, this makes Nietzsche a profoundly antisocial thinker: 'The boundaries of society must be constricted in order to sustain the flower of value. For the anti-Nietzschean, however, the argument will go the other way. The boundaries of society must be extended in order to decrease the possibility of value.'

Shardcore, Nietzsche and the Horse, 2011.



A number of criticisms could be made of the book. The opening of chapter 2, entitled 'Anti-Nietzsche', is perhaps typical of the author's approach to his subject. He begins by noting that although Nietzsche was opposed to everyone, he himself has been met with remarkably little opposition. Furthermore:

Of course, the monster had to be tamed, and Nietzsche's thought has been cleverly reconstructed so as to perpetually evade the evils perpetrated in his name. Even those philosophies for which he consistently reserved his most biting contempt – socialism, feminism and Christianity – have sought to appropriate their tormentor. Almost everybody now claims Nietzsche as one of their own; he has become what he most wanted to be – irresistible.

Here one can note a number of rhetorical exaggerations, as well as ill-informed judgements. First, what does it mean to say that Nietzsche was 'opposed to everyone'? Does this extend to the likes of Goethe and Napoleon, typically presented as heroes in his writings but also not immune to criticism from him on occasion? And, of course, Nietzsche *has* met with a great deal of opposition since the Nietzsche cult

began at the end of the nineteenth century, including from Marxist critics such as Lukács, who regarded Nietzsche's fundamental doctrine of eternal recurrence as a piece of monumental triviality. (Indeed, Bull even mentions some of his recent critics, including, in North America, Geoff Waite writing on Nietzsche's corpse, and, in Europe, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut's text entitled 'Why We Are Not Nietzscheans'.) At the same time, Bull makes no efforts in this book to understand why generations of socialists and feminists have found Nietzsche's texts an appealing source of novel and emancipatory ideas.

Overall, Bull is in the habit of writing as if it was still an earlier moment and the massive intellectual engagement with Nietzsche that has taken place in recent decades – with critical studies on almost everything from Nietzsche on Christianity to Nietzsche and Darwinism – had not taken place. Tellingly, he refers to very few critical studies in the course of the book. Instead, Bull seems to want to frighten readers away from Nietzsche, and so goes in for shock tactics; writing, for example, that Nietzsche's vision of the future included provision for the extermination of vermin, when there is nothing in the texts to support such a claim. At least in these respects, his book can only be described as a regressive exercise – something much in evidence in his overreliance on *The Will to Power*. Elsewhere his efforts to provoke the reader are a little more nuanced, as when, for instance, he cannily describes Nietzsche as a thinker who would have made a not uncritical Nazi: Nazism would have been too limited for his taste, being vulgar in expression, parochial in ambition and too petty in its cruelties.

Bull's book is intellectually courageous in seeking to deal with Nietzsche's anti-Left agenda – something rarely done in the literature, and which was a source of evasion in the appropriation of Nietzsche that marked 'radical' French philosophy in the 1960s and that gave rise to the so-called 'continental' Nietzsche or 'new Nietzsche' of the 1980s and 1990s. However, the book does not, of course, tell the whole story of Nietzsche. It is deliberately biased in favour of the late Nietzsche, and, as I have indicated, the Nietzsche of the *Will to Power*, which is the most questionable part of the corpus bequeathed to us: questionable as a text of Nietzsche's and questionable as anything one could label as providing a reliable guide to his thinking. In addition to the late and largely polemical Nietzsche, there is also the progressive Nietzsche of the middle period, the author of highly neglected texts such as *Human, All Too Human* and *Dawn or Daybreak*. With

a few exceptions Bull rarely refers to these texts. If he had done so he would not have been able to claim some of the things that he does, such as when he asserts that although Nietzsche came to distance himself from his earlier work – such as the artist’s metaphysics of his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* – he never abandoned the idea that art was the only truly redemptive value in the world. This is not true. In his middle period (1878–82) Nietzsche explicitly signals the end of art and sets out to undermine many of the claims made on behalf of art. For the Nietzsche of *Human, All Too Human*, a future humanity may no longer require the forces upon which art depends, such as pleasure in lies, in imprecision, in the symbolic, in intoxication and in ecstasy. The critique of intoxication (*Rausch*) is extended in *Dawn* to states of the self, where the desire to lose the self is regarded by Nietzsche with tremendous suspicion, and in which those who live for sublime and enraptured moments are to be regarded as wretched and disconsolate souls, even half-mad fantasists. Here Nietzsche has decisively abandoned his youthful commitment to Dionysian ecstasies in favour of a newfound existential sobriety. Indeed, this middle period Nietzsche attacks all superhuman pretensions to self-invention and self-creation, fundamentally challenging the Oedipal fantasy of existing as one’s own mother and father. For this Nietzsche, human beings are essentially unknown to themselves, lacking in the most important knowledge: that of the *limits* of the human. Anticipating Freud, Nietzsche argues that we are not masters in our own house, let alone masters of the earth. Indeed, it is the desire for mastery that must be given up. The middle period Nietzsche has, in this way, a progressive agenda of moral and social transformation. It is, admittedly, far from being revolutionary (it goes in for small doses and slow cures), but at the same time it has unmistakable ‘radical’ aspects, as, for example, when Nietzsche calls for disarmament of Europe’s military machine and appeals to a democracy to come: ‘To disarm whilst being the best armed, out of an elevation of sensibility – that is the means to real peace.’ Moreover, ‘The tree of the glory of war be destroyed only at a single stroke, by a lightning-bolt: lightning, however ... comes out of a cloud and from on high’ (*The Wanderer and His Shadow*). That which now calls itself democracy differs from older forms of government solely in that it drives with new horses: but the wheels are the same old wheels. Therefore, we can only posit as our aspiration a ‘democracy yet to come’, one that has excluded the vested interests of democracy as currently practised (the indigent, the rich and the political parties), and that has liberated

itself from the closed interests that have taken hold of it and perverted it.

I would liked to have learned more about Bull’s motivations in writing this book. Why ‘anti-Nietzsche’ *now*? What reactionary forces and groupings centred on Nietzsche are at work at present, and, more than this, concerted working against the progressive forces of the Left? I know of none. Nietzsche’s current influence is most in evidence in work in analytical philosophy – he appears to have ceased being a major influence in continental philosophy – and as far as I know there is no political movement or activity at work in this field of intellectual labour (the focus is largely on Nietzsche’s moral psychology and centred on topics such as Nietzsche and the drives). I concede that there is a highly obnoxious Nietzsche, but this seems a Nietzsche that now looks decidedly dated by his nineteenth-century context and by fantastical discourses on breeding and selection, and who is unlikely to exercise any serious influence on contemporary critical thinking. In spite of this set of criticisms, Bull’s book is a fascinating provocation, and one that will unsettle anyone schooled in Nietzsche through the so-called ‘continental’ tradition of philosophy or who has the ambition of being a master of the earth.

Keith Ansell-Pearson

Becoming cat

Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011. 256 pp., £22.50 hb., 978 0 22675 074 3.

My cat Mabel needs a crash course in renaturalization. She recently presented me with a goldfinch that she’d caught but not killed, setting it down at the bottom of the stairs and meowing persistently until I noticed it fluttering around. What disturbed me about this experience was the sense that Mabel wanted to draw me into something non-human, to change me into something more cat-like. I humanize Mabel by trying to get her to behave according to how I want the world organized. Perhaps she is making an equal effort to ‘catify’ me: to make me act to satisfy not only her desire for food, but also her desire that all her companions should perceive the world as cats do, and indeed that all of us should really be cats.

This illustrates Spinoza’s view in the *Ethics* that ‘each of us, by his nature, wants the others to live

according to his temperament'. Spinoza inveighs against this tendency: it leads to disagreement, resentment and conflict. But he also warns against our trying to assume the perspectives of other species through sympathy, pity or imitation, for this distracts us from understanding our own human nature and what is good for it. We need to affirm our humanity without making it the measure of the universe; to esteem human virtue without asserting its superiority or transcendence to the rest of nature. This is what Hasana Sharp calls 'renaturalization', which she suggests is the best way for humans to flourish in their integration with the non-human world. Sharp argues that Spinoza is the philosopher who 'redefines human agency as entirely natural' and who stresses that 'humans need to come to love and regard themselves in their distinctiveness, *as humans*', in order to be individually and collectively powerful.

Thus begins one of the most interesting books on Spinoza to appear in recent years. The term 'renaturalization' is Elizabeth Grosz's, and Sharp aims to show how Spinoza lays the groundwork for the contemporary philosophy of posthumanism. This is a book whose time has come: posthumanism, which denies that humanity is exceptional in nature, has long recognized its Spinozistic ancestry, specifically using it to cut through the knot that ties political agency to human subjectivity. However, if a book is needed which examines how, and how justifiably, this movement uses Spinoza's concepts, this is not what Sharp herself offers. Instead, she selects those concepts of Spinoza's which appear to lend themselves to 'a posthumanist politics of composition and synergy', and prefers this to the liberal, humanist politics of personhood and representation that she aligns with Hegel. What results is a frequently digressive celebration of the good outcomes renaturalization and posthumanist politics might produce, but without much attention given to how or whether it really would produce them (or even what those outcomes are), and without the badly needed critical scrutiny of the aptness of using Spinoza's philosophy in this context. While this is, then, a thought-provoking book with some very good parts, it is also a frustrating one that pulls the reader in many directions without resulting in a satisfactory whole.

Sharp's argument that Spinoza advocates renaturalization is persuasive. This is a useful way of naming a response to Spinoza's demand that we understand ourselves to be 'part of nature' without degrading or abandoning our humanity. Sharp is right to stress that Spinoza's 'nature' includes humanity and all its

products, from the pyramids to toxic waste dumps to multinational corporations: renaturalization is not a demand for a 'return to nature' in some naive sense. Sharp is all too aware of the problems lurking behind that kind of demand, particularly for women and ethnic groups historically denied reason and culture on the basis of their 'natural' status. To be 'part of nature', for a Spinozist, means to affirm that humanity is not, in the words of the *Ethics*, 'a dominion within a dominion': our individuals, activities and products are finite modes of God, the single substance that is all of being. Nothing that we do, say or think is attributable simply to our subjectivity or free choice; it is determined by the vast causal nexus of nature in which we are wholly integrated. Our individuality is really what Étienne Balibar calls, in his book on Spinoza, 'transindividuality', constantly varying in response to our interactions. Understanding this leads us to understand ethics and politics differently, as Spinoza shows in the *Ethics*. We see that our behaviour is largely explained by how our circumstances and experiences affect us, but also that human beings have more in common with one another than they do with anything else. We flourish best by coming together to understand ourselves better, and to act in collectively empowering ways.

Sharp explains these aspects of Spinoza's thought very well in the first three chapters of the book. But her selective reading becomes apparent when we consider what Spinoza means by 'collective empowerment'. Spinoza is very clear that the flourishing of human communities depends on individuals *reasoning* together. Where there are low levels of reasoning, people are more determined by associations of images and affects (based on habit, tradition and/or religious or political ideology) and require more authoritarian governance. When we have better rational understanding of our human nature, however, we understand what is good for it, and we are led to work together (requiring less governance) to do what makes humanity stronger, more virtuous, and more rational still. Collective empowerment means people together understanding their common human nature – defined by the physical composition of the human body and the order of the ideas of the body that constitutes the human mind – and doing what's good for its strength and perseverance.

It is quite a leap from this to the suggestion that collective empowerment happens when people get together to oppose oppression and injustice; yet this is what Sharp proposes. 'My (overly ambitious) hope is that renaturalization may aid social movements in fortifying and organizing powerful minds and bodies',

she states, giving as an example a political protest that achieves no change of policy but makes people feel good about themselves. In Spinoza's view, the exchange of affects and the collective increase of joy that take place at such an event are useful in that they might *lead to* more rational thinking, but they do not on their own *amount to* rational thinking. For Spinoza, empowerment requires that we think rationally together; Sharp conflates this with a notion of empowerment as feeling good together. For Sharp, it seems that feeling good together suffices for true understanding, for she takes truth to be something that emerges from positive affective exchanges. Sharp imagines that an idea can 'become true' if enough people feel that it is, and that the set of 'true ideas' includes 'things that really happened', such that the injustices of the past (for instance) become true as they become collectively recognized. She also suggests that an idea could be true but nonetheless 'oppressive or disabling', and that this type of true idea should be 'resisted and extinguished'.

All this constitutes a profound misunderstanding of Spinoza's concept of truth. The notion of a true idea of a past event is simply incoherent for Spinoza, as is the notion that an idea's truth depends on human feeling. As for the proposal that true ideas could oppress us, it's difficult to think of anything less Spinozistic. For Spinoza, truth characterizes ideas as they exist in God, and is *in no way* dependent on human assent, thought or language (renaturalization requires accepting that neither truth nor being is directed at us). To the extent that humans have true ideas, we understand them adequately – that is, completely through their causes – and subsequently their truth cannot be doubted. True ideas are adequate ideas of real objects: famously, an individual's mind is the true idea of his body (though his conscious access to that true idea is limited). By contrast, the inadequate (partial and confused) ideas of real objects that develop as we are affected in experience are what Spinoza calls *images*. Our thoughts about past events are therefore 'imaginary': whether based on memory, myth or research, such thoughts are based on images and are necessarily incomplete and inadequate.

As Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd have compellingly argued, in their 1999 book *Collective Imaginings*, these 'imaginaries', when they are collectively perpetuated, readily overpower our rational thought. It is these image-systems that can oppress us, by causing us to associate certain affects (e.g. of hatred or resentment) with certain images (e.g. of a

particular group of people). Sharp wants to offer a tool to cut through these oppressive associations, yet her proposal that we feel good together is just a recipe for generating more 'collective imaginings' (*Yes we can! Meat is murder! We are the 99 per cent!*). They may be useful and positive imaginings to replace the hateful and oppressive ones that went before, but they will not be the rationally understood true ideas of our bodies and minds which for Spinoza are the real path to socio-political improvement.

This muddled epistemology inevitably grounds a rather muddled political position. I was left unclear about what 'a vital politics of collective self-organization' really involves. Sharp argues effectively for what it is not – that is, the humanist politics of identity, personal recognition and group representation based on Hegelian dialectical relationships – but never quite tells us what it is, other than suggesting we go on protest marches and spend more time with our companion animals. We could just as well endorse music festivals, corporate awaydays, and civil war re-enactments: mass events that do no harm and cause joyful affects are good things, but they don't amount to a 'politics of renaturalization', or any kind of politics at all. The aim that humanity should love itself and 'glory in nature's infinite power' is a fine one – it is Spinoza's – but it is empty, on his terms, without the rational understanding that comes from science, philosophy and the good leadership of a rational sovereign. Spinoza is keen on philosopher-kings who know how to manage the affects of the masses wisely. He is not so keen on highly affective political protests, which he thinks are more likely to obstruct reason than to encourage it.

Of course, Sharp does not purport to give us politics as Spinoza would have it; she gives us a Spinozistic way in to thinking about politics differently. And Sharp's use of Spinoza is undeniably interesting in this regard. What this book least persuades me of is its 'global' argument that a direct line leads from Spinozistic naturalism to a certain kind of progressive politics. But within the chapters are 'local' arguments that are far more compelling. There is excellent original material on animals, ecology and a-humanism in chapter 6, and a well-drawn comparison of Spinoza to Judith Butler's politics of recognition on the one hand (chapter 4) and to Grosz's impersonal politics on the other (chapter 5). In these more focused and condensed arguments, Sharp emerges as an important new thinker to watch for anyone interested in Spinoza, posthumanism or affective politics, and to anyone uncertain about how to relate to their cat.

Beth Lord

Intensified tenderness

Daniel Loick, *Kritik der Souveränität*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt, 2012. 346 pp., €34.90 hb., 978 3 59339 514 2.

‘Only when we lost control did we understand that we were succeeding.’ With this remark, Ola Shahba concluded her fascinating account, at a conference earlier this year, of the preparations of multiple activist groups for the January 2011 demonstration on Egypt’s Police Day. According to Daniel Loick, not only assessments of mass mobilization but also political philosophy in general would be well advised to embrace the logic of this not-at-all-ironical remark. Reserving the success of emancipatory politics for a moment when central control will fall into disuse and be surpassed, Loick firmly locates the actual irony elsewhere, at the heart of one of modern political theory’s key categories: sovereignty. In *Kritik der Souveränität (Critique of Sovereignty)*, Loick pursues a suspicion which also drove the first generation of Critical Theorists: might not our seemingly most enlightened achievements turn out to prolong the violence they set out to abolish? Unlike Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, Loick is not faced with any singular or ultimate historical catastrophe that would underline his pessimistic diagnosis of reason’s dialectical (non) success in history. His account therefore reverts to the concept of irony, understood as a situation in which the very means intended to prevent a certain mischief turn out to bring it about (not Alanis Morissette’s ‘black fly in your Chardonnay’, but someone sinking with the ship they took out of fear of flying).

Loick uses the first section of his three-part book to examine four traditional theories of sovereignty. As the first to argue in favour of the monarch’s right to override customary law, Jean Bodin established the conception of a sovereignty of the final appeal. However, this new flexibility of the social realm was secured by removing the position of the sovereign from contestation. Trying in turn to justify this status, Hobbes came up with a contractualism that rests on a notion of consent as being as voluntary as a signature at gunpoint. While Rousseau revolutionized the notion of sovereignty by placing the people in the position of the sovereign, the violent relation between ruler and subject recurs via the notion of the *volonté general* requiring absolute obedience. And although the priority of sovereignty is overcome in Kant’s transcendental deduction of rights, which assumes the state as a subservient function to the sphere of law, Kant effectively eternalizes legal violence. By turning

coercive power into an analytical feature of law, Kant closed the conceptual space Loick fervently attempts to reopen.

So, law, according to these analyses, proceeds like *Deadwood*’s Sheriff Bullock whom Loick portrays in the introduction to his book: Seth Bullock maintains legal sovereignty by quickly shooting the thief an enraged mob is about to lynch. This emblematic account nicely illustrates the argument and yet would need to be confronted with more twisted cases: don’t we in modern civil societies cling to state, law and police precisely because we actually assume them, in most cases, to protect the life of someone about to be lynched by a mob? The central second part of the book thus works towards a much more detailed phenomenology of the downsides of the law. Entitled ‘Critical Theory of Sovereignty’, this section provides an impressive survey of a vast literature supporting Loick’s project. Taking his cue from Benjamin’s distinction between *rechtssetzende* and *rechtserhaltende Gewalt*, and weaving in the motifs of subsequent thinkers, Loick produces an elaborate taxonomy of the violences immanent to law. These accounts are brilliant contributions to exegetic discussions around a range of individual thinkers in their own right.

Loick’s updated list of forms of legal violence contains five dimensions. First, he explores the question of ‘law-founding violence’ in a contrast between state-centred policies and the notions of emancipatory politics to be found in Marx and Arendt. The interesting rapprochement of those rather adversary thinkers traces how they both argue for a deposing of the sovereign hold over the sphere of politics – Marx in his critique of human rights as creating bourgeois atomistic individuals alienated from human species-being, and Arendt in her praise for non-instrumental, genuinely collective action which would be foreclosed by a division into sovereign rulers and obedient subjects. While Arendt and Marx point to problems with sovereign law as the medium of politics, Benjamin and Foucault are subsequently consulted to reveal the violence of the means needed to preserve and sustain the law. It is Benjamin’s critique of the police which presses for a justification of the violence of means independent of the ends they serve – a perspective that informs the whole programme of *Kritik der Souveränität*. Foucault’s analyses of governmentality, by contrast, are of ambivalent effect.

On the one hand, Foucault's concept of biopower, in its intertwinement with persisting structures of sovereign discipline, allows for an immense prolongation of the phenomenology of 'law-preserving' acts. Not only the penal code, or even the architecture of the prison, but also that of charitable housing project are aspects of the governing of a population. On the other hand, however, in proliferating sites of power Foucault also undermines any direct relinking of those aspects as functions of a sovereign centre. Foucault's historical analyses thus perform the task Loick aims to transport into political theory; namely, as Foucault himself put it, 'cutting off the head of the king'.

Giorgio Agamben, one of the most forceful contemporary critics of sovereignty, whom Loick reads in an agreeably measured way, provides the material for the third dimension: 'law-withholding violence' in the realms constitutively outside sovereign reach. Drawing upon Cover and Derrida, Loick then rehearses the argument that exposes the violence inherent in the interpretation of law: the procedural inevitability of a decision always forces the judge, at some point, to put an end to the process of reasoning which escapes any strict determination by the text of the law. Finally, Loick generalizes an argument made decisively by feminist thinkers like Wendy Brown and Catherine MacKinnon regarding the 'law-splitting violence' effected by abstract rules in different contexts of application – it is only (in the necessary scare quotes) 'equally' forbidden for men and women to have an abortion or for poor and rich people to sleep under bridges. Loick's insistence that a post-sovereign politics must also be post-masculinist is most promising. Nevertheless, feminist considerations might also highlight a certain source of discomfort here: how optimistic should we be that the undoing of law does not make room for a much vaster potential of violence, accumulated precisely within our non-codified norms, within language and relationality? *Kritik der Souveränität* nowhere claims that the end of legal violence would end all or at least most violence. But its overall appeal depends on the question of whether we can imagine a design of institutions for non-coercive mediation that do not automatically reproduce the victory of the pig-headed over the tender-hearted, or of the privileged over the precarious. Consequentially, then, the book inserts a short meditation on the 'problems of passage' – that is, the conundrum of a revolutionary struggle that creates the material conditions for a post-sovereign society without itself striving for sovereignty.

With all its constitutive violences in plain view, the deconstructed law still need not be rejected

automatically. In Christoph Menke's recent book *Recht und Gewalt* (2011), for instance, Benjamin's critique is elaborated as revealing a necessary tension in our modern conception of law and his call to a de-posal of law is taken to suggest that we should, as such, henceforth use it with greater reluctance. Daniel Loick, to the contrary, proceeds to an idea of 'Critical Theory without Sovereignty' – the title of the last part of his book. It is via his reading of Cohen and Rosenzweig that Loick develops a tentative vision of the 'Before' and the 'Beyond' of sovereignty. Cohen already argued for the need to uncouple the Kantian notion of law from coercive power in order to make room for a truly universal conception of justice, unbound from any particular legal system and extrinsic motivations. In Rosenzweig's complementary proposal, the removal of legal coercion opens new sites for solidaric, life-worldly practices – or for what Loick calls an 'extremely intensified tenderness'.

Methodologically, Loick tries to root his project in the framework of his philosophical (or at least institutional) home: that of Critical Theory, defined by its adherence to the method of 'immanent critique'. The



assumption that we can, via rational reconstruction of their constitutive norms, deduce unfulfilled promises from the centre of our modern institutions seems to falter in this case despite Loick's best assertions. Did law ever promise a world without violence? Didn't it 'just' promise to replace random, uncontrolled violence with that of a legitimate sort? Has the utopian figure of Alexander the Great's battle horse Bucephalos, who found his new vocation in studying but never implementing the law – an allegory Loick receives via Benjamin from Kafka – not come from somewhere else? Loick's normative resources seem drawn rather from what Hannah Arendt called a 'hidden tradition', from the interstices of our theoretical heritage. It is the prospect of overcoming even the violence of means,

taken from Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence', which, opposed to traditional as well as critical accounts of sovereignty, opens up the space for a critique as radical as Loick's. This would make Loick even more Benjaminian than he admits, formulating a redemptive critique of the law (dissevering it from violence) by unearthing a strand of thinking precisely not of the historically victorious sort. Interestingly, Loick delineates this performative critical procedure very precisely in his exposition of Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, where Rosenzweig confronts the Christian metaphysical heritage with an account of the 'heterotemporality' of Jewish life so as to shatter the former's presumed totality and make room for a renaissance of Jewish philosophy and practice.

The desideratum in the conclusion of *Kritik der Souveränität* is whether a law studied but not enforced could draw on any alternative force of bond. Loick touches on an intensified ethics (or rather *Sittlichkeit*) of care as well as on the illocutionary potential inherent to language use. Perhaps it is here that Loick would

be well served not to try and steer clear of genuinely anarchist thinkers. Elaborating on Kropotkin's notion of mutual agreement, for example, would tie the future to promises and yet is codified enough to still mark a distinction between post-sovereign law and morality. What Loick's own very tentative hints seem to point to can perhaps be illustrated by a return to Tahrir. The post-sovereign atmosphere during the occupation is described by the novelist and journalist Ahdaf Soueif as follows: 'Together, in the Midan, over the last four days, we have rediscovered how much we like ourselves and each other and, corny as it may sound, how "good" we are. I sneeze and someone passes me a tissue. And all the time the chants continue, the demands are articulated, opinions for the future discussed. It is not possible to say what will happen next.' It has been rather rare recently that books from within the tradition of the Frankfurt School have had a capacity to make us dream comparable to that of Loick's *Kritik der Souveränität*.

Eva von Redecker

Open country

Mick Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2011. 320 pp., £56.00 hb., £18.50 pb., 978 0 81667 028 4 hb., 978 0 81667 029 1 pb.

At a time when ecologically related disasters continue to pervade the headlines, there has never been a greater demand for a comprehensive and sustained discourse on ecological ethics than today. While Mick Smith's *Against Ecological Sovereignty* does not make overarching claims to such comprehensiveness – indeed he would argue that such an attempt would be antithetical to his arguments – the book interacts extensively with the history of ethics and its contemporary ecological implications in productive ways. In doing so, it explicitly questions and tackles assumptions regarding the role of sovereignty in ecological ethics and politics, while simultaneously challenging broader, 'extra-ecological' conceptions of sovereignty. Ultimately, in fact, Smith's interactions with thinkers ranging from Plato to Giorgio Agamben lead him to formulate an ecological ethics that rejects *any* form of sovereignty – whether social, political or economic. For Smith, as long as the idea of sovereignty continues to dominate the political sphere through liberal policies and regulations – even if they 'benefit' such movements as the ecological movement in certain ways – a conception of

ethics and politics that strives to include a nonhuman nature can never be fully achieved.

Much of *Against Ecological Sovereignty* is centred on a critique of what Agamben terms the 'anthropological machine'. This, for Smith, is the foundational intellectual framework that provides the justification for human beings continuing to stratify and dominate what is deemed to be the non-human world; a mechanism of thought wherein 'the only feasible and rational approach towards valuing nonhuman nature is to espouse an enlightened self-interest'. Smith traces such a mechanism at work throughout the traditions of Western intellectual thought, suggesting, for example, that 'Plato's subtle admixture of myths and taxonomic exercises connect nature to politics and ethics even as they instantiate an early iteration of the anthropological machine'. Similarly, he notes the early connection established between nature politics and the anthropological machine. This critical connection between nature and politics is a necessary one for Smith's thought, in so far as he argues that all ethics and politics tend to become *ecological* ethics and

politics as a result of the pervasiveness of biopolitics: 'the governmental management and control of the biological life (and death) of populations'. Indeed, Smith suggests that while it has been recognized that 'politics is everywhere being replaced by biopolitics ... the implications of biopolitics for ecology and the ecological implications of biopolitics have hardly even been noticed'.

In furthering his critique of the 'anthropological machine', Smith's conception of ecological ethics and politics also rejects concepts of ethical stewardship, which he views as simply and problematically *extending* hierarchal dynamics. This rejection of liberal politics – which are based on an agenda of 'moral ideals' – is central to his argument against sovereignty per se, claiming that 'this moral ideal is imposed in the form of relatively fixed norms, rules, and laws, that the "steward" deems accord with the Good'. Consequently, Smith views an ecological appeal to the state (a sovereign entity) as dangerous because 'it is ultimately based in a political decision the results of which are antipolitical'. This antagonism towards policy-based environmentalism is made very clear in the cleverly titled 'Apologue', in which it is asserted that the 'desire for legislative completeness ... the desire for policy after policy, is clearly the regulative counterpart to the global metastasis of those free-market approaches that effectively reduce the world's diversity to a common currency'. In rejection of such ethical, political and economic fixedness, Smith calls instead for a certain idea of political *wildness* that opens up political discourse rather than closes it; such a closure, Smith argues, is *inherent* in all forms of political and ethical sovereignty. It is precisely this fixedness qua sovereignty that must be overcome.

Smith's ethical formulations ultimately culminate in a discourse that forces a confrontation between radical ecology, anarcho-primitivism, and such philosophers as Levinas and Arendt. Indeed, Smith aligns his conceptualization of ethics with that of Levinas, in so far as he views the latter's ethics as characteristically anarchic: 'Levinas's ethical anarchism resists totalizing/totalitarian tendencies by stressing the indefinable complexity of a relation that calls *every* individual to take responsibility for the (infinite) openness of all (human) others'. By reading Levinas (and Arendt) as an-archic, but not necessarily *anarchist* in a traditional political sense, Smith creates a necessary alliance between more traditional philosophies, such as that of Arendt, and what are, arguably, more radical ones (as, for instance, in the work of John Zerzan). At the same time, by contrasting radical political positions

like anarcho-primitivism with more liberal forms of environmental politics, such as environmental stewardship and conservationism, Smith is able to criticize the role played by certain conceptions of sovereignty (and its possible dangers) in conventional calls for ecologically motivated action.

One overarching question in *Against Ecological Sovereignty* is the relationship between ecological ethics and politics, on the one hand, and some broader, extra-ecological ethics and politics, on the other. Smith asserts an inescapable connection between nature and politics – a claim that is essential to his interrogation of biopolitics, which he links with totalitarianism throughout the book – and, in fact, ultimately suggests that there can exist no determinable disconnection between ecological and purportedly extra-ecological ethics and politics at all. Resisting such a determination is crucial to the degree that any clear separation between the ecological and extra-ecological would provide both an intellectual foundation for the latter's marginalization as well as the grounds for a specific form of *green* sovereignty, seeking state-sponsored agendas to implement 'green' changes. Unsurprisingly, then, Smith rejects any partnership between the state and ecological ethics and politics. As he puts it: 'the argument for green sovereignty is an argument against green politics'. While Smith recognizes that this is not the intention of many of those who seek to integrate a green politics into contemporary neoliberal political agendas, his counter-argument places a productive critical spotlight on the kinds of political trajectories that many ecologically minded individuals take for granted.

Smith's account is clearly passionate. At the same time, as a result of complex sentences that often derail themselves through extensive use of parentheses, it is often awkwardly expressed. The ideas expressed in Smith's work are complex and his presentation of those ideas does not necessarily make them as accessible as they might have been. Moreover, the account of the history of ethics that Smith provides, while quite elaborate, overshadows the connections he makes with this tradition and *ecological* ethics. Smith consistently makes reference to the ecological implications of his analyses for the work of such philosophers as Iris Murdoch, but he often fails to make these implications and connections explicit. Nonetheless, Smith's interactions with the tradition of Western ethico-political philosophy, as opposed to any superficial rejection, allows him to formulate a radical perspective that *builds* from previous, extra-ecological schools of thought, resulting in a sober exploration of environmental ethics as well

as a politically charged interrogation of notions of sovereignty across a number of different political spheres. For Smith, the future of (ecological) ethics and politics as such ultimately hinges on a radical rejection of sovereignty and a conception of the open texture – the *wildness* – of ethics and politics themselves.

Jordan Kinder

Unhomeland

Mark Neocleous and George S. Rigakos, eds, *Anti-Security*, Red Quill Books, Ottawa, 2011. 270 pp., £19.00 pb., 978 1 92695 814 9.

Anti-Security is a well-edited volume tightly organized around one idea: challenging the concept of security, showing it to be nothing more than an ‘illusion that has forgotten it is an illusion’. The book contains an opening ‘Anti-security Declaration’, written by the editors, followed by nine chapters. The declaration is a form of political manifesto aiming a sharp critique straight at political and intellectual actors involved in the security project. Most admirable in this book is its unapologetic political stance that not only criticizes the modern security project, but also seeks to unravel it, challenge it, and extinguish it so as to produce an *anti-security politics*. To that end, the editors not only argue that security is an illusion, but that it is a dangerous one.

Why ‘dangerous’? Because it has come to act as a blockage on politics: the more we succumb to the discourse of security, the less we can say about exploitation and alienation; the more we talk about security, the less we talk about the material foundations of emancipation; the more we come to share in the fetish of security, the more we become alienated from one another and the more we become complicit in the exercise of police powers.

In short, the authors collectively argue that it is security itself that obfuscates power relations. To demonstrate this point, the editors present contributions from a variety of authors from academic and activist circles, including philosophers, lawyers, political scientists and homeless activists. This array of perspectives, all singly focused on challenging security, provide the reader with a multi-pronged presentation of the problems facing us as we try to move beyond a security state and towards a more free and egalitarian world.

From the start, the book proposes that the logic of security (either private or public) is impenetrable.

Security is bound up in a hegemonic discourse that, if engaged uncritically, or with a liberal bent, reinforces the logic of the bourgeois society. Thus, the ‘Anti-security Declaration’ that starts the book parts way with the concept of security and instead lays the groundwork for its negation. Instead of building liberal binaries (between, say, security and liberty, soft versus hard repression, domestic versus foreign, or police versus military), the authors show that security arranges institutions to reify the liberal apparatus. The negation of security, then, requires a strong political move to recognize security (and the mechanisms that enforce it, be they military, police, international or domestic) as the ‘supreme concept of bourgeois society’. The current use of security (as well as ideas of safety) originates with the liberal state, along with the individual rights necessary for a system of exploitation. For these authors, to be ‘secure’ and ‘safe’ in bourgeois society involves, first and foremost, securing the ability of a class to accumulate more than another class, while maintaining class dominance. The Declaration concludes:

The history of civilization after the Enlightenment is the consolidation of wage labour, the cultural and material imposition of imperial domination, and the violence of class war. In the form of the ‘standards of civilization’ the majesty of the law was central to this project. To civilize is to project police powers. ‘Civilization’ is code for forcing capitalist relations; which is to say: bourgeois civilization is barbarism.

Mark Neocleous’s opening chapter, ‘Security as Pacification’, represents a significant and innovative contribution to the study of social control, and makes an intriguing central claim: that the capitalist state constantly and intentionally (re)produces insecurity and instability. In turn, this instability gives rise to the *politics of security*, as the state uses this to gain legitimacy. It is through threats to the status quo ‘that the constant revolutionizing and interrupted disturbances of the capitalist order is fabricated, structured, and administered’. Yet this true function of the threat remains hidden. To grasp the allusive nature of security politics, Neocleous argues that scholar and activists must reappropriate the term *pacification*. Unlike security, pacification refers to a broader set of practices aimed at inducing submission while establishing ‘peace’ and ‘tranquility’ in a given territory. Within a capitalist order, this peace and tranquility translate into the maintenance of capitalist accumulation. Looking for the origins of the concept, Neocleous finds that pacification first appears under colonialism to keep colonial subjects under control through the

‘centralization of violence and bureaucratization and discipline of standing armies’. According to the author, a parallel process occurs within liberal democracies, where police powers serve a similar function in civil society, leading to the fabrication of order around the logic of peace and security. In the end, Neocleous convincingly argues that a conceptual shift to pacification brings with it a ‘powerful theoretical change, linking as it does the military to the police, the foreign to the domestic, the colonial to the homeland’.

Expanding the concept of anti-security, George Rigakos’s chapter, entitled ‘To Extend the Scope of Productive Labour: Pacification as a Police Project’, argues that ‘to be against security today is to stand against the entire economic system’, in so far as security refers to the preservation of capitalist order. Rigakos argues that we are in dire need of a counter-hegemonic discourse that prioritizes material consideration. Using two case studies (the Thames River Police in the early 1800s and the application of Broken Windows in the 1980s), Rigakos demonstrates that policing powers have always been connected to making labour more productive, privileging private property, and establishing safe spaces for consumption and the exploitation of labour. He concludes that security, expressed through the police, involves the ‘manifestation of brute force both legislatively and through what we would call pacification’. Neocleous’s and Rigakos’s chapters together are a good excuse to buy the book. However, there is more.

Michael Kempa’s chapter, ‘Public Policing, Private Security, Pacifying Populations’, turns its attention to the private security industry. Using Toronto as a case study, Kempa challenges the idea that private security agencies pose a threat to more public-led institutions subject to regulation and reform. Most interesting, he directly challenges the liberal notion that public systems of control are responsive to the needs of the populace. Rather, Kempa suggests that ‘both public and private policing have common historical origins, and, more deeply, are linking to the same political economy: both sets of modern security agencies work in common towards the pacification of populations in service of the growth of markets and thus the interest of capital’. In line with the themes of the volume as a whole, the chapter concludes that a challenge to security politics requires an understanding of pacification as an administrative and disciplinary endeavour ‘in the service of the expansion of markets’.

In a chapter titled ‘War on the Poor: Urban Poverty, Target Policing, and Social Control’, Geatan Heroux presents a well-written analysis of the crime ‘crisis’

in Ontario during the previous decade. Heroux, an experienced organizer, writes a refreshing chapter that connects the general theoretical framework of the book with an on-the-ground examination of the treatment of poor people. He suggests that the criminalization of poor communities and the policing efforts focused in marginalized neighbourhoods occurred in parallel with historic disinvestment in social services. In Heroux’s direct activist experience, securing marginal neighbourhoods involves law-and-order policing put in place to mitigate the cuts in social service. Together, this combination of cuts and law enforcement spell out the function of security politics, namely the promotion of capital. Olena Kobzar’s chapter, ‘“Poor Rogues” and Social Police: Subsistence Wedge, Payday Lending and the Politics of Security’, also directly examines the effects of security on the poor. Kobzar looks at predatory lending practices (aka payday lending) in the United States, Canada and the UK. These practices target poor folks when they are most vulnerable. The business model involves opening offices in or near inner-city neighbourhoods where companies offer ‘loans’ at extraordinary interest rates that, with some missed payments, can lead to rates as high as 4,000 per cent. Who would pay such rates? They are meant for individuals unable to access credit lines from mainstream banks, mainly those populations that are already in such desperation that they have no other choice. In turn, the debt incurred is intentionally difficult to reduce. Like the rest of the book, this chapter effectively questions the politics of security, showing that security in this instance is the dangerous illusion that one is free to borrow money at high interest rates, leaving one with semi-perpetual debt.

Will Jackson’s chapter, ‘Liberal Intellectuals and the Politics of Security’, presents an impressive critique of the liberal intellectual’s entanglement with security politics. He argues that the ‘concept of security in the current era is inextricably bound up with discourses of human rights and this has given rise to a ‘liberty–security regime’. While the connection between security and liberty is not new, Jackson cogently demonstrates that liberal intellectuals tend to shore up the dominant ideology through human rights discourse. Thus liberal intellectuals are not just reacting to the current politics, but are ‘instead bound up in the formation and subsequent legitimization of the current security regime’. Concluding that a politics *against security* is the only alternative, Jackson’s analysis moves us closer to resisting the concept of security all together.

The final three chapters, Heidi Rimke’s ‘Security: Resistance’, Ronjon Paul Datta’s ‘Security and the

Void', and Guillermina Seri's 'All the People Necessary Will Die to Achieve Security', serve as a good conclusion to the book, exemplifying both the theoretical richness of the volume and the application of the ideas to real-life existence. Rimke confronts the tendency of law enforcement to criminalize protests through security concerns. Using the 2010 G20 protests in Toronto as the backdrop, Rimke returns to the theme of pacification, arguing that the policing of summit protests exemplifies techniques aimed not only to control but also to (re)produce the bourgeois order. She demonstrates how police invoke the *anarchist spectre* to induce fear of protest, leading to the justification of heavy law enforcement. Rimke smartly points out that the anarchist spectre, if used correctly, also serves as an anti-security politics, pointing us towards some

political alternatives. Datta's philosophical chapter applies an aleatory materialist perspective to theorize about what is *not happening* (i.e. the void), aiming to open space for newly imagined futures. The chapter will be most interesting for those seeking innovative ways to think about anti-security. Seri's work concludes the book with an apt analysis of how the state 'turns the market's victims into state enemies'. Using her experience with *favelas* in Latin American, the chapter poignantly demonstrates that the logic of the free market (i.e. security) cannot protect the dispossessed; that at the very moment when the state connects security to citizenship, police kill with impunity. This will likely all change once we realize, as Datta quotes John Holloway, that 'Capitalism exists today only because we created it today'.

Luis A. Fernandez

We have worked enough

Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011. 296 pp., £64.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 978 0 82235 096 5 hb., 978 0 82235 112 2 pb.

The problem with work, according to Kathi Weeks, is that there's too much of it. This is not an argument about the exploitation or alienation of work but, rather, about work's monopolization of so much time and energy, and its overly mediating role in our lives not only as 'workers', but also as social and political subjects. In the contemporary 'work society' – Weeks focuses on the USA but her analysis is certainly more widely applicable – work is not just an economic practice, producing goods and services, and functioning as the primary mechanism of income distribution. It is also a key site for becoming interpellated into gendered, classed subjects and governable citizens, and for determining access (or lack of it) to education, health care and housing. Weeks's key aim is thus to 'render strange' our willingness to dedicate ourselves to a life of work, and to interrogate why political theory consistently fails to question the values and logics that secure its continuing domination.

It is not only the Right that has accepted and promoted the work ethic that dominates the social and political imaginaries. Leftist movements have also nurtured it through the perpetuation of its productivist values. For example, whilst Marxist theory has crucially publicized and politicized the 'hidden' privatized

world of waged work under capitalism, it has tended to foster a glorified notion of work, seeking to liberate it from its exploited and alienated forms, rather than questioning the ideal of work itself. Feminist theory, Weeks argues, has similarly failed to challenge the dominant legitimating discourses of work. Its attachment to productivism, she points out, is evident in two dominant feminist strategies: the first being to seek women's equal access to waged work as a path towards greater fulfilment, the second being to affirm the worth of unwaged domestic work and demand its recognition. Though the second strategy importantly publicizes and politicizes the 'hidden' world of domestic work (thereby expanding the category of 'work' itself), both strategies tend to draw on the language and sentiments of the traditional work ethic, affirming the inherent 'value' or 'fulfilment' offered by work, be it 'productive' or 'reproductive', waged or unwaged.

In criticizing both Marxism's and feminism's 'productivist' tendencies, Weeks does not deny or disavow the importance of struggles to improve the conditions of waged work, or to demand recognition for nonwaged work. Her point is that such demands for 'better work', or for affirmation of nonwaged socially necessary work, can be so easily co-opted

into contemporary post-Fordist managerial discourses of ‘worker empowerment’, or ‘accommodated’ through ‘work–life balance’ schemes such as ‘flexi-time’ (which have, on the whole, resulted in increased expectations and *more work*, particularly for women). Weeks’s thesis, then, is that political theorists and activists must struggle not only to improve the conditions, distribution and quality of work, but also to tackle the ‘metaphysics, moralism and meaning’ of work, and, above all, to demand less of it.



The meaning of ‘work’, and what counts as ‘work’, however, is a contentious issue, as debates within Marxism and feminism attest. Weeks advocates a ‘capacious’ conception of ‘work’, defined broadly as ‘productive cooperation organized around, but not necessarily confined to, the privileged model of waged labor’. She opts not to distinguish between work and labour, using the terms interchangeably and rejecting the Marxist notion of ‘living labour’ as an alternative to ‘work’. Though ‘living labour’ does offer a critical standpoint from which to interrogate alienating and exploitative forms of work, Weeks argues it embodies an essentialized conception of work that generates a future vision of ‘the work society perfected’ rather than of such a society overcome. The refusal to distinguish between work and labour is thus, she explains, ‘a wager of sorts: by blocking access to a vision of unalienated and unexploited labor ... I hope to concentrate and amplify the critique of work as well as to inspire what I hope will be a more radical imagination of postwork futures.’ Her chief theoretical influence here is autonomist Marxism, distinguishable not only by its affirmation of the collective capacity of active subjects for autonomy vis-à-vis capital, but also

by its ‘refusal of work’, best understood as a political standpoint that insists on a break with contemporary work values. From this perspective, it is *work*, not private property, the market or alienation, which is the lifeblood of capitalism, ‘the glue that holds the system together’. The autonomist vision of postcapitalism is therefore based not on the ‘liberation *of* work’, but on ‘liberation *from* work’.

Weeks’s marshalling of autonomist Marxism is effective in generating a critical estrangement from the work

ethic, and in challenging us to imagine possible futures not organized around waged work or the inherent value of hard work. In this sense, her ‘wager’ in opting for a capacious concept of ‘work’, and ignoring the work/labour distinction, pays off. Things become trickier, however, when she tries to extend the ‘refusal of work’ paradigm to the structures and ethics of socially necessary domestic/caring work, which she admits is a more complicated affair. ‘Femi-

nist antiwork critique’, Weeks suggests,

would need to accomplish several things at once: to recognize unwaged domestic work as socially necessary labour, contest its inequitable distribution ... and, at the same time, insist that valuing it more highly and distributing it more equitably is not enough – the argument of unwaged reproductive labour and its relationship with waged work must be entirely rethought.

One of Weeks’s main sources of inspiration here is the feminist Wages for Housework movement, associated primarily with Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, and articulated in a number of texts in Italy, the UK and the USA between 1972 and 1976. This movement has rarely been taken very seriously, and has often been interpreted as extolling the virtues of domestic work and essentializing or entrenching the ‘housewife’ role for women. However, through revisiting the movement’s roots in the autonomist Marxist tradition, Weeks uncovers a nascent feminist ‘antiwork politics’ within its key texts. Calling domestic labour ‘work’ was not about elevating it, as Federici explains, but was rather ‘the first step towards refusing to do it’. The radical ambition of the Wages for Housework

proponents, Weeks argues, was thus to contest the invisibility and undervaluation of unwaged domestic labour, whilst at the same time contesting its moralization and its 'overvaluation as a labor of love'. Nor, she claims, was waged work viewed as a promising way out of domestic work, because, as Dalla Costa insists, 'we have worked enough'.

Weeks finds useful resources for an antiwork feminist politics in this literature, and her approach to this 'curio from the archive of second-wave feminist theory' is an exemplary exercise in strategic feminist historiography. Yet she ultimately rejects 'wages for housework' as a substantive political demand, voicing support instead for broader political campaigns for shorter working hours and for a guaranteed non-means-tested basic income for all. The crucial advantage of the demand for basic income over wages for housework, Weeks maintains, is that it resists any problematic distinction between productive and reproductive or socially necessary and unnecessary labour, implicitly recognizing that 'all citizens contribute to society in a variety of ways'. And because it would go to individuals rather than households, it can speak to differently situated subjects (rather than 'heads of households' or 'housewives'). Moreover, the demand for a basic guaranteed income for everyone addresses the key problems of the contemporary post-Fordist political economy that renders its wage system unable to function adequately as a mechanism of social distribution, – that is, its high levels of unemployment, and of temporary and contingent employment.

The gender neutrality of the demands for basic income and for shorter working hours, however, is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, as Weeks rightly points out, the gender-neutral approach avoids reproducing essentialized gender categories, household and relationship configurations. With a basic income and shorter hours, every individual would have more money and more time to do as they chose, regardless of who they were or whom they lived with. And she does stipulate that a feminist movement for basic income and shorter hours would need to factor socially necessary unwaged labour into any estimation of 'working hours', and to challenge its present unequal distribution. However, when the feminist substance of these demands is essentially an *amendment*, rather than being at their very core, the risk is that the specificities of the feminist problematic become eclipsed within a more general 'antiwork' movement. As Weeks herself concedes, there is no reason to think that socially necessary labour would be shared out more equitably if only everyone had more time.

The problem with *The Problem With Work*, then, is that Weeks ends up essentially *deferring* the question of how exactly the 'refusal of work' might apply to socially necessary domestic labour, and how socially necessary labour might be differently and more equitably organized. 'Applying the refusal of work to domestic labour', Weeks reassures, 'doesn't mean abandoning the house and denying care but interrogating its basic structures and ethics'. Yet the 'unthinkable' thought experiment of denying care to dependent and vulnerable people does perhaps suggest that the domestic labour debate cannot be engulfed within a broader antiwork politics that takes waged work as its privileged model of 'work'. I am not suggesting a return to a dichotomy between productive and reproductive labour, or to a fixed, reified notion of what is socially necessary and what isn't. Nor am I suggesting we take the 'refusal of work' that literally. However, the fact that the 'refusal of work' does seem so strained when applied to socially necessary caring work does imply that a more specified and differentiated analysis may be required. Despite its shortcomings, the *Wages for Housework* literature does at least foreground the intractability of the problem of socially necessary labour.

Then again, Weeks's stated intention is not to offer a worked-out future plan for meeting needs and organizing different kinds of work, but instead to stimulate an antiwork critique and a 'postwork' politics oriented towards the 'yet-to-come'. The trope of the 'yet-to-come' in recent political and philosophical writing can often be the sign of a rather empty politics. Weeks, however, provides a robust defence of this approach in the book's final chapter, drawing judiciously on Ernst Bloch's notion of 'concrete utopian thinking' and giving an insightful analysis of the 'utopian demand'. Her key argument here is that incomplete, fragmentary visions and demands might better meet the challenge of concrete utopian thinking, which, as Weeks interprets it, is to enact a critical distance from the present but also to hold 'the space of a different future open' to multiple insights and tendencies, rather than projecting a blueprint of 'the good society'. In this sense, she suggests, the content of the utopian demand may turn out to be 'less important than the political act of demanding itself'. This defence of incomplete and partial future visions, and of the power of the utopian demand, is persuasive. Weeks also succeeds in showing that antiwork critique must be an essential aspect of feminist politics, and in her proposal that a contemporary 'feminist time movement' that seeks to reduce working hours must broaden the possibilities

for nonwork time, including time for pleasure as well as fulfilment of duties. Yet, whilst it is in many ways an illuminating and inspiring book, *The Problem With Work* would perhaps have been even more stimulating of the feminist imagination if the utopian demands it advocates had more explicit feminist content; that is, if they focused more acutely on the problem of socially necessary labour and its reorganization, and offered more of an articulated glimpse of what a feminist ‘postwork’ future might be like, however fragmentary and contingent such visions may be.

Victoria Browne

Unconscious historiography

Matt Ffytche, *The Foundation of the Unconscious: Schelling, Freud and the Birth of the Modern Psyche*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2012. 320 pp., £60.00 hb., 978 0 52176 649 4.

Psychoanalysis has a problem with history. The concepts with which psychoanalysis operates both demand and threaten to forestall an account of their own emergence. They demand such an account because psychoanalysis has been concerned since Freud with denaturing, rendering contingent, the categories used to make sense of sexuality, of identity, of the subject more generally. Despite this, a historical account of psychoanalytic conceptuality is threatened by the explicitly universalizing, if not naturalizing, character of Freud’s own theoretical apparatus; an apparatus that Freud used to hypothesize the emergence of history from prehistory while largely avoiding the question of analysis’s *own* (philosophical, cultural) history, beyond local institutional struggles or hyperbolic portrayals of interpersonal dissent and betrayal. Since Lacan’s theoretically omnivorous reinvention of Freud, the question of history has become even more pregnant, in terms of the admissibility or otherwise of temporal rupture within the latter’s structural reconfiguration of the unconscious, and in the increasing sense that psychoanalysis as both theory and practice is fundamentally at odds with contemporary ways of reducing psyche to brain. Seen in a certain light, psychoanalysis seems out of step with history.

Matt Ffytche’s fine book draws our attention to the rich, complex philosophical history of the unconscious,

especially as articulated in Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* and within German Romanticism. If Schelling sought to ‘ground history in the unconscious’, Ffytche opts instead to ‘give the unconscious a history’, weaving deftly between discussion of Fichte’s self-grounding ‘I’, Gotthilf von Schubert’s now largely forgotten Romantic psychology, and Freud’s own recalibration of the relationship between the psyche and the autonomous self. But the thorny question of psychoanalysis’s conceptual resistance to history, as I’ve outlined it above, remains largely unposed. One might, then, wonder whether the very comprehensiveness of Ffytche’s account of the unconscious, its relentless assimilation of its materials into the terms of its motivating questions, bars in advance sustained attention to what is particularly problematic and *resistant* to a certain kind of historical periodization in the specifically psychoanalytic, rather than metaphysical, notion of the unconscious.

Broadly, Ffytche’s thesis is that the history of the unconscious is at the same time the history of attempts in philosophy and psychology, from the 1800s on, to account properly for the contradictions of the modern liberal self. Those contradictions are shown to have slowly emerged from prior, metaphysical attempts to hold together nature and soul, mind and body, knowledge and truth, all ‘harmonised through the psyche’. Ffytche spends three chapters exploring the work of Schelling, whose successive attempts to reconcile the human as both autonomous agent and the highest expression of nature’s self-development is set up as a prefiguration of Freud’s own wrestling with the determination and indetermination, completion and decompletion, of the individual in or through the unconscious. Schelling, Ffytche argues, presents a paradox that will continue to haunt theories of the unconscious long after German idealism and Romanticism had waned: ‘on the one hand, it [Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*] purveys a vision of the human spirit as something that “strives to make *itself* free”’; on the other, the human must be itself accounted for within a much broader, metaphysical account of the inextricability of natural and human development. The resulting concept of the absolute ‘welds together the connotation of an unshakable premise, an absolute starting point in the philosophy of existence, *and* the sense of the absolute autonomy of each self’. Schelling’s eventual turn to art and poetry as materials to thematize the opaque ground that might birth both determined existence and indeterminate autonomy are a symptom, for Ffytche, of Schelling’s more general desire to hold on to the ‘ellipsis’ that must characterize what is particular about

human autonomy. It is, finally, unconsciousness that takes the role of that ellipsis in Schelling, 'invoked not just in one respect, but as a set of necessary conditions pertaining to *all* points of ontological reference – the absolute, the act of creation, and the individual'.

For Ffytche, the contradiction between determination and autonomy that motored Schelling's attempt to unite 'the individuality of the self and its unconscious grounds' is detectable too in the inconsistencies of Freud's psychoanalytic project. Freud, according to Ffytche, posits multiple and frequently contradictory accounts of the individual's primary motivations, propensities and wishes, concentrated in his many reflections on the role of egotism in the human psyche. At one level, Freud wishes to draw a picture of child development predicated on the gradual abandonment of infantile selfishness within a higher synthesis of the different parts of the psyche with the external world. On another level, he seems to attach importance to those elements of infantile egotism as crucial for the establishment of individual autonomy. Any attempt to encompass such contradictions within the defining terms of sexuality or repression merely resituates the aporia at a higher level of generality: 'we cannot so easily master the ambiguities over selfhood and egotism, affirmative and pathological individuality, at least not by conscripting them within the more familiar patterns of sexual repression.' The key point for Ffytche is that these inconsistencies are not to be solved by a further extension of psychoanalytic concepts or by a turn to the clinic; rather, such contradictions

arise from instabilities in the social definition of these terms – not only through socio-political tensions, but also instabilities stemming from the piece-meal depiction of 'individuality' emerging out of various competing disciplines or modes of belief: psychology, literature, religion, nascent sociology, philosophy.

Such problems are compounded by Freud's avoidance of a unified theory of the self, and are symptomatically replayed, for Ffytche, in the lack of any consistency in the post-Freudian account of the relation between psyche and selfhood. Little space is given over to dealing with such post-Freudian theory in the book, however, and some of the reflections on the likes of Laplanche and Lacan are compressed and sketchy. The moments when Ffytche does attempt to justify his brand of historiography against more theoretically minded models are brief and unsatisfactory. We learn, for instance, that Foucault's early writings on the emergence of the unconscious are undermined by their

'being re-read through the lens of French structuralist debates in the 1950s and 1960s', resulting in his inability to provide 'a more adequate evocation of the German, as opposed to French, intellectual context stretching from the mid eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth century'. But Foucault's archeological and then genealogical reconstructions of discourse represent a critique of the very kind of 'flexible' but progressive historiography that underpins Ffytche's research. It may be that Ffytche's broad optic, one that tends nonetheless to contract the innumerable conceptual problems and opportunities of the unconscious to that of the liberal subject and its troublesome 'freedom', blinds him to the potential insights of non- or anti-historicist accounts of the unconscious; accounts which are not necessarily without a theory of history or time *per se*.

Nonetheless, in a certain light the flaws of Ffytche's approach start to look like virtues. There is no doubt a need for the kind of rigorous intellectual history of psychoanalysis that Ffytche presents here, and his book will open up avenues of understanding that extend far beyond the largely interpersonal and institutional histories of psychoanalysis that dominate the field. I was particularly struck by the rich account of the interaction of psychiatric and philosophical writing in early-nineteenth-century Germany that makes up much of the fifth chapter. There, Ffytche notes 'intriguing intersections ... between notions of psychic health and ontological representations of individuality and autonomy'; whereas, in the French context, patients in trance states were studied as to the ways that they could give 'insights into the nature of their own illness', 'the Germans were more keen to corroborate the insights of idealism, to map out the transcendental structures of the self'. It would be fascinating to trace the history of such interactions to the present day, where analytic philosophy of mind and cognitive neuroscience entertain a dialogue that has nonetheless come largely to exclude wider philosophical and psychoanalytic insights.

If Ffytche's lucid and impeccably well-researched book gives the unconscious a history, it still remains to ask what challenges psychoanalysis itself might pose to historical writing, or at least to the model of historiography – progressive, each example marshalled by the demands of a singular problem or question – that underpins Ffytche's account. To admit such questions could lead to a new way of framing the relationship between psychoanalysis and history, one that might register both the intellectual history of psychoanalytic concepts and that which is singular and ruptural in

Freud's Copernican revolution. Such a practice may well require a historicization that is immanent to, rather than set apart from, psychoanalytic conceptual-ity; as Eric Santner has recently phrased it in his book *The Royal Remains* (2011), 'The strange self-reflexivity at work here is that only with psychoanalytic theory can one truly grasp the nature of the historical context in which that theoretical paradigm emerged.' In the meantime, however, Ffytche's excellent book sets a new standard for philosophically sensitive historical writing on the concept of the unconscious.

Tom Eyers

Gloopy

Keston Sutherland, *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms*, Seagull Books, London, 2011. 264 + vii pp., £12.00 hb., 978 1 90649 797 2.

Keston Sutherland's numerous books of poetry have established him – a way of putting it that, understandably, he will not like – as one of the most innovative poets writing today. Yet, according to its dust jacket, *Stupefaction* is 'his first book of critical and literary theory'. Incontestable as this description might seem, it is necessary to note that books of poetry like *Neocosis*, *Hot White Andy* and the recent *The Stats on Infinity* are themselves avowedly critical – of, in particular, the 'blackened dogmatic catwalk' (*Hot White Andy*) on which the pageant of contemporary social life proceeds – while, in their stark affront to routinely accepted codes dictating what 'literature' is, such works are also resolute interventions in the field of literary theory.

It is well to be reminded of this taut relation between the critical and theoretical, on the one hand, and the literary, on the other, in Sutherland's authorship to date because *Stupefaction* demands renewed thinking about the cognitive and social force of the literary in a range of texts – a range that would appear merely miscellaneous only to the reader smugly in possession of a handy sense of what 'literature' is and is not, and of what its capacities are and are not. This, of course, is a book that aims to discomfort such readers. Each of the book's four main chapters has been published in some form previously, but *Stupefaction* is more than just a bringing-together of earlier work, and not just because each of the chapters here is the result of major expansion and revision of its earlier incarnation. Rather, as a whole, the book develops a striking

account of the necessity to radical thinking of a satirical intransigence and angularity that is, Sutherland claims, as distinctively literary as it is philosophical – a claim he bears out through at minutely attentive readings of figures including Hegel, Marx, Adorno, Wordsworth and Pope.

The book's introduction goes a long way to setting out its main aims and, in particular, bones of contention. Announcing Marx as the 'central and heroic figure in the book', Sutherland goes on to develop a patient but also emphatic differentiation of his reading of Marx from the influential account in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. Sutherland takes Derrida to task for his insistence that Marx's thinking be subjected to a critique in the form of 'a deconstruction of ... critical limits' by showing how, for Marx and *pace* Derrida, limits of this kind are not always already transgressed but are rather the expression of social contradiction. What amounts simply to an aspect of a methodology, for Derrida, is instead, in Marx's thought, 'a kind of cognitive testimony of social facts, the measuring up of thinking to injustice'.

The focus on Marx is maintained in the book's first, and perhaps finest, chapter, 'Marx in Jargon', in which Sutherland elaborates what might provisionally be called an anti-theoretical account of Marx's work. Sutherland's account of Marx is anti-theoretical in the specific sense that he seeks to disable a view of Marx's work that would see it as a vast storehouse of concepts to be taken up (and discarded) at the will of the reader. Instead, Sutherland reads *Das Kapital* as satire, the object of which is the bourgeois reader and, in this case, would-be consumer of portable conceptual items. It is *Das Kapital*, and not *Capital*, that is thus read by Sutherland because, as he demonstrates, translation has too often involved the inoculation of Marx's satirical intent. Taking the example of the translation as 'con-gelation' of Marx's description of abstract human labour as *Gallerte* – jelly – Sutherland is able to show that Marx originally intended to *disgust* the reader with her or his consumption of the jellified mass of human hands, brains, muscles and nerves. Sutherland is engaged at this point in the correction of a misleading translation of Marx's text – so long as it is understood that such correction (and such misdirection) has extremely far-reaching consequences. He shows in detail that the absence from *Capital* (as opposed to *Das Kapital*) of the specific description of abstract labour as jelly – a semi-solid mass produced by boiling down a kind of witch's brew of dismembered bodies – renders (a word, picking up on Sutherland's hints, I use advisedly) Marx's text no longer satirical. This

matters not just because it distorts Marx's 'style' – and it is salutary to be reminded in the chapter's epigraph of Wilhelm Liebknecht's assessment that 'The style is the man – the style of Marx is Marx' – but because it distorts the very purpose and character of his thought. 'Satire is not an ornament'; once it is boiled off, we are left not with a lean corpus of Marxist doctrine, but with nauseating gloom. Sutherland has a gift for a directness and concentration of statement that is at the same time by no means culpable of simplification, and he summarizes this argument well: 'Satire in Marx is more than a comic modality of the picturesque: it is the concentrated literary exposure of social contradiction.'



It is worth pausing here, though, to consider for a moment a key term in this last quotation, namely, 'literary'. What Sutherland certainly demonstrates convincingly is that the particular force of Marx's thinking is inextricably bound up with characteristics that are not reducible to textbook summary. The literary is what this stubborn remainder is – and, indeed, the literary is characterized throughout *Stupefaction* as something that cannot be got rid of, rather than as an ornament to be packed away with the heirlooms. But it might be argued at this point, especially by those without a particular interest in 'literature' as commonly understood, that it would have been open to Sutherland to argue that *Das Kapital* is a satirical critique of political economy without exactly being a *literary* text.

While there is no explicit definition of the literary here that would deliver the exactitude demanded by that argument (and, in a way, how could there

be?), Sutherland's sense of the literary as the non-paraphrasable but nevertheless vitally critical (and critically vital) substance of a range of seemingly disparate texts is developed with admirable bravura throughout. The approach to Marx developed in the opening chapter entails that the turn to Wordsworth, Pope and Wordsworth again in what follows is not inconsistent even as it remains bracingly anomalous; for neither Wordsworth nor Pope is submitted to anything like a straightforwardly recognizable Marxist (or Hegelian or Adornian) reading, but rather both poets are brought into striking conversation (without the piety that usually attaches to that word) with these philosophical authorships. Sutherland develops a reading of Adorno's account, from *Minima Moralia*, of the bourgeois anxiety to be right in order to emphasize the significance of Wordsworth's insistence that his readers 'ought to like' perhaps the most mockingly despised line in all of his work, which concludes his description of a pond in his poem 'The Thorn': 'I've measured it from side to side: / 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide.' My A-level English teacher explained that, in giving the measurements of a pond so baldly, Wordsworth was 'going a bit far' in his famous rejection of poetic diction, but it is in that extremity, in Wordsworth's seemingly obdurate commitment to what is universally derided by the benignly right-thinking, that Sutherland finds the revolutionary force of this poem.

Wordsworth's is not just a dogmatic commitment, despite the objections of his readers, to the rightness of his line, but rather principled perversity in the face of the canons of poetic correctness. The work that Sutherland most admires – whether it is Marx's critique of political economy, Pope's invention of 'bathos' as a critical term, or Wordsworth's poetry – is not comfortably assured of its own rightness, but rather uncomfortably unambiguous and emphatic in its challenge to accepted thinking. The discomfort for that otherwise supremely unruffled consumer, the reader, produced by a proper attention to the authorships examined in *Stupefaction* is, then, a key point of emphasis throughout. Marx sets out to disgust his readers with the macabre shlopp that they daily consume in a cannibalistic frenzy; Wordsworth insists that it is the duty of his readers to like a line of utterly banal verse; and the consequence of Pope's account of bathos is that the mortification of language is not the result of natural attrition, but rather of the dullness and sloth of readers and speakers. The reader is decidedly on the hook of the texts she would otherwise simply gut.

Ross Wilson

Ludic exertion

Steven Connor, *A Philosophy of Sport*, Reaktion Books, London, 2011. 232 pp., £17.00 pb., 978 1 86189 869 2.

Academic philosophers, Steven Connor notes in his Introduction, have paid sport a good deal of attention in the four decades since *The Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* first appeared. Connor refers occasionally to this body of specialist work, but he is not wanting (so he explains) to pursue the approaches he finds there, which consider sport as a ground on which to test out questions of rules and definitions, as a sphere of moral action, and as an aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic domain. His book is centred, rather, on the experience and practice of sport in its own terms. Connor seeks to illuminate this by a more or less disciplined conceptual thinking that draws on theory and philosophy, from Baudrillard and Bataille to Wittgenstein and Zeno – although he warns us at the outset that he is ‘not a professional philosopher, and maybe not any other kind either’.

His claim that ‘sport is becoming ever more definitional of what it means to be a human being’ is tenable only if ‘sport’ is taken to include watching it, above all on television: for every Olympian who sweats, thousands of viewers will gawp. However, the discussion of spectatorship is occasional rather than systematic. The first chapter reviews conflicting assessments by Horkheimer and Adorno, Michel Leiris, Susan Sontag, and others, of sport-watching as an element in the mass culture of modernity; but although Connor acknowledges that it can be construed both as a mode of carnival and as a mode of social discipline, he does not pursue the tension between these dialectically related aspects. Some of the claims made for sport’s existential meaning – that it imbues time with special intensity, that the pleasure-in-victory it offers is inseparable from pleasure in the other’s defeat – are developed with reference to the experience of the watcher as well as that of the performer. The book closes by suggesting we should blow the whistle on hegemonic sporting forms with their warlike ethos, and embrace ‘a new, more oblique and convivial kind of ludic exertion’ (skiing and surfing are Connor’s examples), in which the sporting body engages less with an adversary and more with its own powers and limits. Here, too, the figure of what Adorno in one translation called the ‘howling devotee of the stadium’, with his (or her) unregenerate love of the adversarial, seems to be invoked. But the unsystematic approach

means that many political and cultural questions raised by the prominence of sport-watching among twentieth- and twenty-first-century entertainments are neglected: there is some discussion of nationalism, but nothing on disability and very little on gender, and nothing on the amusing phenomenon of a public at once unprecedentedly sport-fixated and unprecedentedly fat.

The book is more methodical, and more satisfying, in its engagement with the sportive human body in action. Connor is no ‘professional’ in this arena either; his sporting performances have been restricted, we gather, to youthful front-lawn football-kicking, reluctant school rugby and sociable ping-pong. This places him on a level playing field with most of his likely readers, and prepares us for a treatment that will rely on wit, scholarship and insight rather than on special knowledge. Threads from theoretical and literary writing are interwoven with Connor’s usually persuasive reflections on the rule-governed, goal-directed space–time of sporting endeavour. One main emphasis is phenomenological: Merleau-Ponty is quoted on how the soccer player’s body, in ‘the dialectic of milieu and action’, ‘modifies the character of the field’, and there are frequent references to Michel Serres’s *Variations sur le corps*. This is complemented by a broadly existentialist argument, drawing on Hegel and Sartre, to the effect that sport enables human beings to endow with a kind of necessity their unnecessary being-in-the-world. Connor quotes Hegel, declaring in the *Philosophy of History* that sport ‘presents the higher seriousness; for in it Nature is wrought into Spirit’, but adding that ‘in these contests, the subject has not yet advanced to the highest grade of serious thought’.

The tone of *A Philosophy of Sport* sometimes implies an ambivalence, which philosophical readers may share, as to whether the topic deserves, or requires, the ‘highest grade’ of scholarly and intellectual attention. When Connor the (non)philosopher offers in passing to resolve Zeno’s paradox, or when at the end of the book he invokes an ecological ethic conspicuously absent up to that point (‘we are involved in a war that we cannot, dare not, dream of winning, a war against the world’), seriousness risks becoming portentousness. But for the most part, this book will confirm his reputation as an entertaining and lucid thinker.

Martin Ryle