

### Grande biog

Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, trans. Andrew Brown, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden MA, 2012. 603 pp., £25.00 hb., 978 0 74565 615 1.

‘What matter who’s speaking, someone said, what matter who’s speaking?’ Despite post-structuralist philosophies’ association with Beckettian questions such as these, they remain surprisingly bound to what Foucault called that ‘singular relationship that holds between an author and a text’. Hence, of course, the ambiguous attractions of biography in a field so often marked today by its mechanisms of authorial branding and commodification of ‘key thinkers’. A less fashionable or influential figure in academia than he was a decade or so ago, for a wider public Jacques Derrida remains probably the most famous philosophical ‘name’ since Sartre. The commission of a biography as exhaustive as Benoît Peeters’s *Derrida* was thus an inevitability.

Still, even (or especially) here, the sense that, in philosophy above all, ‘the life’ is somehow beside the point remains a powerful one. Derrida cites Heidegger’s own description of Aristotle’s life: ‘He was born, he thought, he died.’ The ‘rest is pure anecdote’. Biography may tell us something of the milieu in which the modern intellectual exists, but as regards what is distinctive about the philosophy itself: it would appear to be a necessary part of its traditional self-understanding that it always escapes such narration. ‘Lives’ are for poets. As every commentator is obliged to point out, there is, of course, a further difficulty. Any would-be biographer has to confront the extent to which Derrida’s thought is itself identified with a challenge to conventional ideas of authorship, the subject or, indeed, the identity of ‘a life’. Yet, equally, precisely because it is a supposed condition of the properly philosophical subject that it rigorously *exclude* biography as a ‘dangerous supplement’, a realm of empirical accident external to the internal coherence of the thought, what could be more open to deconstruction than such a desire to insulate the idea from its contamination by the contingency of an everyday, material life? And, in fact, few philosophers could be said to have ‘exposed’ themselves to the degree that Derrida does in texts like ‘Envois’ and ‘Circumfession’.

If all this raises a set of fairly obvious ‘philosophical’ issues, they are not, however, ones that much trouble

Peeters, at least beyond his short introduction. Instead, he states, he has been content ‘to write not so much a Derridean biography as a biography of Derrida’. To all intents and purposes, this is the last time that any concerns regarding form or genre intervene. In many ways, one can be grateful for this – how awful does a ‘Derridean biography’ sound? And, if nothing else, the book’s remorseless endeavour to do exactly what it says on the tin may mean, with any luck, that the abomination that was Jason Powell’s 2006 *Jacques Derrida: A Biography* can now disappear quietly. Best known in France as a graphic novelist and author of a very good biography of Hergé, Peeters most obviously assumes here the role of a professional writer working to a commission (in this case from the editors of Flammarion’s *Grandes Biographies* series). Consequently there are few echoes of his own earlier ‘experimental’ biographies of Claude Simon and Paul Valéry; the first of which has been credited with inaugurating a distinctively French genre of ‘autofiction’. Instead, such reflexivity has been reserved for the 250-page ‘Biographer’s Notebook’, *Trois ans avec Derrida*, also published by Flammarion (and unlikely, one suspects, to be translated into English). *Derrida: A Biography*, meanwhile, sticks relentlessly to a chronological narration of the facts. Journalistically chronicled via 4–5-page chunks of text, and organized into chapters that generally cover no more than two or three, often overlapping years (1967 and 1968 get chapters to themselves), Peeters doesn’t quite tell us what Derrida has for breakfast every morning, but he does, for example, relate his student complaints about the École Normale Supérieure restaurant, with its slices of camembert ‘approaching the consistency of a brick’. We learn that Derrida watched a lot of telly, liked gangster films and swimming in the sea, and appears to have spent much of his twenties on the verge of a nervous breakdown, getting by on ‘special diets’, sleeping pills and anti-depressants (not, one suspects, entirely unusually for students at the ENS). As for Peeters himself, he disappears entirely into the role of organizer and archivist, all personal reflection siphoned off into the companion notebook.

For a book by a novelist, *Derrida: A Biography* is, then, a remarkably, even ostentatiously, ‘unliterary’ work. Such an approach has its benefits. The book is way too remote from its subject to result in hagiography, even if we are left in little doubt that its author – who marks his personal gratitude for Derrida’s ‘generous piece’ about one of his own earlier publications in the introduction – likes as well as admires his subject. Equally, the biography resists any idealization or over-dramatization of its subject’s life, although the near total absence of judgement, whether philosophical, psychological, moral or political, becomes itself wearying after a while. The impersonal style of narration also has its advantages in that Peeters refrains from any direct forays into, for example, the more obvious cod psycho-biographical explanations that might tempt him in the sections dealing with Derrida’s Algerian childhood, when ‘they expelled from the Lycée de Ben Aknoun in 1942 a little black and very Arab Jew who understood nothing about it’, as Derrida famously recalled in ‘Circumfession’. Nonetheless, in sticking so unbendingly to the facts, it is remarkable just how little space is devoted to presenting the actual significance of Derrida’s writings, given that Peeters has himself a philosophy degree from the Sorbonne and a Master’s dissertation supervised by Barthes to his credit. The philosophical importance is instead presumed, and, by comparison to works like Elisabeth Roudinesco’s 1993 biography of Lacan, or the late David Macey’s *Lives of Michel Foucault*, any kind of précis of Derrida’s major works is thin on the ground. Peeters begins by suggesting that he wanted ‘to present the biography of a philosophy at least as much as the story of an individual’. But what results comes close to reducing the ‘genesis’ of ‘a philosophy’ to little more than a list of books read, people met, and institutions passed through, rhythmically punctuated by a chronology of publication dates.

Peeters’s account of the pivotal 1964 essay on Levinas tells us something, for example, about how the 30-year-old Derrida first came to read *Totality and Infinity* (on the recommendation of Paul Ricœur), and about the process by which its original ‘monster text’ of more than a hundred pages came to be edited down and published over two issues of Jean Wahl’s *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (an invocation of textual ‘excess’ that will become a familiar motif throughout the book). Yet, beyond a few fairly unilluminating citations, Peeters’s summary of its actual contents boils down to: ‘while the study was overall very flattering, it also made several critical points’. Quite what such ‘points’ might have been is something the reader is

not told. (And is it really ‘very flattering’?) Peeters could justifiably reply that there are plenty of other books that can tell us this, at least in the case of such celebrated texts as ‘Violence and Metaphysics’. But, given the extensive labour in the archives, it feels more of a missed opportunity where the gestation of other works, particularly early on in Derrida’s career, are concerned. Peeters dutifully tracks the topics of the writing from some precocious schoolboy essays on Sartre onwards. However, there is nothing equivalent to what might be truly described as that ‘biography of a philosophy’ to be found in Edward Baring’s *The Young Derrida and French Philosophy*, which meticulously tracks the young Derrida’s turn from existentialism towards self-consciously scholastic readings of Husserl or the development of *différance* as manifest in the edits and rewrites of early papers for publication in *Writing and Difference*. (Baring’s book – itself a product of much time served in the archive – will be reviewed by Andrew McGettigan in *RP* 178.) So, while, for example, Peeters notes in passing Derrida’s 1964 award of the ‘prestigious’ Prix Cavallès for his translation and introduction of Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*, nowhere does he remark how apparently odd, from the perspective of his subsequent reputation, it should be that Derrida’s first such recognition should have come in the context of the philosophy of mathematics, nor what significance for the ‘genesis of the principal works’ that were to come this might have. Something a good deal closer to ‘intellectual biography’ would not have gone amiss here.

As befits a professional writer, where Peeters evidently feels on stronger ground is in describing Derrida’s developing style or tone. ‘A sentence by Derrida is closer to Henry James than to Proust’, Peeters notes in one nice remark, ‘it seems to coil indefinitely round itself, before making a sudden leap forward.’ Commenting on *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy* – with the caveat that this ‘is not the place to discuss such a technical work’ (as if other ‘less technical’ works might be discussed elsewhere) – Peeters rightly notes how ‘one of the most striking things’ about a piece written for a *Diplôme d’études supérieures* is the exceptional self-confidence with which it is presented. Similarly, Peeters writes, the ‘grandiose, magisterial tone’ that opens the Levinas essay is ‘completely different from a critical review’, and observes of ‘Force and Signification’, written around the same time, that with ‘the loftiness of its views ... [it] manifests a style of thought and writing which Derrida’s readers must have felt they would need to take seriously.’ Peeters thus implies – though

does not quite say – that at least part of Derrida’s early reputation was propelled by this ‘magisterial’ manner that suffused his work.

The strongest commentary is to be found in those sections dealing with the formal innovations of books like *Glas* and *The Postcard*. The material and typographical invention of *Glas*, in particular, gets a chapter to itself (1973–1975), where, for once, the customary details of the publishing process, in an era before the word processor, does not feel quite so anal in their recounting. (Here, too, Peeters’s labour in the archive pays off, digging up intriguingly enthusiastic responses in letters from both Althusser and Derrida’s old classmate Pierre Bourdieu.) Beyond this, *Derrida: A Biography* tends to be most revealing when it is proceeding by way of citation of Derrida’s own words. Although fleshed out by interviews with the likes of Étienne Balibar and Bernard Pautrat, the chapter ‘In the Shadow of Althusser 1963–1966’, for example, takes most of its actual ‘analysis’ from Derrida’s long interview with Michael Sprinker of 1989. Little further light is shed, despite a long citation from a 1964 letter responding to the last chapter of *For Marx*, on the intellectual dimensions of what must be considered one of the more enigmatic friendships in postwar French philosophy; even if Peeters more than competently narrates Derrida’s thoroughly admirable personal loyalty to the man who first employed him at the École Normale.

This is not to say that there is nothing here that doesn’t make Peeters’s book a significant point of reference, at least for the time being. Most importantly, along with more than a hundred interviews with friends and acquaintances – from Régis Debray to Jean-Luc Nancy – is the glimpse that *Derrida: A Biography* offers into the full range of materials to be found in the archives. The ‘public’ archives are themselves divided between Irvine, where Derrida taught during the 1990s (but with which he later fell out), and the Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine near Caen, which also holds those of Althusser and Barthes, among others. It is the material culled from these collections, and from Derrida’s correspondence in particular, that constitutes the most important new resource here. Peeters has unearthed more than a few gems, including a wonderfully splenetic response to *Anti-Oedipus* in a letter to Roger Laporte – a ‘very bad book (confused, full of exasperated denials, etc.) ... welcomed in a very broad and dubious sector of opinion’ – and a ‘peer review’ of Badiou’s early article on Althusser for *Critique* – ‘important’, Derrida judges, despite its ‘author’s pomposity, the “marks” he hands

out to everyone as if it were prize giving or the Last Judgement’. Other significant correspondence includes letters to Levinas on philosophical dialogue and from Genet on commitment, as well as a hilariously frosty exchange with a seemingly near-sociopathic Lacan. There is also some interesting material, by way of Pierre Aubenque, Lucien Braun and Jacques Taminiaux, on Derrida and Heidegger’s ‘to-and-fro relation’ – although, despite the latter’s expressed wish to make ‘the acquaintance of Monsieur Derrida, who already sent several of his works’, the two never met.

Peeters’s patient chronology has some moments of revelation to impart as well; chiefly via its decompression of events that most critical commentaries tend to flatten out. This is the case, for instance, in the book’s narration of the notorious argument with Foucault. As Peeters shows, Derrida’s respectful but relentlessly pressing 1962 critique of *History of Madness* – his first proper academic lecture in Paris – was initially praised in remarkably fulsome terms by its target. Indeed, writing that ‘You have magisterially shown the right road to take’, Foucault enthusiastically encouraged its publication. Three years later, he was still sending letters to Derrida, such as one on the occasion of the publication of ‘Writing Before the Letter’, flattering him that ‘In the order of contemporary thought, it is the most radical text I have ever read.’ In fact, it was a rather later dispute concerning a mention of Derrida’s essay in a lengthy 1967 review article by Gérard Granel that seems, then, to have been the first prompt in what, another five years on, would result in the infamously vicious ‘reply’ published as an appendix to a new edition of *History of Madness* in 1972 (not, it should be said, Foucault’s finest hour). Typically Peeters does not fully make the point as such, but the implication is that this had as much to do, on Foucault’s part, with his former student’s rising star, as with any insurmountable intellectual or political disagreement that might otherwise have been expected to make itself felt rather sooner than it did.

Unsurprisingly, any reader looking for confirmation of the claustrophobic bubble of elite French intellectual life will find plenty here. Peeters looks on as a slightly bemused observer rather than an aggressively hostile judge of the tight and incestuous circles of Parisian philosophy – among Derrida’s direct contemporaries at the fairly small preparatory Lycée Louis-le-Grand to which he went in 1949 were, for example, Bourdieu, Granel, Michel Serres, Pierre Nora and Michel Deguy. At the same time, Peeters places a good deal of emphasis on an image of Derrida as a perpetual outsider to this academic world – plausibly enough for an Algerian

Jew and adolescent 'rogue', with 'another youth, different from the Parisian student existence' (as Derrida put it in a 1951 letter) who never left El Biar until he was 19. Yet the biographical details suggest that this can be exaggerated. Derrida got his share of stupid comments from markers, and found life understandably hard as a boarder in the 'draconian' regime of Louis-le-Grand. But his oft-mentioned failure, twice, of the ENS entrance exams was not so remarkable (and seems to have had more to do with his highly strung character than any specific animus from the establishment, at this stage). The real 'humiliations' came later, after a relatively conventional passage through an *assistant* appointment at the Sorbonne to his work alongside Althusser at the ENS, with the failure to be appointed, first, in 1980 as Ricœur's replacement at Nanterre (for which Ricœur had encouraged him to apply) and then, a decade later, to a position at the Collège de France, despite the support of Bourdieu. By this point, Derrida had already published more than twenty books, translated into a number of languages, and held visiting professorships at Johns Hopkins and Yale.

This increasingly 'vexed' relationship with French academia played out in parallel with growing

international success. In so far as it touches here on a broader mode of intellectual history, Peeters's book has some suggestive things to say about the formation of the networks by which ideas and works (and, finally, brands) are disseminated, although this tends to dissolve into simple lists of names in Peeters's narration. By comparison to, for example, Roudinesco's *Jacques Lacan & Co.* or François Cusset's *French Theory*, there is little reflection on the institutions of 'theory' themselves. Peeters entitles one chapter (1996–1999) 'The Derrida International', picking up on a phrase used by Deguy to refer to the 'faithful' who 'spread the influence of deconstruction across the world'. A rare critical tone threatens to enter Peeters's account at this point, but he remains reluctant to pursue with much force the strategies at work in such cultivation of translators and disciples. As early as a 1968 letter to his friend Henry Bauchau, Derrida remarked the need for his 'very definite, restricted' audience to act as mediators of his thought. In the USA, this became akin to a sort of military campaign, dividing the country into friend and enemy states, with anointed representatives in each. (Avital Ronell recalls taking up 'the role of "Minister for Germanic Affairs"' in Der-

rida's 'team'.) In similar vein, Derrida referred to himself on more than one occasion as being caught in the role of 'travelling salesman'. A general theme of excess takes over the latter parts of the book: endless trips, marathon lectures that go on for hours, innumerable interviews and seminars, all carried out at the 'pace of a real rock star', in the words of his son Pierre.

If there is a focus here on various relationships, both friendly and strained, Baring's characterization of Peeters's book as emphasizing the 'private and personal' is nonetheless not quite true. In an interview in the 2002 film *Derrida*, responding to the question of what he would want to see in a documentary about a philosopher, Derrida answers: 'Their sex lives. ... Because it's something they don't talk about. Why do these



Recreation of the painting *The Massacre of the Innocents*, c. 1975, in the house of the Adamis

philosophers present themselves asexually in their work?'; though he follows this up by slyly adding that 'I never said I'd respond to such a question.' Yet here, too, Peeters is coy. While he describes Derrida at one point as having 'the reputation of being a seducer', the only affair mentioned is one that could hardly be avoided: his twelve-year relationship with Sylviane Agacinski, which ended in 1984 with the birth of a child, Daniel, and which Derrida tried to keep secret even from close friends (though most seem to have known) until it uncomfortably entered the public realm when Agacinski's husband Lionel Jospin ran for president in 2002. It was to Agacinski, Peeters suggests, that the 'strange and superb correspondence' making up 'Envois' was originally addressed, and, given some later attacks on each other in print, the relationship between the philosophical and the personal evidently becomes rather fraught at this point. Meanwhile, Derrida's wife, Marguerite, hardly appears as a living, breathing person at all; something, one suspects, that may have been a condition of her full cooperation.

Apart from personal traumas, and despite moments of excitement such as the 1981 arrest in Prague when visiting to give covert seminars on behalf of the Jan Hus Education Foundation – and a public punch-up with Bernard-Henri Lévy – overall, as one might well expect, *Derrida: A Biography* presents a well-travelled life, but not one that provides much of a rival for, say, Ray Monk's *Ludwig Wittgenstein* as the basis for a page-turning read. Generally, where the wider world is being uprooted, whether in Algeria in 1962 or Paris in 1968, Derrida is assuming the role of the torn and troubled onlooker – although he had more involvement in the events of 1968 than did, for example, either Althusser or Deleuze, organizing the first general assembly at the École Normale, despite his misgivings about 'spontaneism'. In tracing Derrida's involvement in the politics of his time, among the more interesting 'new' material in Peeters's book is a long unpublished letter from 1961 sent to former classmate Pierre Nora in response to the latter's *Les Français d'Algérie*. Here, Derrida carefully attempts to articulate a nuanced position, as someone brought up as a French Algerian, that would acknowledge the necessity and justice of the struggle for independence but resist decolonizing lurches into nationalist assertions of racial or religious identity; while also suggesting that it 'is perhaps the whole Marxist dogma about colonization, economic imperialism (and the phases of capitalism) that needs to be revised'. These thoughts, however, remained private. While, then, it might be true to suggest, as Peeters does in one rare moment of

speculation, that the Algerian War constituted 'one of the sources of all his political thinking', the book itself offers little in the way of elaboration. Overall, this is a pattern to which *Derrida: A Biography* remains true throughout. Peeters's archival tracking does, however, unearth what comes to appear as a fairly consistent but (until the mid-1990s at least) unpublicized position in Derrida's relations to Marxism, going back to at least his encounters with the Althusserians, in which it was in fact a commitment to being 'on the left' which meant (as he puts it in a letter to Granel in 1971) that the risk of giving an 'impression of apoliticism, or rather "apraxia"', was tied to the strategic requirement to avoid appearing to take a reactionary position in criticizing current orthodoxies on Marx: 'I'll never fall into anti-communism, so I'm shutting my mouth.'

The final words of Peeters's book are a citation from Derrida's last interview, carried out a few weeks before his death, in which he marked his 'preoccupation' with the question of 'Who is going to inherit, and how? ... When it comes to thought, the question of survival has taken on absolutely unforeseeable forms.' Peeters claims that his is a 'biography [that] has refused to exclude anything'. Yet one cannot help but feel that the one thing that it has finally excluded is the 'life' of a philosophy itself.

David Cunningham

## Anno Domini MMXII

Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology*, Verso, London and New York, 2012. 302 pp., £16.99 hb., 978 1 84467 737 5.

'A sustained and fascinating reflection on the place of religion in political discourse' – as per the review by Rev. Giles Fraser over at the *New Statesman* – this book is not. Nor should it be taken on credit when David Winters, down at the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, says that Critchley 'provides a powerful vision of what our politics ought to look like'. Now, 'fascination' is a personal matter, a question of susceptibility or taste, so we must let the Rev. Fraser be fascinated as and when he can. But 'sustained' is a weightier term. It implies grit and drive, a methodical rigour which is simply not in evidence in Critchley's new work, where what Critchley calls 'experiments' could better be called 'encounters'. There is no use in cataloguing the crew that we catch sight of in this book, but the fact that it opens with a glance at 'love' in Oscar

Wilde – that incorrigible sybarite – and closes with a nod at ‘love’ in Søren Kierkegaard – that incurable celibate – is indicative. The links are often weak.

Meanwhile, Winters’s choice of ‘powerful’ is curious, since Critchley harps on what he calls – already on page 7 – the ‘powerless power of being human’. Here, at the first appearance of this negated ‘power’, it signifies ‘conscience’. And it is to this, ‘conscience’, that Critchley promises to ‘return throughout this book’. But the operative phrase then sinks out of view until page 160, where – rather than conscience – it is ‘the power of being *in Christ* [that] is a powerless power’. (We are not meant to identify ‘conscience’ *simpliciter* with ‘being in Christ’, however, and whatever that could mean.) Not much farther on, it is Critchley’s new term ‘faith’ that is ‘a powerless power, a strength in weakness’ (this is St Paul, roughly), while upon its next – and on my reckoning, last – appearance, it is ‘Messianic power [that] is always weak – [that] is the power of powerlessness’. So Winters could not be faulted for mistaking the *reference* of Critchley’s ‘power’ – it could just as well be ‘vision’ as conscience, being in Christ, and so on – but that this ‘power’ is *negated* is impossible to miss.

And this is why Critchley’s eventual return to ‘conscience’ is yoked to a ‘logic of the call of conscience [in the early Heidegger] and its essential impotence’. Of course, ‘essential impotence’ is a *contradictio in adiecto*. But the analytic incapacities this results in were likely foreseen, since incapacity is the idea here. And it is precisely this wilfully inert formula that Critchley would like the political to reflect and, indeed, confess. Thus he says, with reference to Heidegger (though this is not Heidegger): ‘It is the impotence of Dasein that most interests me ... [and] it is a *double impotence*.’ And again, no less tendentiously: ‘Impotence – finally – is what makes us human ... It is the signal of our weakness, and nothing is more important or impotent than that.’ And no, the last clause is not mistyped. With this much established, then, I trust that I cannot be accused of cruelty or misconstrual when – rather than ‘powerful’ and ‘sustained’ – I suggest that *The Faith of the Faithless* is not only an impotent, but a *doubly* impotent book. This is to say nothing more, on Critchley’s terms, than that his is a distinctly human piece of work.

We will come back to impotence momentarily. I would first like to stress that this is also a *sad* book, for after Critchley opens with a lively précis of Wilde’s *De Profundis*, it is hard not to infer – when we read the following – that *The Faith of the Faithless* is something like Critchley’s own ‘De profundis’:

I have come to this conclusion with no particular joy. We are living through a chronic re-theologization of politics, which makes this time *certainly the darkest period of my lifetime*, and arguably for much longer. At the heart of *the horror of the present* is the intrication of politics and religion, an intrication defined by violence, and this is what I would like to begin to think through in this book.

And again: ‘Our world ... is [defined] by a series of nightmarish intrications of politics and religion: politics of religion and religions of politics, where *we have entered nothing less than an epoch of new religious war*.’ This, then, is the backcloth of *The Faith of the Faithless*: the ferocity of sectarian wars, and the visibility of cultish persecutions.

As I write this, headlines at the *Guardian* announce: ‘Bail hopes dashed of Christian girl in Pakistan blasphemy case’. While in the report itself, we are soberly reminded that ‘desecration of the holy book’ – this delusional offence with which a Pakistani girl of 13 stands accused, though it is not *her* holy book – ‘is regarded as a particularly grave form of blasphemy and can easily spark violent public reactions’. And while this girl-child faces capital charges from clerical thugs in Islamabad, a trio of the Pussy Riot girls are being shipped to labour camps on the Russian steppes. Islamic thuggery, Orthodox thuggery. And while this is by no means the worst of it – we have the recent slaughter of apostates in Algeria, Syria’s descent into hell, and so on – a humane sceptic is entitled to recoil. Yet it is here that Critchley’s impotence, or ‘double impotence’, comes into view. For while he admits that a ‘return to religion has become perhaps the dominant cliché of contemporary theory’, and deplores, at once, the grim energy of re-politicized religion and the fact that ‘theory often offers nothing more than an ... echo of what is happening in ... a political reality dominated by the fact of religious war’, Critchley then stages his own ‘return to religion’ (a first impotence), and proceeds to echo – in a muted and oblique way – the blasts of a ‘religious war’ that mar the geopolitical landscape (a second impotence).

The first impotence of *The Faith of the Faithless* is displayed in a shallow appropriation of Wilde’s aestheticist sentiment: ‘Everything to be true must become a religion.’ It is this that inspires Critchley’s project. But it is precisely the *inverse* of this statement that – from Plato to Feuerbach – inspires any project which can lay claim to the name of ‘philosophy’. For anything to become true, and to attain the *concept* of ‘truth’, it must cease to be a religion. And this is uncontroversial. Even ‘philosophical theology’ is philosophical to the

precise degree that it is irreligious – methodologically faithless, at very least. Plato, for instance – relative to the pre-Platonic philosophers and Sophists – is a theological reactionary, and succumbs, particularly in his last dialogue the *Laws*, to the morbid and coarsening allure of theologistic laws. But even this last Platonic effort takes its rise from a critique of every ‘civil theology’ then existing. Thus, in the *Laws* – a work that Critchley does not quote here – Plato savages his interlocutors’ putatively ‘divine’ law-codes and the social orders they instituted at Sparta and Crete. And it is precisely this – an unremitting critique of ‘divine’ law-codes – that is still needed at present.

But Critchley wavers. He cedes that ‘Christianity, which requires universality of belief, has led to little else but religious wars for much of the last millennium’, but then expresses ‘little sympathy’ for the late Christopher Hitchens, despite the fact that Hitchens’s broadside against Christendom was similarly – and no more subtly – framed. Critchley wants to hold, against Hitchens, that what the old-school devotees shed blood for is *at once* the purest ‘fiction’ and a mode of highest ‘truth’. This may indeed require a faith, but if so, it is bad faith: it merely signals his abandonment of the possibility of a politics of truth. And predictably, the agitators and anti-philosophers swarm in: St Paul and St Augustine, Luther and Kierkegaard, a half-Christian Heidegger, and so on. Even the second-century heresiarch Marcion comes to prominence, while Critchley feels obliged – it is scarcely believable – to condemn a ‘crypto-Marcionism’ in Heidegger, Agamben, Badiou, the Invisible Committee, and so on. We are warned that ‘Marcionism must be refuted’, and that ‘If we throw out the Old Testament, then we imagine ourselves ... without stain or sin.’ I say: god forbid that this sort of obscurantism can still pass as philosophy in twenty years’ time (though Critchley, tellingly, titles his book a ‘theology’).

The second impotence of the book is that Critchley presents no resistance to the faith which kicked off the very ‘re-theologization of politics’ that he loathes. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Russian patriarchs, et al., may have begun to bare their teeth in imitation – a trend Hitchens denounced half a decade back – yet, manifestly, this faith is Islam. And there are echoes of it here, as when he foists the term *jihad* on Europe’s Crusades. Yet Critchley skirts the brutish fact that his ‘epoch of new religious war’, while heralded by the ayatollahs’ coup in 1979 and the fetid Rushdie *fatwa* in 1989 (reinstated in 2005), was ushered in by the 2001 attacks, which signified, if not nothing then nothing good. These attacks introduced us – so Critchley

writes, in passing – to ‘what some provocatively call the “Islam-Jacobinism” of al Qaeda’. And ‘Islam-Jacobinism’ is indeed a slur. Whatever the Jacobins’ homicidal excesses, at least ‘liberté, égalité, fraternité’ name an estimable – a genuinely radical, and *philosophical* – ideal. Divine law – a servile fiction – is never radical, and revolution in its name is *eo ipso* still reaction.



Critchley should be praised for dismissing ‘the mannerist nostalgia for revolutionary violence in thinkers like Žižek’. Yet while Critchley sees past Žižek’s Leninist raptures, and while their attempts to rehabilitate St Paul are equally inchoate, Žižek, at least – unlike Critchley – is willing to conceptually dismantle the faith which, to a unique degree, still insists on a regressive ‘intrication of politics and religion’. Critchley’s power to resist this faith – and, indeed, faith *tout court* – is, as he would have it, powerless. Doubly impotent. And until he replaces *The Faith of the Faithless* with *The Truth of the Faithless*, we can hope for little, or nothing more from him than powerlessness.

**David van Dusen**

# Emergency!

Claudia Aradau and Rens Van Munster, *Politics of Catastrophe: Genealogies of the Unknown*, Routledge, London and New York, 2011. 176 pp., £80.00 hb., £24.95 pb., 978 0 41549 809 8 hb., 978 0 41562 738 2 pb.

Stuart Price, *Worst Case Scenario? Governance, Mediation and the Security Regime*, Zed Books, London, 2011. 304 pp., £65.00 hb., £18.99 pb., 978 1 84813 529 1 hb., 978 1 84813 530 7 pb.

Something exceptional is in the air, and these two books tingle with the resonance of a so far over-repeated, yet under-explored notion: that the figure of an unpredictable future is looming within the contemporary security and state apparatus. We see endless doomsday, catastrophic, end-of-the-world premonitions articulated in Hollywood fiction, in publicized reports of emergency exercises, and even in television dramas that represent the simulation somehow merging with the real, in the vein of Don DeLillo's airborne toxic event in *White Noise*. These fictions, we suppose, occupy the highest levels of ideology, power and authority. *Worst Case Scenario?* and *Politics of Catastrophe*, while drawing on these fictions, advance and complicate such claims whilst presenting readers with some of the best analysis seen so far in the US and UK contexts. Price's extraordinary and polemical volume provides media-focused research into signifiers and texts, whilst Aradau and Van Munster's dynamic and theoretically advanced text is clearly inspired by concepts drawn from theories of performativity and materiality. Such divergent approaches actually mean that the texts complement one another really well, as they take a different look at a similar problem: how is the future governed?

Both books use the emergency scenario as an indicator of something of broader significance as well as an important site in its own terms. In Price, we find a wide-ranging and broadly convincing argument about how emergency – although not figured explicitly with notions of Agambenian 'exception' – helps to legitimate and ultimately pursue the reproduction of a paramilitary state, both diffused and unburdened of its responsibility to the normal rule of law and the protection of universal access to services. There are some issues, however, concerning the actual specificity with which the terms 'scenario', 'exercise' and 'emergency' are employed here, as greater attention is given to the broader critique of such powers. For Aradau and Van Munster, the focus is on 'catastrophe' as an overturning interruption or limit. *Politics of Catastrophe* surely marks one of the most rigorous studies of this term. Theirs is a genealogy of the unknown, a part history

of catastrophe as an emergent object of governance. Like Price, the book takes to task the 'exercise', yet perhaps with more empirical and historical grounding than does *Worst Case Scenario?*, and is careful to situate it within the context of civilian defence and the changing institutional address of the future, explored in the book's earlier discussions of Herman Kahn, RAND and cold war planning in the advent of thermonuclear strategy. Both books use their analyses to develop other sites of enquiry such as ones concerning counter-terrorism legislation, insurance and the everyday deployment of a variety of security modalities. The point is that the practices, techniques, rationalities and logics underlying notions of 'catastrophe' are to be found at work in other contexts and places.

The main thrust of the arguments differs across the two books. Price's offers more in the way of a passionate concern for the march of security through the 'worst case'. In this respect, the text is quite reminiscent of Mark Neocleous's 2008 book *Critique of Security* in its punch. The 'worst case' is an imagining that penetrates institutionally and organizationally; it allows private security contractors, political elites, the armed forces and complex assemblages of state organizations to overlay hierarchical structures of decision-making onto everyday life, with seeming impunity and with constant recourse to 'exceptional' circumstances. Aradau and Van Munster's approach is to consider instead how a similar set of laws and institutions, from the UK Civil Contingencies Act legislated in 2004, to post 9/11 counter-terrorism practices, have set about making the future not simply something to be feared, but inhabited. 'Catastrophe' is Aradau and Van Munster's 'worst case', an idea of a future which is made governable by different techniques and technologies of inhabiting it. Often this is about making the future present in the here and now. 'The governance of catastrophe', they argue, 'depends on a new *dispositif* of heterogenous practices, knowledges, institutions and authorities'. The particular conceptual value of this work is to advance discussions of 'catastrophe' in the midst of wider debates around 'emergency', futures, contingency and technologies of governance.

Such an idea of how the future is ‘inhabited’ pervades both books, although inhabitation, understood as a set of embodiments and practices rehearsed, entrained, and essentially subjected to discipline in the very odd environment of an emergency exercise, is more explicit in Aradau and Van Munster’s text. In this regard, the latter do much in the way of forwarding claims that would take greater account of the body and material relations in security research. In one of the later chapters in the book, for example, they explore the use of posters and advertisements that seek to govern suspicion in London in order to secure potential threats through the public’s senses and intuitions, as well as wider schemes in the business community. I think this works very well, although sometimes the explicit linkages between the procession of each of the chapters and its diverse material could have been given more attention. By contrast, Price’s approach seems more removed from such issues of ‘inhabitation’. His is an analysis of media discourse which, at moments, can appear averse to considering how events are actually lived, as opposed to their symbolism or role in rhetoric. One might compare *Worst Case Scenario?*, in this regard, to Tracy Davis’s approach to the cold war nuclear *staging* of emergency, in her 2008 book *Stages of Emergency*, which takes a more performative approach. On the other hand, Price’s identification of the muddled senses of cause and effect in the middle of an event like the Stockwell tube shootings, or the media commentary surrounding 9/11, work incredibly well to convey the radical uncertainty that the worst case gathers together in a collage of media, data, imagery and sounds. This has even more import when compared to Aradau and Van Munster’s excavation of a sense of the sublime in their aesthetics of catastrophe.

Both texts can lose a sense of detail and occasionally assume an equivalence between concepts and contexts which possibly elides the more subtle work that they might do. However, I don’t think this necessarily detracts from the direction of their arguments or broader theses. It does, though, make me question whether the emergency planning exercise scenario, which lies at the heart of both books, does quite what it is said to do. Indeed more could be done in both books to properly distinguish the category of the ‘future’ from ‘catastrophe’, ‘emergency’ and to a lesser extent ‘event’ (as this is thought through in, for example, the writings of Alain Badiou). Furthermore, what might be the differences between pre-emption and something like the logic of preparedness? These are debates which have been explored by Ben Anderson and others elsewhere (see, for instance, Anderson’s 2010 paper

‘Preemption, Precaution, Preparedness: Anticipatory Action and Future Geographies’ in *Progress in Human Geography*).

In Price’s book, emergency planning legislation in the UK is characterized in a way that suggests the continual rehearsal of authoritarian hierarchical realignments of rule and the withdrawal of essential services. Structures of emergency become normalized according to this thesis, always ready to kick into gear. But perhaps this analysis overplays the possibilities of the legislation, and ignores fail-safe protections surrounding civil contingencies legislation. It also supposes that the command and control hierarchies instantiated in emergency are naturally authoritarian and top-down, and I wonder whether this is a mistake. Does hierarchy always imply this? Other principles such as ‘subsidiarity’ seem to be placing decision-making in local hands. And can the public really be seen as ‘passive’ or a ‘variable’ in these structures, which more disconcertingly are enrolling publics into forms of ‘community’ resilience while ‘decentring’ responsibility to private providers just as services and protections are being simultaneously withdrawn? An occasional overstating of the argument can mean these more subtle developments are not always fully considered. Furthermore, there’s little sense that the emergency apparatus might even be progressive or actually quite self-critical of itself. As Aradau and Van Munster have it, the catastrophe is an event of upturn, or potential novelty, the possibility of sharp socio-political change. What we see most in *Politics of Catastrophe*, however, are examples of when catastrophe becomes an opportunity for profit, or the extension of political power in line with Naomi Klein’s notion of ‘disaster capitalism’ in her 2008 book *The Shock Doctrine*. Yet there are alternatives. Could the ‘worst case’ even bite back? What we might see portrayed here is possibly the ‘worst case’ of police practices or emergency response, exemplars which cannot so easily be divorced from security’s reproduction. Whilst this might mean a continual pandering to the threat of potential litigants, perhaps the ‘worst case’ also helps to justify caution and responsible and appropriate action, particularly in emergency planning contexts.

A tendency to overstate the argument makes it far easier for both books to speak of the structures of emergency planning in the same breath as pre-emptive logics for the Iraq War or drone strikes in Afghanistan. I’m not saying that these connections cannot be drawn, and the approach both texts take to exploring the connections, parallels, associations and correlatives between contexts throws a powerful light onto the

world of security and secrecy. And yet I don't think it is too cautious to say that, as a result, it is sometimes easy to lose sight of the particular rationalities and logics underlying the employment of something like an emergency planning scenario. While the emphasis in both books is certainly on pushing beyond an Agambenian sense of a 'state of exception', exploring the detail of this apparatus shows that emergency plans are far more a means to ensure that exceptional action and decision-making are precisely *not* the normal state of affairs. The 'worst case' is a rare scenario as compared to infrastructural interruption and the disturbances of services. In fact, emergency planning draw down potentialities into a bureaucratic cycle of planning

according to fairly well defined legal responsibilities and sets of activities that are routinely (and slowly) practised and refined in order that *response* can bring an emergency under control.

Neither book is all that strong in setting limits on its historical or geographic analyses, something which would have helped the reader anticipate some of the jumps and cuts made in each book's arguments. But this is nitpicking. In their different ways, both books offer cutting and quite thrilling critiques of Western security practices – theoretically adept and beautifully written, they are at the forefront of exciting new research to come.

**Peter Adey**

## The power of the plebe

Martin Breugh, *L'Expérience Plébéienne: Une Histoire Discontinue de la Liberté Politique*, Payot, Paris, 2007. 405 pp., €25.00 pb., 978 2 22890 260 1.

Martin Breugh's book *L'Expérience Plébéienne: Une Histoire Discontinue de la Liberté Politique* (*The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom*), part of the series 'Critique de la Politique' directed by Miguel Abensour for the French press Payot, did not receive, on its original publication, all the attention it deserved, or that could have been expected given the theoretical ground it covers: that of the collective subject of emancipatory politics. The fact that Breugh, a professor of political theory at York University in Toronto, writes in French may be at the root of the somewhat discreet reception of a book that represents an original contribution to the political debates that have marked the philosophical landscape (at least in so-called continental philosophy) over the last decade. It is to be hoped that its translation into English and 2013 publication by Columbia University Press will change that situation.

If such a translation into English hopefully brings renewed attention to *L'Expérience Plébéienne*, it occurs at the right time. Breugh's conception of what constitutes emancipatory collective action, and of who might be the subject of such an action, particularly in tune with some of today's struggles, most obviously the Indignant and the Occupy movements. The rhetoric that accompanies such struggles is mostly framed in a language of what Breugh terms the *plebe* – much more than it is, for example, in a Marxist language of class. Social, economic and political demands are

vented in a discourse of moral outrage, of which the quantitative metaphor of the '99% against the 1%' is perhaps the clearest example. For Breugh, such quantitative determination of the subject of politics is also essential: emancipatory politics is always a 'politics of the many', a question of the access of the great number to a political dignity whose denial by the power-holding elite is the situation in which most of humanity lives most of the time. Such access to dignity rests on a demand, made by the plebe itself, for recognition, a demand that is, at the same time, an attempt to shake off the domination by the few and to affirm the collective right to political self-determination; that is, to affirm the many's capacity for self-government, in the guise of the equal participation of each and all in determinations of the community's destiny.

In tandem with several other dominant theoretical voices in contemporary political thought, Breugh attempts to ground his conception of politics in a non-objectivist way. Politics is understood as an egalitarian affirmation that cannot be reduced to the expression of the interests of certain objectively identifiable social groups, such as classes, ethnic groups, or any other category stemming from a recognizable social identity. The plebe is not an identity classification because it does not rest in a division of the social whole, occupying a determinate position in its overall structural arrangement. 'Plebe' or 'plebeian' rather designates a historical experience, an experience through which

the subject of a 'politics of the many' is constituted, and outside of which it doesn't exist. Such experience rests in a double movement by which the domination of the few is refused and the equality of all is asserted.

Refusing any substantialization of the plebe, which would result in its identification as a social identity and not, as the author conceives it, as the instantiation of a transhistorical principle of political action, Breaugh makes of the plebe the guiding principle of political action, in the rare historical occasions in which it manifested itself. One of the most interesting features of the book is precisely the way that the author sets out to analyse the plebeian principle in its moments of concrete verification, tracing what he calls 'a discontinuous history of political freedom', in which, for Breaugh, as for Badiou or Rancière, politics is necessarily rare. The temporality of the plebe is thus that of the interruption, and not that of the institution. As such, the analysis of the historical genesis of the plebeian principle corresponds to a presentation of the occurrences of such egalitarian and radically democratic interruption of a continuous order of domination: from the first plebeian secession, in which the plebe of the Roman republic fled from the city to a self-governed encampment in the Mount Aventine (an occasion evoked recurrently throughout the book, and which serves as an inaugural scene for the history of the plebeian experience) to the *Ciompi* revolt in Florence, the carnival in the French village of Romans and the Neapolitan revolt of Masaniello.

After tracing this historical genesis, Breaugh follows the emergence and development of the emancipatory principle of the plebe in philosophy; that is, the mode through which, at several moments in the history of political thought, the access of the great number to political equality was theorized. The philosophical thought of the plebe begins, according to Breaugh, with Machiavelli and proceeds through Montesquieu, Vico, Pierre-Simon Ballanche, Daniel De Leon and Michel Foucault, before ending (for the moment) with Rancière. This philosophical trajectory rests on explicit references to the plebe as a name for a political subject, whether in the analysis of Roman history or in theorizations of the *menu peuple*.

In its third part, the book returns to the analysis of concrete historical situations, with a thick analysis of the specific organizational forms adopted in three historical events: the action of the *Sans-Culottes* in the French Revolution, the London Corresponding Society in the context of English Jacobinism, and the Paris Commune. The internal divisions and debates around organizational issues are explored in order to

highlight the tensions inherent in plebeian movements, and to identify the barriers to an implementation of the plebeian principle, both outside and inside the movements themselves. However, as might be expected, the philosophical and the historical series are not treated in quite the same way. In a book that presents itself as an intervention in the contemporary panorama of political thought, the equanimity with which the different historical moments discussed lend themselves to the cool eye of the analyst – and the distance the latter adopts towards them in order to draw from the events of the past the political lessons for future use – finds no counterpart in the way the theoretical contributions are dissected by Breaugh. In particular, there are two authors whose influence is decisive in Breaugh's understanding of what political freedom and equality may be, and, indeed, of what constitutes politics itself: Rancière and Lefort.

This filiation goes a long way towards explaining some of the book's shortcomings, namely the conception of politics as interval and interruption in a continuous order of domination, to which both the theoretical framework and the historical analysis of concrete situations lend an almost necessary character. Although this shortcoming is not exclusive to Breaugh's thought, and is indeed something of a dominant trend of post-socialist politics (as well as of what Oliver Marchart calls a post-foundationalist political philosophy), there is, throughout the book, a presupposition that the framework of domination is an unsurpassable horizon of human collective life, and a corresponding resistance to any possibility of thinking a just society, of conceiving the event of egalitarian affirmation, as also constituting a moment of the institution of a more egalitarian, lasting order. Such resistance is rooted in Breaugh's unconditional defence of pluralism and his mistrust of any form of unity as a horizon for politics.

Lefort's thought looms large here, since for him the division of the social is an original ontological condition, whose acceptance is necessarily constitutive of every democratic politics, and not merely a sociological counting of the parts. Thus, for Breaugh, the politics of the plebe was, during the brief moments of its existence, the affirmation of the Lefortian principle of an irreducible division of the social, against the principle of unity, which was defended by the few in their own interests. (There were a few historical instances where plebeian movements ceded to the temptation of unity, but this constituted, in Breaugh's view, a threat to plebeian politics coming from inside the plebeian movement itself.) What the book leaves

unconsidered, however, is whether the principle of social division, be it in classes, or simply in groups endowed with different degrees of power, is, in itself, the principle on which domination rests (independently of the ideological operation that tends to subsume such division to a unity supposed more fundamental: the nation, the social body, and so on – an operation that works, in fact, in favour of the status quo). Should the concept of unity not be split in two? On the one side, a unity which is the necessary stage for equality, and which presupposes, of course, a common recognition of the equal condition and capacity of all to determine the collective destiny, and, on the other side, a unity that is merely the operator of consensus that attempts to provide a common ground for hierarchical and unequal relations?

In this framework it appears perfectly natural that freedom, as a goal of political action, is privileged above equality, even when equality is understood, in Rancièrian terms, as a presupposition and not as an objective and quantifiable goal to be achieved. In historical situations where the goal of political unity comes into conflict with the existence of political plurality, as for example in the French Revolution, the threat to plebeian politics comes, for Breaugh, from the attempt to form a united subject who then

constitutes a threat to the necessary recognition of the divided character of the social. Yet how can plurality be handled when it also brings with it the desire for a hierarchically divided order? Can an emancipatory project respect the desire for a society that rests on inequality? The problem here may be that Breaugh takes the plurality of interests at face value, disregarding the way such a plurality of political positions may in itself be grounded in the unjust division of the social. Once again, plurality must itself, as a concept, be split between the different, but equal standing positions in an egalitarian political scene (i.e., different positions that depart from a common presupposition of the equal capacity of all) and a pluralism that is merely transitive to the hierarchical order of different interests – interests that necessarily persist after that event which inaugurates an emancipatory political sequence. Here it is a problem of transition that is at stake. But that problem only arises when we consider the possibility of changing from a social order resting on growing inequalities and oppression, to another hopefully more just one. When the former, however, is taken as an ontologically necessary background, and the latter can only be experienced in short and transitory periods, transition is a problem that doesn't need to be considered.

**Bruno Dias**

## Unburied

Tina Chanter, *Whose Antigone? The Tragic Marginalization of Slavery*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 2011. 233 + xli pp., £60.00 hb., £19.97 pb., 978 1 43843 755 2 hb., 978 1 43843 754 5 pb.

Addressed primarily to readers familiar with the philosophical, psychoanalytic and feminist readings of *Antigone*, Tina Chanter's *Whose Antigone? The Tragic Marginalization of Slavery* has relevance also for actors and dramatists considering how best to stage, interpret, modernize or completely rework Sophocles' drama and, indeed, the whole Oedipus cycle of plays. Registering the importance of Sophocles' heroine to the traditions of continental philosophy, Chanter sets out to address not only the thematics of race, kinship and chattel slavery that run through Sophocles' play, but also the reasons why these topics have been so neglected by the generations of theorists who have made the figures of Antigone and her father/brother, Oedipus, so important to the narratives of the self, identity, justice and ethics that underlie (Western) modernity and civilization.

One of Chanter's primary targets is the influential reading of *Antigone* offered by Hegel which sets up an opposition between Sophocles' heroine and the political, whilst simultaneously treating her as representing kin ('blood') relations in their purest form. Chanter argues that Hegel unduly narrows the notion of the political – and, indeed, that of the tragic – by ignoring the thematics of slavery that are present in Sophocles' play. Arguing that chattel slavery provides one of the linchpins of the ancient Greek *polis*, and hence also for the ideals of freedom, the family and the state that Hegel himself advocates, Chanter suggests that Hegel's emphasis on the master–slave dialectic in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) 'domesticates and tames the ugliness of slavery', and needs to be understood in the context of the slave revolt in Haiti of 1803–05. A critique of Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler

and other feminist theorists who read *Antigone* in counter-Hegelian ways – but who nevertheless still neglect the thematics of race and slavery – is also key to the argument of the book as a whole.

Chapter 5 stages an encounter between Irigaray's understanding of *Antigone*, as both inside and outside the political as well as 'the law', and Agamben's account of 'bare life' (*zōē*), which comprises those who are excluded from the category of the fully human and 'whose exclusion founds the city of men'. Chapters 3 and 4 include interpretations of two important recent African plays that take up and rework Sophocles' *Antigone*: Femi Ọsófisan's *Tègònni: An African Antigone* (1999), which relocates the mythology of *Antigone* to colonial Nigeria, and *The Island* (1974), collectively authored and staged by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona. The latter is set in the infamous Robben Island prison camp in apartheid South Africa, and was inspired 'by an extraordinary fifteen-minute *Antigone*' that was put on around 1965 by Siphon Mguqulwa (aka 'Sharkie'), one of the prisoners in that camp. If Chanter is not the first to take up these two 'African Antigones', what is distinctive about her approach is the manner in which she sets the two plays in conversation with those traditions of Hegelian, continental and feminist philosophy which have so much contemporary purchase.

The historical point that underlies Chanter's reading of the Sophoclean tragedy is the Periclean law, introduced in 450/51 BCE, which changed the requirements for citizenship for all Athenians. From this point on, citizenship was conferred only on those who had two Athenian parents, and, whilst women in ancient Athens could never themselves be full citizens, those women who were born to Athenian families and who lived within the city boundaries were able to confer citizenship on their male children. Chanter convincingly shows that the language of slavery – *doulos* (a household slave) and *douleuma* (a 'slave thing') – is there in Sophocles' text, despite its notable absence from many modern translations, adaptations and commentaries. She also shows how the origins of Oedipus – exposed as a baby on the hills near Corinth, and brought up by a shepherd outside the city walls of Thebes, where the whole action of the play is set – would have been rendered problematic for an Athenian audience, given the circumstances surrounding the first performance of Sophocles' play (roughly ten years after endogamy was made a requirement for citizenship, and exogamous marriages outlawed by Pericles' law).

For a child to be recognized as a citizen in the wake of Pericles' law, the father needed also to be

a citizen (i.e. not a foreigner or a slave). As such, citizenship was not only associated with particular political and civic rights, but also symbolized by religious rites – including ones relating to the anointing and burial of the bodies of the dead. Chanter argues that it was only the bodies of slaves or foreigners (including the Persians or Zoroastrians whose burial practices Herodotus records) that were left unburied, and hence accessible to rotting, to dogs or to birds of prey. Much of Chanter's argument in the first chapters (and lengthy footnotes throughout the text) is concerned with establishing that when *Antigone* insists on performing the proper burial rites for the body of Polynices (son of Oedipus and brother to *Antigone*), in defiance of the orders of Creon (the king, and brother to her dead mother, Jocasta), part of what is at stake is the slave/citizen dichotomy. Slaves and other male non-citizens are, like the women who live within the walls of the Athenian *polis*, both inside and outside the city state.



In recent years, *Antigone* has been used by feminist and queer theorists as a kind of figurehead for rebelling against the norms that make women a kind of abjected 'other', both inside and outside normal selfhood and the law (Irigaray), or that expose the contingent nature of the kinship laws which underlie the heterosexual family (Butler). Chanter shows that the words used by *Antigone* as she rebels against Creon's injunction against burying Polynices according to the appropriate religious rituals can be interpreted as an insistence that his body (and hence also his and her own lineage) should be distinguished from that of a slave. Chanter is not concerned to demonstrate the invalidity of Irigaray's or Butler's readings of the Sophoclean text, but to show how these readings are nevertheless complicit with another kind of oppression – and remain blind to issues of slavery and of race. Given that these themes

have been translated out of most contemporary versions and adaptations of the play, Irigaray and Butler can hardly be blamed for this failure in their interpretations. Nevertheless, Chanter has a strong point in so far as she shows that such topics are still not treated as 'proper' objects of philosophical concern, and that the history that linked high tragedy to the actions and fate of important families or personages (who are not slaves) continues to affect the ways in which tragedies are theorized, adapted and acted today.

Chanter is anxious that we should not understand her to be putting forward a straightforward truth claim about what Sophocles' *Antigone* 'really' means. She is not offering a 'universal narrative' which treats slavery as some kind of hidden truth:

My effort has been directed, rather, toward taking seriously the configurations in which Antigone is born anew – and goes to her death – each time she enters the stage of literary, dramatic history, and in thinking through the way she exposes the limits of what a particular society finds it tolerable to represent to itself.

In this respect, the emphasis on the two African reworkings of *Antigone* is extremely productive. In *The Island*, as Chanter shows, it's being a woman – or, rather, being a male prisoner who is cajoled into taking on the role of a female (Antigone) – which is treated as both shameful and ridiculous. The play shows how the prisoners who are struggling for racial justice remain in some ways complicit in modes of oppression (patriarchy/heterosexual norms) that make the all-male community of the South African prison deeply uncomfortable. In *Tègònni: An African Antigone*, it's British colonialism in its nineteenth-century and its more modern, international guises that is depicted as shameful.

Chanter's analysis of the two African plays is, however, far too brief, and the account of *Tègònni*, in particular, seems unnecessarily curtailed. In a footnote, Chanter registers that one of the aspects of the play that she has been unable to address is 'the role of orality and the importance of song'. Yet, as Wumi Raji indicates in 'Africanizing Antigone' (2005), to neglect the elements of improvisation, music, dance and song that are so integral to Òsófisan's dramas is to neglect the specifically Nigerian (Yoruban) myths, legends, history and traditions on which the playwright draws. Chanter treats *Tègònni* in a dialectical fashion: as merely a counter to the Hegelian/feminist readings that are Eurocentric in their approach. However, it could be argued that Chanter's own reading of *Tègònni* suffers from the same drawback – not only by marginalizing

the Yoruban elements of the mythology and performance, but also by treating the African military powers that are criticized in the play as little more than surrogates for Western imperialist forces. By contrast, Raji argues that Òsófisan's principal target in *Tègònni* (first performed in 1994) was 'the specific Nigerian crisis of the time, the crisis, that is, of military dictatorship and of invalidated elections'.

I would have also welcomed more contextualization for *The Island*. Although Nelson Mandela is the prisoner most associated with Robben Island, I had to look elsewhere to discover that he was absent when Mguqulwa's play was performed there, or that he opted to play Creon in another version of Sophocles' play that was put on in prison. In his autobiography Mandela quite explicitly positioned Antigone as a 'freedom fighter' who symbolizes 'our struggle', but nevertheless expresses sympathy with Creon's wisdom and leadership skills – his reservation being primarily that Creon was too extreme and implacable in applying justice. Mandela talks about how important it was to him to take on the part of Creon, for whom 'obligations to the people take precedence over loyalty to an individual'. As such, it would have also been valuable to at least open up the question of whether Fugard, Kani and Ntshona's play might also stand in a dialectical relationship with Mandela's political goals and ideals.

Much essential information is buried in the extensive footnotes to *Whose Antigone?* But these do, in general, concentrate on classical scholarship and often seem to get bogged down in detail (sometimes in a rather repetitive way). In the text itself there is a tendency to treat philosophers and theorists in an overly condensed fashion, making the details of the analyses of Agamben, Butler and Irigaray hard to follow. Some readers might also struggle with Chanter's decision to provide synopses of *The Island* and *Tègònni* in an Appendix, whilst simultaneously refusing to provide a summary of Sophocles' play. Whilst this is entirely understandable given the conflicting interpretations, translations and 'adaptations' of the play – most of which make slavery and race entirely disappear as themes – this decision makes *Whose Antigone?* far from an easy read. Whatever the difficulties of the exposition, Chanter's central point about slavery remains simple, powerful and transformative. Following the dialectics of Chanter's argument through to her conclusion is also productive in that this is a book that challenges us, in a way that is historically and methodologically subtle, to take 'race' seriously as a philosophical and aesthetic concern.

**Christine Battersby**

# Fem phil

Stella Sandford, *Plato and Sex*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2010. 209 pp., £55.00 hb, £16.99 pb., 978 0 74562 640 6 hb., 978 0 74562 641 3 pb.

Some twenty years ago as a student of philosophy eager to read the work of women philosophers, I was struck by the then recently translated essay by Irigaray, 'Sexual Difference' (1993), and its opening remark that 'Sexual difference is one of the important questions of our age, if not in fact the burning issue.' At the time, the debate in feminist circles, in the anglophone world at least, focused on the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' in an attempt to escape biological determinism and forms of essentialism which confined women to caring and nurturing, and which made it very difficult for women to engage in other areas of life, including philosophy. Hence, many attempts were made by women philosophers, as well as in other academic disciplines, to put the emphasis onto questions of 'gender' – which was understood as a socially constructed distinction – and away from 'sex', which was generally understood as a biological distinction. In this context, Irigaray's argument, in shifting the emphasis to 'difference', offered a way out of the binary distinction of sex/gender; 'difference' could now be valued precisely because it could be understood to offer more than 'the same'.

Whilst 'sexual difference' did not resolve the problem of sexual biologism and the essentialist arguments it might support, it did offer potential new directions that were extremely attractive to anyone seeking to circumvent the binary distinction of sex/gender. However, whilst Irigaray was welcomed by some feminist philosophers, many philosophers still insisted that distinctions of 'sex' and 'gender' were social rather than properly philosophical distinctions. Philosophy, it was claimed, dealt with 'fundamental' structures which were not affected by social change; 'sexual difference' was a social not a philosophical problem. From the perspective of feminist philosophers, here was an opportunity to demonstrate that 'sexual difference' is more than social distinction articulated in 'gender' or a biological distinction articulated in 'sex'.

Irigaray's own argument in 'Sexual Difference' opens with a strategic reference to Heidegger, since it was Heidegger who insisted that his choice of the word *Dasein* in *Being and Time* was precisely determined by the 'peculiar neutrality of the term'. In line with a view for which ontological distinctions are prior to ontic distinctions, and for which, as such, the latter may

be understood as derivative of the former, Heidegger's claim could be taken to argue, again, that sexual difference is not a true philosophical problem. Hence, Irigaray's 'Sexual Difference' opens by developing a well-known phrase from Heidegger, but with a critical twist. According to Heidegger, Irigaray writes, 'each age is preoccupied with one thing, and one alone. Sexual difference is probably that issue in our own age'. To say this was to critique the assumption both that philosophy dealt only with fundamental distinctions, and that sexual difference was merely derivative and, as a result, not a true philosophical problem in this sense. Together with other women philosophers at the time, I tried to build upon Irigaray's argument and demonstrate that sexual difference *is* a philosophical problem, and not only a social one, by showing that Heidegger's own distinction between 'ontology' and 'ontic' is based on Plato's philosophical account where questions of sex and gender (sexual difference) are explicit. However, Sandford's *Plato and Sex* goes much further to reread Plato's accounts of sex and sexual distinction themselves as part of an attempt to help us today to rethink, philosophically, both 'gender' and 'sex' in general.

*Plato and Sex* is a provocative title, chosen by Sandford perhaps in part because of the ways in which it makes us notice how problematic the term 'sex' is for us today, given its capacity to be interpreted in so many different ways. Hence the title could equally name, for example, a book about Plato's sexuality or about the distinction between sex and sexuality in Plato's works. Since 'Platonic love' is perhaps the most common context in which non-philosophers encounter Plato, the conjoining of Plato and sex may well seem strange to philosophers and non-philosophers alike. Sandford explains, however, that her use of 'and' in the title 'is as much disjunctive as conjunctive'. This approach, she argues, is necessary because the term 'sex' is both a translation of the Greek term *genos* and much more. Rethinking what we might mean by the term 'sex' today thus entails an interpretation of Plato's account as well as an attention to the history of this translation in the context of different historical debates, most specifically our own. In this regard Sandford's book can be understood as a kind of archaeology of the term 'sex', in something like Foucault's sense: one that

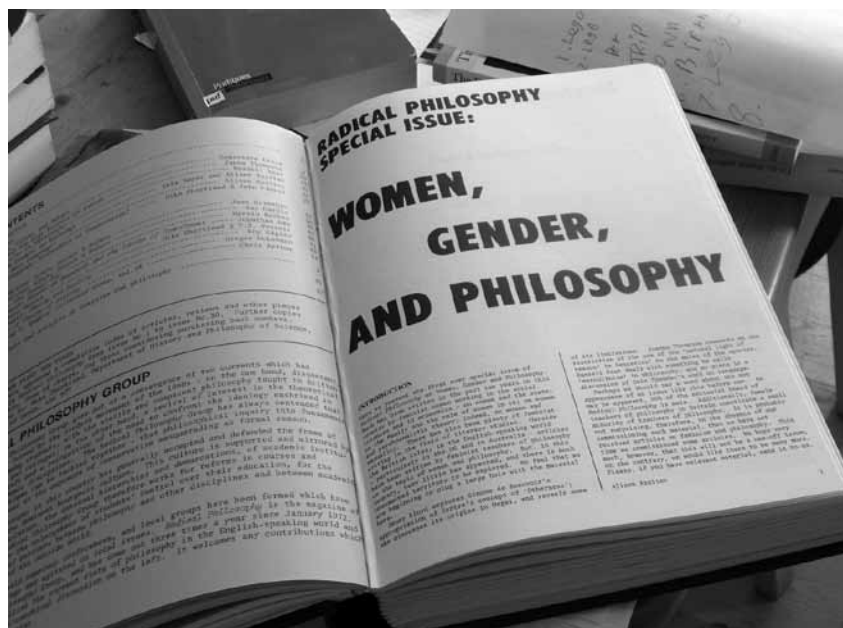
tries to recapture the meaning of the Greek term and Plato's use of it in order to shed light on the way it has been translated and developed over the centuries since. At the same time, Sanford's approach also follows Freud's account of 'belatedness': the claim that we understand the past through a projection of the future and in so doing construct the present. Hence, *Plato and Sex* shows the necessity of moving back and forth between Plato and, for example, Freud and Lacan, as well as contemporary debates around the topic. The reinterpretation of what each in their own context might have meant seeks, in this way, to shed new light on different ways of understanding both Plato and the concept of 'sex'. While this kind of approach is often used so as to demonstrate that present understanding is actually grounded in an earlier one, Sanford's radicalism lies in her attempt to show that our present understanding of 'sex' – which presupposes the modern natural-biological concept – is *not*, in fact, what Plato and the Greeks meant by the term. In so doing Sanford shows that 'sex', with the distinction it produces, is, for Plato, neither a biological nor a merely socio-political problem, but a philosophical one, albeit one that cannot be understood in isolation from socio-political forces at work at specific historical times of writing and interpretation.

Sanford's argument begins with Plato's *Republic* and the famous discussion of equal education for women as a Guardian class and their potential for participation in the rule of the *polis*. Many attempts have been made historically to provide an adequate interpretation of this. Sanford's argument is that if Socrates insists that 'some women have the nature befitting a Guardian, his argument must imply that some women do not have the characteristics and attributes

that define women as women, but have rather the characteristics that define men as men – that is, some women are, in fact, men'. As she points out, Socrates' argument is obscured by the translation of *genos* as 'sex' here. However, *genos* is a much wider term which is not confined to characteristics on the basis of the reproductive function but also includes the meanings of 'race', 'kin', 'tribe', 'generation' and 'kind'. Moreover, as she goes on to explain, Ancient Greek lacks a distinction between 'what we now call the existential and the predicative' of the verb 'to be', and hence 'womanly characteristics in a man are not therefore accidents attached to a manly substance; they entail an existential transformation': some women are men and some men are women, in Socrates' account. That is, the distinction of *genos*/sex is not merely a biological distinction made on the basis of sexual reproduction, but is an existential distinction of becoming. *Plato and Sex* thus seeks, on the basis of its reading of Plato, to facilitate the transformation of a binary distinction into a continuum, albeit a continuum which forms the basis for a distinction between 'superior' and 'inferior' characteristics that are then termed 'men' and 'women' retrospectively.

In chapter 2, Sanford moves on to a discussion of the *Symposium* with a focus on Aristophanes' myth which suggests that human beings had an origin that was neither male nor female, or that was perhaps both male and female. For, according to Aristophanes, there were three kinds of human, not two, and none is characterized by its role in sexual reproduction. The distinction between the sexes, she argues, is thus a myth and 'sex' as such has a mythical structure; it cannot offer its own account of origin on the basis of biology. In the third chapter, Sanford explores 'sexuality' in the *Symposium* with the help of Freud

and psychoanalysis. Freud's broad interpretation of sexuality is used so as to guide the reader towards questioning the appropriateness of any narrow or restricted concept of sexuality in interpreting Plato's work. In so doing, Sanford highlights the constitutive ambiguity of *eros* to be found in Plato's account. This leads Sanford towards chapter 4 and a discussion of yet another famous and provocative discussion in Plato: that of pregnancy. The metaphor of pregnancy comes up in several Plato texts,



though Sandford's focus is on the *Symposium*. The ambiguity here is, again, between the metaphorical and the biological, suggesting that the metaphorical images form part of complex structures of fantasy where the binary opposition between reality and illusion is inadequate: it is not possible to establish which one is 'originary' and which is 'derivative'.

The final chapter focuses on the *Timaeus*, Plato's most influential text by virtue of its availability to the Latin world throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages, and one that was often read as analogous to the biblical account of creation to be found in the Book of Genesis. Sandford's focus is on the impossibility of locating the 'natural beginning' of sex, even in such a creation myth. The difference in Plato between man and woman, Sandford insists, is not sexual but moral. Both the category of 'man' and the category of 'woman' in the *Timaeus*, she argues, are moral categories. Even sexual reproduction is interpreted in the *Timaeus* from the perspective of moral categories. And yet, she points out, the *Timaeus* is presented as a 'natural' account of creation.

Rather than offering a conclusion, *Plato and Sex* ends with 'Coda: The Idea of "Sex"' in which Sandford argues against the assumption that the 'biological-natural' conception formed part of the conceptual apparatus of Plato's philosophy. Making use of Kant, the book ends by insisting that 'the duality of sex is not descriptive but prescriptive' and that 'the idea of sex', like all ideas of reason according to Kant, is 'merely a creature of reason'. If this analysis and argument are accepted then 'sex' is a term which should be repeatedly questioned. The book ends with an implicit reference to Irigaray and Heidegger, suggesting: 'perhaps it is now time to question the future of this illusion', the illusion of 'sex' as 'natural-biological' category.

*Plato and Sex* is a scholarly book that, in its interpretation of Plato, utilizes close analysis of specific debates in both the analytical tradition and the continental tradition. It is out of these close readings that the book develops its argument which shows how, on the one hand, interpretations of Plato's arguments are always already defined by specific debates of their time, and yet suggests that the Greek meaning was probably one that maintained the ambiguity of the term 'sex' as *genos*. There is another strand to this book which may not be easily visible to anybody working outside 'ancient philosophy'. In the anglophone world there is a predominant logical, rather than contextual, approach to the interpretation of ancient philosophy. This approach often forgets that it is informed by debates relevant to its own time

which form the conceptual apparatuses for interpreting the philosophical problem it seeks to explain. Whilst Sandford's book does not itself offer extensive research into contextual ancient material, and maintains its focus on the philosophical, it is also informed by such research, mostly French (for example, the work of Nicole Loraux). In doing so, the argument utilizes a wide range of critical accounts in ancient philosophy from both the analytic and continental traditions. As such, it is also a serious contribution to scholarship in the field of ancient philosophy, which is in need of integrating such philosophical debate and analysis, as well as a serious contribution to feminist philosophy.

**Nicola Foster**

## How was it for you?

Alain Badiou, with Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush, Serpent's Tail, London, 2012. 104 pp., £8.99 pb., 978 1 84668 779 2.

Perhaps best avoided by hardcore fans of Badiou's philosophy, *In Praise of Love* does exactly what it says on the tin: the genre is eulogy. It grew out of a public conversation with Nicolas Truong at the Avignon Arts Festival in 2008, an event Badiou describes with characteristic humility as having been 'a success. No doubt about it: it was a hit.' But, intoxicating as the scent of popular approval may be, the book is ostensibly written not to capitalize on success but to counter the grave threats that, according to Badiou, love faces today.

For Badiou, love is a truth procedure. Beginning with the quasi-metaphysical event of the absolutely contingent encounter, love is the construction of a world from a point of view 'other than that of my mere impulse to survive or re-affirm my own identity'. Love is an experience in which the disjuncture between the infinite subjectivities of two people allows for the construction of a world 'from the point of view of difference' and 'the construction of the truth of the Two: the truth that derives from difference as such'. It is 'an individual experience of potential universality', the incorporation of the individual in the 'Subject of love' from which vantage point a new world can be conceived. Love is not politics – indeed the two must be carefully distinguished – but, to the extent that love is the overcoming of the selfishness of mere individual satisfaction, one possible definition of it, Badiou concedes, is 'minimal communism'. This is an

account of love familiar from others of Badiou's works, though he does here attempt – albeit rather weakly and unsuccessfully – to decouple the Two from their previous identification with the two sexes. At least he tried.

But love so conceived is being 'undermined', notably by the 'safety threat': the attempt to denude love of risk and chance by calculating all the variables of the prospective beloved's characteristics in advance, as promised by the dating website Meetic, whose 'disturbing' French adverts ('Get love without chance!') and personality-test filters are part of the prompt for the conversation between Badiou and Truong. Like the denial of the importance of love in its reduction to one among a set of essentially meaningless and passionless pleasures – and not a particularly intense one at that – the 'safety-first' idea threatens, it seems, the truth procedure of love.

Badiou had already spoken of the threat to love in his *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, and here we are exhorted to take the threat seriously. But it is difficult to see it as more than a rhetorical hook to reel in the right audience. (Difficult, too, not to recall the mocking report of the alleged threat to 'this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity' with which Simone de Beauvoir opens *The Second Sex*.) For if love *is* (rather than is merely said to be) a truth procedure, instigated by the quasi-metaphysical event of the amorous encounter ('an event that can't be predicted or calculated in terms of the world's laws ... in the end, the moment you see each other in the flesh, you see each other, and that's that, and it's out of control!'), is it the sort of thing that could be undermined in this way? Do the 'violent onslaughts of love', this 'subversive, sexual energy that transgresses frontiers and social status', bow to market practices quite so easily?

*In Praise of Love* is a short book which aims to defend love with a declaration of – not an argument for – its status as truth procedure. It suffers from no pretension to depth in the analysis of the problem it addresses and as such it is no doubt unfair to expect much of it, even if the kind of analysis that the jaundiced eye of Adorno might have brought to the topic of love under market conditions is sorely missed. The book is an exercise in the popularization of philosophy and needs to be assessed as such. From this point of view, Badiou's account of love is (as the enthusiastic

reviews on Amazon tell us) remarkably accessible. It is also, in many respects, remarkably conventional:

When I lean on the shoulder of the woman I love, and can see, let's say, the peace of twilight over a mountain landscape, gold-green fields, the shadow of trees, black-nosed sheep motionless behind hedges and the sun about to disappear behind craggy peaks, and know – not from the expression on her face, but from within the world as it is – that the woman I love is seeing the same world, and that this convergence is part of the world and that love constitutes precisely, at that very moment, the paradox of an identical difference, then love exists, and promises to continue to exist.

Of course there is sex too:

But even in their wildest delirium, lovers know that love is there, like their bodies' guardian angel, when they wake in the morning, when peace descends over the proof that their bodies have grasped that love has been declared.



There is nothing here to frighten the horses, and the French pastoral strays, at times, parodically close to the conventions of romantic fiction. But any relevant comment on its popular form concerns not the content of the book or anything its author says about love but how its publication – or more particularly, perhaps, the publication of the English translation – exemplifies the academic celebrity industry. Supping with this particular devil, Badiou did not use a long enough spoon. Perhaps he does not know that the UK publisher describes the book as 'a bold take on love', or that the cover image of the English edition would work quite as well as an advert for Meetic. Badiou's attempted critique of dating website conceptions of love is swallowed up by the dating website view of intellectual production that powers its appearance in the anglophone market.

**Stella Sandford**

# Red Phil

Yehoshua Yakhot, *The Suppression of Philosophy in the USSR: The 1920s & 1930s*, trans. Frederick S. Choate, Mehring Books, Oak Park MI, 2012. 260 pp., \$24.95 pb., 978 1 89363 830 3.

The publication of this book in English is a significant event. The new Mehring Books edition makes available to an anglophone readership for the first time a work that was originally published in Russian in 1981, then again in 1991 in serialized form by a Soviet journal, against the background of the disintegration of the USSR. Reviewing the content and context of the tumultuous development of Soviet philosophy, from the lively and relatively free debates of the early 1920s to the later consolidation of Stalinist orthodoxy, Yakhot examines an impressive range of issues. A series of familiar philosophical problems, such as the relationship between necessity and contingency, objectivity and partisanship, and, more broadly, between philosophy and natural science, are recast in what will be for many an unfamiliar and intriguing setting. The book also features a remarkable cast of characters: regrettably forgotten early Soviet philosophers as well as famous political figures such as Plekhanov, Lenin and Trotsky, gauged from the distinctive standpoint of their philosophical interventions and contributions. At the same time, canonical figures of Western philosophy such as Hegel and Spinoza are seen in new ways through the looking glass of the Soviet experience.

Yakhot's analysis of the early period of Soviet philosophy demonstrates its remarkable vitality. After the cumulative effects of World War I and the ensuing Civil War had disorganized every aspect of society, the early Soviet government made a conscious effort to reconstruct the discipline under very difficult conditions. Yakhot explains the significance of the founding of leading institutions such as the Institute of Red Professors and the journal *Under the Banner of Marxism* in the early 1920s, as well as attempts to bring philosophy to broad layers of the population by means of textbooks and lecture courses. Although philosophy in the Soviet Union was reconstructed on explicitly Marxist and materialist bases, Yakhot's book shows that these efforts featured a great deal more openness and flexibility than might be imagined. A letter by Lenin explaining the political basis for philosophical work in the new Soviet society is particularly important in this regard. Discussed by Yakhot and included in the appendix, the letter combines a firm opposition to the recrudescence of openly idealist and clericalist

currents with an assertion of the necessity of working together with non-Communist intellectuals on the basis of a shared defence of philosophical materialism.

Yakhot provides a valuable sketch of how early Soviet philosophy rapidly crystallized around two main rival tendencies: the 'mechanists' and the 'dialecticians'. Although these schools were not completely disengaged from the burning political questions of the day, and although their mutual criticism was often sharp and politically charged, their differences revolved around genuine philosophical problems. To simplify what was in fact a complex and variegated picture, the mechanists were closely associated with natural science and a positivist ontology grounded in a 'mechanical' understanding of reality on the basis of physical and chemical processes. The dialecticians granted philosophy, particularly through a conceptual refinement of Hegelian dialectics, an independent and guiding role in the development of scientific research, insisting on the qualitative differences among natural processes. In this early period, members of the two schools were able to carry out research, publish findings and polemicize in the same journals. Their struggle was conducted in relative autonomy from immediate political considerations, even at a time of extremely sharp internal conflict within the ruling party. Significantly, the leading figures of both schools – the mechanist Liubov Isaakovna Akselrod and the dialectician Abram Moiseevich Deborin – came to occupy prominent positions in Soviet philosophy in spite of their inconvenient political past in the ranks of the Mensheviks. In this way, Yakhot demonstrates that early Soviet philosophy's commitment to Marxism was not a mechanical subservience to a fully formed and sterile orthodoxy. Attention and respect to the Marxist canon was no doubt strong. For example, the publication of Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* in 1925 found immediate resonance. But arguments among early Soviet philosophers were not settled merely on the basis of a scholastic rummaging among old quotations. Both mechanists and dialecticians engaged, in their own ways, not in a barren and insular defence of Marxism, but in its further elaboration. Such early debates were also spurred on by many of the important developments in science and philosophy outside the Soviet Union, including Einstein's theory of relativity and Freud's psychoanalysis.

Yakhot's account of the construction of Soviet philosophy is followed by an unsparing and equally illuminating analysis of its suppression. A sharp turn in the situation took place in 1930, in the thick of a political struggle between Stalin and Bukharin, which

was primarily waged around the question of the pace and means of 'socialist construction' in the USSR. A speech delivered by Stalin on agrarian problems in the context of new policies of forced collectivization and industrialization proved to be the unlikely clarion call for a very different type of struggle. Virtually every academic discipline was subjected to an immediate reassessment on the basis of its direct contributions to the 'successes' of socialist construction. Since Bukharin was a leading theoretician who was highly regarded by the Soviet intelligentsia, in practice this constituted a systematic effort to undermine his base of support. Leading figures and entire schools of thought in fields as diverse as economics and aesthetics came under attack. On the 'philosophical front', mechanists and dialecticians alike were subjected to violent criticism. Yakhot documents how a 'new philosophical leadership' consisting of young and politically pliable upstarts used the already available criticism of each school against the other in order to ultimately destroy both. The principle of partisanship came to be reinterpreted as the annihilation of all scientific and philosophical considerations before Stalin's latest diktats.

Deborin's fate stands out in Yakhot's book as particularly tragic and instructive. A serious and principled scholar, Deborin was initially able to defend his positions, along with the independent role of philosophy. However, as the blows of Stalin's campaign against 'menshevizing idealism' continued to fall on him and his associates, Deborin was increasingly befuddled by the manner in which his dismantling of the critics on the plane of philosophical argumentation seemed to have no effect. Fending off accusations about his insufficient appreciation of Lenin's philosophical contributions, he only belatedly realized that what was in fact demanded of him was a full capitulation to the incipient cult of Stalin, and that, in any case, all decisions had already been made on a very different plane. Deborin's tortured descent into concessions and self-criticisms detailed in Yakhot's book illuminates not just a process by which an individual could be psychologically broken, but the fate of an entire generation of intellectuals. In the biographical notes at the end of the book, the peculiarities and differences among dozens of significant but now long forgotten figures who had played a role in the construction of early Soviet philosophy are eclipsed before the common biographical fact expressed in their date of death. The vast majority of them were physically exterminated between 1936 and 1939, during the years of Stalinist terror.

The fate of these philosophers had important consequences. The climate of intimidation enforced in philosophy made genuine research and teaching activity virtually impossible, and ensured that only the most retrograde and unprincipled could rise to significant positions. The new philosophical leadership, in turn, played a crucial and active role in extending the same process to many other disciplines. The criteria of direct, practical contributions to 'socialist construction' was not just an expression of philistinism, but had very practical negative consequences. Having referred in his conclusion to the suppression of 'physics, statistics, sociology, and so forth', Yakhot provides the specific illustration of the field of genetics, where 'Stalin caused enormous damage and set the country back decades in a scientific field that was moving forward and that would yield enormous practical results'.

If, on the one hand, the significance of Yakhot's book lies in its documentation of the violent and systematic suppression of philosophy in the Soviet Union, its very existence demonstrates that the process was not entirely successful. In this sense the book has a historical significance of its own. Yakhot was able to rediscover a genuine tradition of Marxist philosophy in spite of accumulated layers of historical falsifications and significant pressures brought to bear upon him. Rather than simply exposing Stalin's crimes, however, he also pointedly demonstrated the inadequacy and complicity of ostensibly 'de-Stalinized' accounts of the fate of Soviet philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s. In chapter 7, for example, a discussion of the history of ideology as a concept in the Marxist tradition leads to a withering contemporary criticism of a society in crisis, where 'the critical and nihilistic element clearly dominates, and expression of discontent is a universal phenomenon'. It is no accident that while Yakhot began to write his book in Moscow, he had to complete it in Jerusalem, after being forced out of the Soviet Union in 1975. It is also no accident that Trotsky, the most outstanding opponent of Stalinism from a Marxist standpoint, makes a conspicuous appearance in Yakhot's book in spite of decades of official censure and falsification.

The principal significance of Yakhot's book extends beyond any mere reassessment of apparently settled questions concerning the development of a discipline, or even of a country. For those who have rushed headlong into various forms of post-Marxism, the book also serves as a warning that, on a philosophical as well as political level, accounts with the twentieth century and its most important event have not yet been settled.

**Emanuele Saccarelli**

# Delays on the line

Jay Lampert, *Simultaneity and Delay: A Dialectical Theory of Staggered Time*, Continuum, London and New York, 2012. 272 pp., £65.00 hb., 978 1 44112 639 9.

In *Simultaneity and Delay: A Dialectical Theory of Staggered Time*, the Canadian philosopher Jay Lampert challenges theories that define time in terms of absolute simultaneity and continuous succession. To counter these theories he introduces an alternative: the dialectic of simultaneity and delay. According to Lampert, this dialectic constitutes a temporal succession that is no longer structured as a continuous line, but that is built out of staggered time-flows and delayed reactions. The bulk of the book consists of an attempt to give a conceptual order to the 'unsystematic analyses of simultaneity and delay sprinkled through the history of philosophy'. This conceptual analysis leads us through ancient (Plato and Plotinus), medieval (Origen) and late modern issues (Kant, Hegel and Lessing), as well as scientific discussions (Einstein, McTaggart), and culminates in the central chapter of the book, which attempts to show 'how the problems of the great simultaneity philosophers – Husserl and Bergson – might be solved by the great delay philosophers – Derrida and Deleuze'.

Lampert's first point concerns the problem of synchronizing experience. This problem comes to the fore in Husserl's phenomenology and undermines absolute simultaneity. Husserl tried to develop an account of time in which the multiple time-flows of experience can be synchronized into a single flow of consciousness. Lampert, however, shows that it remains unclear how this synchronization can be accomplished. This can be illustrated with a simple example. When I am reading a book while experiencing hunger, it is not clear how the continuous time-flow of hunger can be synchronized with the discrete time-flow of reading. Discrete time-flows have natural stopping points and involve constantly shifting expectations; whereas continuous time-flows have no natural stopping points and involve more or less steady expectations. According to Lampert, Husserl cannot explain how such divergent time-flows can be synchronized.

To make the problem of synchronization fruitful, Lampert derives a model of staggered simultaneity from Derrida. According to the latter, the synchronization of the multiple time-flows of experience does not result in a single, continuous flow of consciousness that can unify the experience of 'being hungry' and the

experience of 'reading a book'. Lampert argues that for Derrida the only way to synchronize these experiences is therefore to inscribe the continuous time-flow of hunger within the discrete time-flow of reading a book (and the other way around). Derrida thus shows that the time-flow of being hungry is neither included nor excluded in the time-flow of reading a book. Rather, the experience of being hungry is only present as a hiatus that does not belong to the experience of reading as such, but always differs from it. This model of staggered simultaneity makes it possible to define a model of synchronization that does justice to the multiplicity of experience, without shattering time-consciousness to the point of complete chaos.

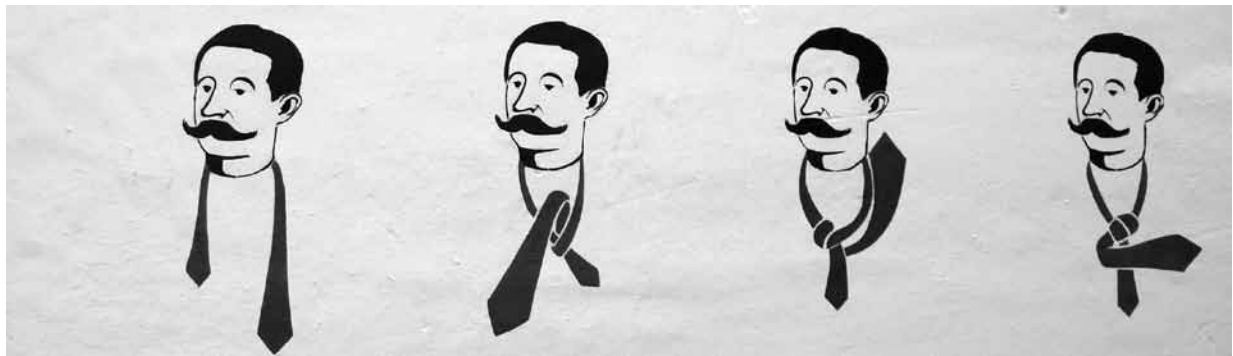
If the problem of synchronizing experience comes to the fore in Husserl's phenomenology, so too does the problem of synthesizing perception and memory. To save continuous succession, Husserl tries to define the difference between perception and memory in terms of their relation to the outcome of an experience. For Husserl, my experience of asking someone out on a date is a perception as long as I am still unsure how my expectations will turn out. But this experience becomes a memory when the outcome becomes clear; she or he answers 'yes' and my hopes are fulfilled (or they answer 'no' and my fears become true). According to Lampert, this gradual transition from a perception of the present to a memory of the past creates a problem. It suggests that I do not remember the experience itself, but only the outcome of this experience. Therefore Husserl cannot explain how, 'after an experience has been fulfilled, we can remember how it looked before it had been fulfilled'. Husserl cannot explain, that is, how it is possible that after twenty years of marriage I can still remember the uncertainty I felt when I asked my future wife to go on a date. Husserl is not willing to accept that succession 'is filled with delays'. Instead, he reduces the past to the series of realized expectations and excludes all the unfulfilled possibilities of the past that were part of the original experience as delayed expectations.

To solve the problem of synthesis, Derrida is again invoked. According to Lampert, Derrida shows that the outcome or endpoint of an event is always delayed; it will never arrive within the present in which it takes place, but will constantly be reproduced in other moments of time. Husserl's neat distinction between perceptions of the present and memories of the past can no longer be sustained. If the outcome of an event is always delayed, it is no longer possible to view time as a continuous succession. Instead, Lampert argues, delay becomes the mechanism that holds the present,

the past and the future together. The past is part of the present as a delayed effect of the already given; the future is part of the present as an expectation of an endpoint that will always be delayed. In other words, the non-present of delay is the condition of the present. In Derrida's view, I am able to remember the uncertainty I felt before my first date because the outcome of the project that commenced with this first date is always delayed. It never becomes a frozen memory, but always leaves room for new meanings and new affirmations.

This leads to Lampert's discussion concerning the problem of localizing memory, as it is generated by the work of Bergson. Although Bergson redefines the model of continuous succession and absolute simultaneity, he does not really get rid of it. As Lampert points out, for Bergson 'neither succession, nor coexistence [i.e. simultaneity] is the fundamental structure of time;

present and a virtual past, as Bergson would have it. Rather, both actuality and virtuality are part of the ontological structure of events. A political tactic, for instance, is an event in at least two different senses. First, it is an actual event in the ongoing present, which retains an implied past and anticipates an implied future. Second, it is a virtual pattern of relations, which emerges in the actual event but will only be applied in later, delayed events. As Lampert makes clear, the 'point of reusable pattern is not that it was actually used as some former present, but that it functions as a pre-existing model, and in that specific sense, functions as the past, for other events'. For Deleuze, the virtual and the actual are two independent layers of time that cannot be synchronized. Nevertheless, the actual layer can structure the simultaneity of virtual events; the virtual layer that of actual events. In this way, Deleuze solves the problem of localization.



time has two independent structures'. As succession, time is *actually* taking place in the present; as simultaneity, time is *virtually* available in a 'pure memory' that is only present as an unidentified potential. The event of my third birthday is always available in pure, virtual memory, but can only be perceived if it is turned into an actual memory-image that has worked its way up into the present, before it fades away in the past again. According to Lampert this generates a problem of localization. If all the past events in my life are simultaneously available in pure memory, how can I localize memories of my third birthday and distinguish them from memories of my twentieth birthday? For Bergson it becomes very difficult to explain how temporal distance can be preserved within simultaneity. In Lampert's view, the 'danger is that Bergson begins with so much simultaneity that memories not only coexist but coalesce'.

To make Bergson's problem of localizing memory fruitful, Lampert points out that Deleuze translates Bergson's psychic vocabulary of 'pure memory' into an ontological vocabulary of the 'pure past'. For Deleuze the event does not have to switch between an actual

Towards the end of Lampert's book he adopts a strikingly formalistic language to describe this dialectic. 'In its simplest form', Lampert writes, 'simultaneity consists of two or more events at one time, and delay consists of one event at two or more times.' This basic structure can be organized in different kinds of 'ones' (corresponding to different conceptions of simultaneity) and different kinds of 'twos' (corresponding to different conceptions of delay). To my mind, this formalistic approach endangers the fluidity and richness of the dialectical principle. Is it enough to conclude with Lampert that there 'is no single structure of time' but only a dialectical principle that organizes the many structures of time? Or do we not also have to acknowledge that there is no single strategy for putting this dialectical principle to work? Nevertheless, despite these questions, Lampert convincingly shows how a dialectic of simultaneity and delay can address the temporal problems generated by Husserl and Bergson. As such, his impressive book has much to offer for anyone interested in the problem of time.

**Martijn Boven**