

## The power of negative thinking

Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, London, Verso, 1993. xvi + 406 pp., £39.95 hb., £14.95 pb., 0 86091 368 6 hb., 0 86091 583 2 pb.

Roy Bhaskar's previous writings have belonged to definite regions of philosophy – for the most part the philosophy of science and social science. But their implications have been much wider. They have been one of the various twentieth-century attempts to undo the damage done by Descartes and his successors, and in my view the most successful attempt. *Dialectic* leaves this guerrilla struggle in the marginal zones and joins battle in open country with the whole philosophical heritage. To change the metaphor, it stakes out the whole philosophical ground and claims it for a new, dialectical, critical-realist, ontology. And this is such a huge task that, even in over 400 pages, there is no space to do more than stake out the ground; the work of planting and watering the crops remains ahead.

Dialectical critical realism is divided into four groups of themes (things tend to come in fours in this book, capping Hegel's dialectical triads):

- 1M (first moment) concerned with non-identity, stratification, multiplicity, depth;
- 2E (second edge) concerned with absence and negativity – the theme foregrounded in the book, and so also here;
- 3L (third level) concerned with totality, reflexivity, internal relations;
- 4D (fourth dimension) concerned with transformative agency, human emancipation.

As against these themes, Bhaskar identifies four tendencies in the ontology of modern philosophy which act 'as a block on the development of the social sciences and projects of human emancipation': it is 'anthropomorphizing, actualizing, monovalent and detotalizing'. Three of these are familiar errors against which Bhaskar's earlier work has been directed: 'anthropomorphizing' – the epistemic fallacy, which takes theories about what we can know to settle questions about what there is; 'actualizing' – the reduction of powers to their exercise, denying any enduring structures underlying the flux of events; 'detotalizing' – the

assumption that we have best explained something when we have reduced it to its atomic components; and 'monovalent' (this is the newcomer) – the doctrine that there is only being, not non-being. Bhaskar's dialectic, 'the logic of absence' as it is called in the subtitle to chapter 2, aims to overcome this error.

I have remarked elsewhere that the time-honoured metaphor of nutcracking needs to be slightly altered to catch what Marx did to Hegel's dialectic: the kernel was broken into bits, which Marx retrieved, but which could not be put together again. Bhaskar's earlier account of dialectic is similar: there are various kinds of contradiction, not logically connected, but linked by a family resemblance – a resemblance to logical contradiction; yet they are not, or not only, logical contradictions. A large part of Bhaskar's task in this book is the collection, listing and classification of various dialectical nut-pieces: internal relations, wholes, contradictions, and above all, real absences and absents. It is this inventory-nature of the book which gives it its characteristic style, quite unlike the tightly argued and fully exemplified texts of the author's earlier works (Bhaskar writes of exploring a 'conceptual labyrinth'). In relation to the classical (Hegel/Marx) dialectic, the central case (largest nut-piece) seems to be that in which one structure necessarily generates two conflicting tendencies. An example might be Marx's claim that mechanized industry tends to produce both an ossified division of labour and a need for mobility of labour and fluidity of skills. But the pervasive feature of Bhaskar's own account of dialectic – the Ariadne's thread that may hopefully lead us through the labyrinth – is the concept of real absence, and the verb 'to absent'.

Given Bhaskar's claim that we use causal as well as perceptual criteria for existence – e.g., that we don't doubt that magnetic fields exist, though we can't see them, since they have effects – it should not surprise us that absences can be real: the absence of vitamin C in a person's diet causes scurvy. It should be noted in passing, though, that this presupposes that vitamin C is part of our

necessary diet. Otherwise the graffito 'reality is an illusion caused by lack of alcohol' would not be a joke.

Absences have already been theorised in modern philosophy by Sartre, and Bhaskar takes up his example, which as he notes uses perceptual criteria for absence: Pierre's absence from the café, in the first chapter of *Being and Nothingness*. But for Sartre, there are only absences because there are people ('for-itself'). It is because Sartre is expecting to meet Pierre there that the café reveals itself as the ground organised around the figure 'Pierre's absence'. This is not the case with the judgement 'Wellington is not in this café', which he may make to amuse himself. Yet the two facts are equally objective – that Pierre is, say, sleeping off a hangover in another part of Paris, and that Wellington has been safely entombed in Westminster Abbey since 1852. These can be described without reference to absences. Hence, according to Sartre, without us the world is a 'plenitude of being', and if we project negative concepts into it we are being anthropomorphic. We say that a storm destroys a building because we use buildings and not rubble, but the rubble has just as much being as the building.

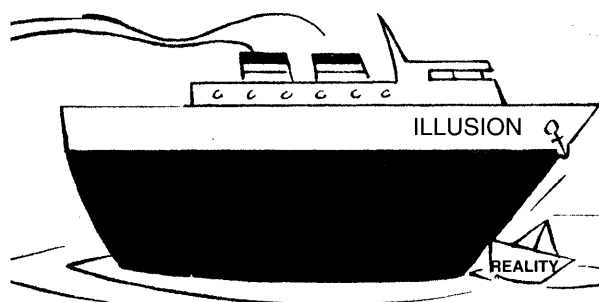
Bhaskar is defending the non-anthropocentricity of absences. Obviously it isn't enough to say that, after all, Pierre *really isn't* there, because neither is Wellington, and so on. The notion of absence, so generalized, would be trivialized. There is another argument that Bhaskar uses, which I don't think works either: that there must be empty space between material particles, otherwise motion would be impossible. In the first place, this strikes me as *a priori* science: the idea of the ubiquity of matter, as taught by Descartes and Spinoza, is doubtless *false*, but only empirical science can show that it is. And secondly because Sartre would reply: empty space is not nothing, it is the real gap between material particles, and hence part of the plenitude of the in-itself.

Nevertheless I think that Bhaskar is right and Sartre wrong. To avoid artifacts, let us take the example of a tree destroyed by a bush fire. Granted that there remain ash, smoke and so on, the tree as a structured organic entity has been destroyed. If we accept the reality of emergent strata of nature (as I think we must on the grounds of Bhaskar's arguments in earlier books), we must accept the reality of destruction, independently of us. Likewise with the effects of drought (absence of rain) on soil and plant life and so on. This notion of real absents links up with two important, and I think true, doctrines of medieval philosophy which Bhaskar also retrieves: (1) that logical negation and real negation are distinct: one can assert the reality of an absence; absence is not a mere projection of the negative form of judgement; and (2) 'ills . . . can always be seen as

absences'. I take it that (2) refers to real absences, for of course *anything* can be seen as an absence if this is just a shadow of negative judgement – e.g., sight can be seen as the absence of blindness and so on. But Augustine, Aquinas and co. wanted to insist that there was a sense in which blindness is (asymmetrically) the absence of sight, and that something similar can be said of all ills. This opens up the possibility of a value-realism which is based in the nature of being: just the sort of realism that we need in order to theorize environmental ethics.

Because of the importance which I attach to this idea of real absences, I am a little worried about the way that absences and absents proliferate in Bhaskar's book. I am worried that the concept might be trivialized, and its use in axiology undermined. There are two sources of this worry. Firstly, every action (indeed every causing) comes to be seen as an absenting – baking a potato absents a raw potato, eating it absents hunger, and so on. But baking the potato makes present a baked potato, eating it makes present a full stomach. The real distinction between absenting and making present, and hence between absence and presence, is replaced by a formal one, with no axiological potential.

My second worry is that Bhaskar overreacts to ontological monovalence by giving non-being priority over being. There might (logically) not have been anything – true enough, so far as logical possibility goes: 'complete positivity is impossible, but sheer indeterminate negativity is not.' I am not convinced that complete positivity is *logically* impossible. Nothing (excuse the pun) hangs on this. But there does seem to be some non-scientific cosmology in the offing: 'if there was a *unique* beginning to everything it could only be from nothing by an act of radical autogenesis.' Whatever the arguments for and against the Big Bang and/or creation by God, both seem more intelligible than such autogenesis of being from nothing – and Bhaskar presents no arguments against either. I take it he actually rejects autogenesis too, and favours a pluralistic account of the origin of the universe as we know it. But Bhaskar has in the past (whatever some critics have said to the contrary) always been careful to avoid legislating in advance for the sciences, and there is no reason to backpedal on this now.



When we come to particular negativities, absences of 'de-onts' as Bhaskar calls them (rather confusingly, since the prefix 'de-' signifies, not negativity, but removal of what was previously present, and that is not intended here), they surely can only be individuated by reference to 'onts', positive beings. A hole needs a rim and sides, and these must be 'onts'; an ont must indeed be limited, but this may be by other onts. Or consider the difference between various silences: the embarrassed silence after an unintelligible paper, the angry silence after a lovers' quarrel, John Cage's musical composition *25 Minutes of Silence*, a Quaker Meeting, the reticence of a resolute Heideggerian hero. They are immensely different in their effects, but their different *structures* can only lie in the different ways they are framed by onts. All this suggests to me that whole de-onts exist, some of the ways in which they depend on onts are one-way dependencies. I stress that these criticisms are all aimed against overstretching and so weakening the theory of absences, by way of 'bending the stick', and not against the claim that absences have real effects, and so are themselves real, or that they exist in the natural as well as the human world.

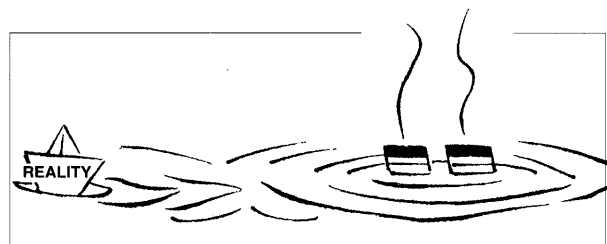
The underlying reality or 'alethic truth' of dialectic is for Bhaskar the 'absenting of constraints, on the absenting of absences'. This is more straightforward than it sounds. If someone hasn't got a job, that is an absence; getting one would be absenting the absence; government policy may be a constraint (i.e., an imposed constraint) on that absenting; getting a different government might absent that constraint. Despite its technical vocabulary and dense foliage, this book is political through and through, and I think the most profitable way to read it, for anyone with the leisure to do this, would be to go through working out political examples for all the abstractly specified bits of dialectic of which it is such a storehouse.

Turning to the explicitly moral and political parts of the book, Bhaskar's aim is to present a naturalistic version of moral realism. He has already shown in his accounts of explanatory critiques how values can be derived from facts; his account in relation to science of the (possible) rationality of judgements within the relativity of our knowledge at any given time, which in turn exists within an objectively real world, provides a model for an account of the objective reality of values, while recognising the relativity of any particular moral code. An immense amount of work needs to be done to fill out this promising sketch for moral realism. The clue which Bhaskar provides itself requires a lot of analysis of examples and rebuttal of possible objections before we have a realistic ethics. This clue is surprisingly Kantian, though it also has resonances of the ancient and

medieval idea that since all action explicitly aims at some good, it must implicitly aim at the Good itself. Sartre's idea that free action should take freedom as its goal, and Habermas's idea of an ideal community implicit in communication, are also echoed. The Kantian aspect is the principle of universalisability, defended through the notion that the non-universalizing agent is involved in a theory/practice contradiction or heterologicality – e.g., the parent who tells a child: 'if you tell lies your nose will grow long like Pinocchio's.' This is supplemented by the idea that since every action aims at absenting some constraint, the agent is committed by universalisability to freedom in general. Hence 'as logic is totalizing, and every absence can be seen as a constraint, this goal of human autonomy can be regarded as implicit in an infant's primal scream.' One might be facetious and ask why the maxim extracted from the scream by universalization should not be 'everything in the universe should make as much noise as possible'. More seriously, it might be asked whether freedom in general can be affirmed – whether it is not the case that one freedom is always incompatible with some other: not just with someone else's freedom, but with other possible freedoms of the same agent. To be free in one respect is always to be constrained in another. I do not mean to say that Bhaskar's moral realism should be rejected – it is an attractive proposal and I would like to see it developed. But it is limited by its formality, and needs to be supplemented by a '*materiale Wertethik*', in Scheler's phrase: a substantive theory of objective worth.

Finally, to the explicit politics of *Dialectic*. Bhaskar distinguishes power, 'the transformative capacity intrinsic to the concept of action as such' – i.e., *pouvoir*, to be able; and power, 'the capacity to get one's way against either the overt wishes and/or the real interests of others in virtue of structures of exploitation, domination, subjugation and control, i.e. generalized master-slave type relations'. This is a useful distinction, given the liberal and Nietzschean tendency to subsume the first kind under the second, transforming slogans like 'knowledge is power' from a commendation to a condemnation of knowledge. And in terms of it, the aim of Bhaskar's libertarian socialist politics can be summed up as 'the abolition of power'.

But there is a real danger here of backtracking on all



we should have learnt from Marx. Bhaskar accuses Marx of remaining 'fixated on the wage-labour/capital relation at the expense of the totality of master-slave relations (most obviously those of nationality, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, age, health and bodily disabilities generally)'. But if it is just a question of denouncing oppression, we don't need Marx – Abiezer Coppe did it far more trenchantly back in 1649. What Marx gave us was an explanatory theory of the mechanisms generating oppression, according to which the wage-labour/capital relation explains some of the others.

Another way of putting this would be in terms of Bhaskar's valuable notion of the 'social cube', according to which social being is four-planar, the four planes being:

- (a) = plane of material transactions with nature
- (b) = plane of inter-/intra-subjective (personal) relations
- (c) = plane of social relations
- (d) = plane of subjectivity of the agent.

Now most people on the Left would argue that personal

oppression is structurally rooted – i.e., power, at (b) is rooted in/explained by structures at (c). Central to Marx is the further claim that (c) is rooted in/explained by (a). These points could be expressed in the concepts of *Dialectic* as: *the explanatory structure (or even alethic truth) of power<sub>2</sub> is inequality of power<sub>1</sub> at plane (a)*. If this explanatory hypothesis is false, it may be criticised at the level of substantive social science. But I hope it will not simply be lost behind talk of generalised master-slave relations.

These comments are all intended in a constructive spirit. After all, *Dialectic* is the most systematic work so far by the best philosopher of our generation. It merits long and careful thought, and development in relation to concrete examples.

Finally, I would like to repeat in public one plea to Bhaskar to communicate his marvellous ideas in shorter and less self-embedded sentences, using words not symbols, and where possible words with Anglo-Saxon rather than Greek or Latin roots. Unless one has shares in the ink industry, there is nothing to be gained by using 'nominate' for 'call' or 'eudaimonistic' for 'happy'.

**Andrew Collier**

## The final curtain?

Lutz Niethammer (in collaboration with Dirk Van Laak), *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?*, translated by Patrick Camiller, London, Verso, 1992. 158 pp., £34.95 hb., £11.95 pb., 0 86091 697 9 hb., 0 86091 395 3 pb.

Lutz Niethammer is one of Germany's leading practitioners of oral history. He approaches the subject of this book as a practising historian who has been struck by the fact that the question of whether history is finished seems to have haunted all the 'cultural sciences' except history itself. His aims are to understand the diagnosis of posthistory, to reveal its 'historical site' and to assess its significance for historians. In the most general terms the site is revealed to be constituted by Hegelian philosophy of history. The posthistory diagnosis should be understood, in Niethammer's view, as an elitist, voluntarist, culturally pessimistic inflection of that inheritance. Hegelianism is itself the descendant of, and secular substitute for, the Judaeo-Christian eschatology in which salvation comes through the humanization of the Divine at the fulfilment of history. Thus, posthistory is constitutionally, as it were, pre-postmodern. So far from scorning metanarrative, it is the twist in the tail of the central metanarrative of Western culture.

At a lower level of generality Niethammer marks out the historical site in terms of the life and work of a disparate collection of twentieth-century thinkers. Those

who loom largest in his account are Arnold Gehlen, Alexandre Kojève, Ernst Jünger, Hendrik de Man, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Günther Anders and Peter Brückner. Others who figure prominently towards the margins include Weber, Spengler, Adorno, Carl Schmitt and Baudrillard. As these lists suggest, posthistory draws on a wide range of sources, encompassing, for instance, figures who are conventionally assigned to the Left as well as the Right of the political spectrum. For Niethammer, however, its centre of gravity lies unmistakably on the Right, among a group of intellectuals whose thinking was decisively shaped by the tragic course of twentieth-century German history. Even so, posthistory is not a 'developed theory', more a 'symptomatic sensibility'. At its heart is the sense of a petrified, technocratic world, self-steering and self-reproducing, whose inhabitants, with the loss of all meaning and value of a traditional kind, are becoming reintegrated with nature as morose or playful animals. Posthistory is the triumph of biology and technology over history and spirit. Plainly the Good Fairy who presides over the birth of this sensibility is Nietzsche, a truth that

is also acknowledged in Niethammer's text.

The birth itself was the response of members of a cultural élite to what they experienced as the collapse of their social world and utter defeat of their political projects. What they did, in accordance with a familiar ideological mechanism, was to universalise their predicament as, in Niethammer's phrase, a 'specific form of projective self-exoneration'. Hence it is that the first explicit emergence of the posthistory concept occurs in the work of Gehlen, de Jouvenel and de Man during and immediately after the Second World War. Niethammer shows a historian's skill in disentangling the complex interaction of public and private, political and personal, practical and theoretical in the lives of these thinkers and of the others in his gallery. In doing so he traces some striking and unexpected criss-crossing patterns. Thus, for instance, there are the mutual assurances of Gehlen and Adorno of the agreement between their cultural critiques. There are the contacts between Kojève on the one hand and Schmitt, Jünger and de Man on the other, contacts mediated through Leo Strauss, a central figure in so much twentieth-century intellectual history. All of this makes for a story of great theoretical and human interest, told by Niethammer with often graphic economy. His telling of it will be particularly valuable as an introduction for readers confined to English-language sources who might otherwise find the cultural milieu difficult of access. Gratitude is in these circumstances the appropriate response to his achievement and it may even seem churlish to raise doubts about it. Yet given the richness of the subject, and the qualifications Niethammer brings to it, a sense of disappointment, at least of lost opportunity, is hard to avoid.

In part it arises mundanely from the fact that the scholarship deployed is not always impressive, at least where the crucial nineteenth-century background is concerned. In this area Niethammer seems by no means at home. Thus, it is dispiriting to be told flatly that Hegel 'at the peak of his career glorified the Prussian state in the period of reaction as the fulfilment of history'. This view could be dignified as contentious today only if some reputable Hegel scholar could be found to contend for it. Equally casual is the assertion that the Lordship and Bondage section of the *Phenomenology* 'seemed especially important to Marx'. There is, of course, bound to be a time lag in the international reception of research. Yet the news that this particular 'myth of Marxology' had received the stake through the heart treatment in Chris Arthur's 1983 *New Left Review* article might by now have been expected to have reached the ears even of German commentators. On the nineteenth-century background one may note by way of addition, though it

is not a criticism of Niethammer in particular, how odd it is that writers on the end of history so seldom refer to what is surely the first unmistakable announcement of their theme, much less equivocal than anything to be found in Hegel. This is Marx's treatment in *The Poverty of Philosophy* of the political economists for whom 'there has been history, but there is no longer any'. For them history is no more because they are unable to envisage even the possibility of an alternative to the bourgeois society of their own time.

Here we arrive at what surely is still the heart of the matter. Then as now the claim that history has ended is in essence the claim that capitalism is endless. This is a way of conceiving the matter which surfaces occasionally in Niethammer's text without any particular attention being paid to it. He makes a similarly low-key use of a traditional language which is still serviceable for posing the crucial issue a little more concretely. To say that capitalism is endless is to say that it has resolved, or permanently suppressed, all its 'fundamental contradictions', all those that carry a potential for pushing beyond the system of what exists into some other mode of social totality. Of course, whether this is actually so or not is, or should be, the first item on the agenda of contemporary social theory.

Another source of frustration in Niethammer's book is its peculiar lack of organisation. The discussion plunges disorientatingly into detailed analysis almost from the start, leaving the statement of a programme to the final chapter. In between it tends to move backwards and forwards among its large cast of characters in a seemingly haphazard way, a procedure for which Niethammer apologises at one point. The problem of organisation is connected with what are perhaps the most obvious grounds for dissatisfaction with the work, the thin and sketchy way individual thinkers are treated. This is to some extent inevitable in a short book which, in addition to those already mentioned, tries to say something about the significance for its topic of Cournot, Freud, Walter Benjamin, Norman O. Brown, and Heidegger. That the difficulty is exacerbated by overall formal indiscipline is, however, suggested by the case of Benjamin in particular. He receives by far the most sustained attention, an entire chapter, given to any individual in the book. Yet in this chapter the main claim, which Niethammer has no trouble in establishing, is that Benjamin's work has in reality little to do with posthistory, indeed that his analysis is 'diametrically opposed' to the diagnoses of the posthistory writers. But in that case, one is tempted to complain, why is it, given that space seems to be at a premium, that so much of it has been taken away from those who really do contribute

to the topic? The answer must lie in the inspiration Benjamin provides for Niethammer's own positive views. Benjamin, it appears, is part not of the problem, but of its solution.

What is important for Niethammer in Benjamin's work is the resistance that is offered there both to posthistory and to the historicism from which it springs. Benjamin refuses to endorse either the metanarrative of progress or the inanition in which it supposedly culminates. His 'angel of history' directs our attention instead towards the 'modest alternatives of historical perception and orientation which open up for those not blinded by fantasies of grandeur'. In doing so it provides an impetus for 'the building of a tradition of the oppressed' with a 'weak power of redemption and reorientation'. The attempt to carry on this work brings one, in Niethammer's view, directly up against the 'basic problem of the posthistory authors', their elitist misconception of the relationship between the intellectual and the masses. Holding themselves strictly apart, they regard the masses as 'something which in reacting instinctively and mechanically to the demands of society, does not constitute a subjectivity in its own right or hold any capacity for historical knowledge and change'. To set this misconception aside is to see that the proper task of intellectuals is one of supporting and developing an actually existing mass subjectivity. This is where the historians make their entrance. Starting with the life history of individuals, 'history from below' can provide them with a sense of the historical roots of their

situation and thereby a realistic assessment of the space for action within it. By this means the dangers of the posthistorical condition can be averted by the masses 'who are actually composed of individuals with a modicum of freedom and responsibility, and to whom intellectuals also belong'.

This is a democratic, egalitarian and large-minded vision. Yet there is about it an air of incongruity that makes it hard to take altogether seriously. This is not just due to the familiar sight of a distinguished academic specialist investigating a large and complex intellectual field only to discover that what is needed above all is more of his own specialism. What is truly incongruous is the simple fact that it is *much* more, a breathtaking expansion, that is envisaged. 'Everyone,' Niethammer tells us, 'needs the help of professional historians.' The building of the new subjectivity through the articulation of life histories is, as he makes clear, a highly labour-intensive service delivered to individuals. It would show a mean spirit to respond to this genial proposal by asking how the army of historians is to be recruited and sustained. For let us suppose that the logistical problems can somehow be overcome and that the result of the historians' work is a flowering of subjectivity such as the world has not seen before. It is surely not just nostalgia for an old objectivity that leaves one wondering what concrete forms of agency in that situation could conceivably bring an end to the otherwise unending night of capitalism, or whose ghost it is that sings in the background 'What then?'.

**Joseph McCarney**

## Political tensions

Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London and New York, Verso, 1993. vii + 156 pp., 0 86091 486 0 hb., 0 86091 660 X pb.

*The Return of the Political* is a collection of nine essays, some previously published, which offer a sustained critique of rationalist and individualist liberal discourses, whilst attempting to provide a theory of 'radical and plural democracy' that might rejuvenate the floundering political framework of 'the Left'. Keen to defend the model of democratic pluralism for a more radical vision of politics, Mouffe seeks to separate out liberal individualism and political liberalism: to jettison the former and reclaim the latter; to hold firmly onto the political project of Enlightenment, but to reject its epistemological underpinnings.

Mouffe's claim is that we can challenge the self-foundation project of the Enlightenment without giving up on its self-assertion project, abandoning the rationalist and individualist assumptions whilst retaining the

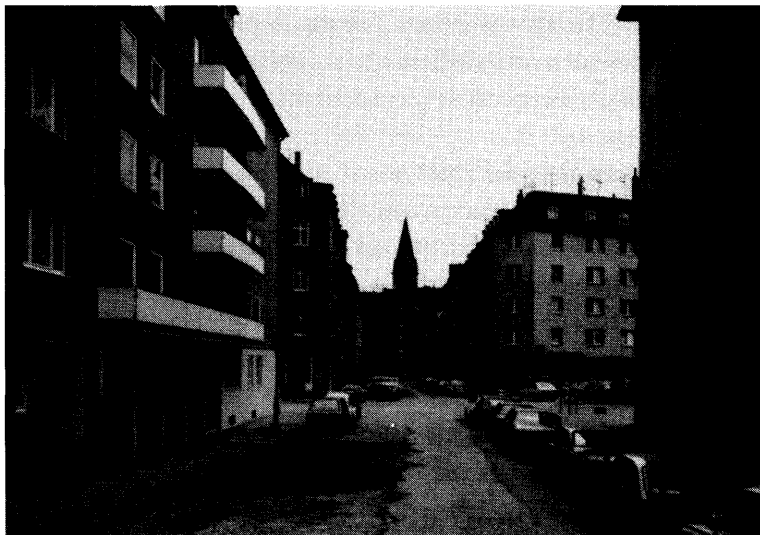
pluralist and democratic political structures. In making this move, Mouffe claims to be providing the Left with a new imaginary: 'an imaginary that speaks to the tradition of the great emancipatory struggles but that also takes into account recent theoretical contributions to psychoanalysis and philosophy.' This theoretical move is, I think, invaluable in that – regardless of Mouffe's own formulation of the separation – it signals the possibility of circumventing the Enlightenment's myth about its own nature as a coherent, unitary project, which can only be accepted or rejected wholesale.

So how does Mouffe approach her task, and is her approach distinctive? What, for example, is Mouffe's relation to the communitarians, currently liberalism's most forceful critics? Here Mouffe rightly distinguishes between MacIntyre (who espouses an illiberal

Aristotelianism) and Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer (who might be viewed as sharing her general project). Mouffe claims her analysis goes beyond that of Taylor and Walzer, not in her critique of Enlightenment epistemology, but in her conceptions of identity and politics. Identity, for Mouffe, must be seen to be inevitably multiple and contradictory, precarious and temporary, politics can no longer be viewed as located within a unique constitutive space but is rather a dimension of social interactions.

Rejecting individualism and essentialism, Mouffe draws upon post-structuralist writing to offer a relational and contingent notion of identity. Arguing that our identity is constituted through our relation to, and difference from, others, every identity is understood as an affirmation of difference: the 'them and us' distinction fundamental to the possibility of identity. Taking this – now familiar – reading to identity, Mouffe argues that antagonism will therefore always be a crucial element of politics. *Contra* both communitarian visions of cohesion and the Habermasian vision of consensus, Mouffe claims that democracy requires an open conflict of interests: the political is necessary precisely because it allows for the expression of conflict within accepted frameworks, thus stopping adversaries from becoming enemies. Indeed, the illusion of consensus is said to present a danger within the political realm, creating a void in which enmity can thrive. The strength of this insight – that the rationalist and universalist underpinnings of liberalism would encourage us to transcend (for which read ignore) power and antagonism, rendering it impotent in the face of current hostilities – is that by taking the existence of hostility as a starting-point, we arrive at a more adequate conception of the political.

This conception of 'the political', Mouffe claims, must be clearly distinguishable from the moral. For if modern democracy is characterised by the absence of a substantive common good, our political community must be distinguished from the realm of the moral. Hence, political liberalism needs to be agnostic in terms of morality and religion, but cannot be so concerning political values. The ethical component of political liberalism resides in a common set of *political* principles. Politics is therefore neither integrated into the substantive good of a community, nor absolutely separated from morality and reduced to instrumental legal procedures. It allows, and requires, a common commitment to specifically democratic political principles: those of



liberty and equality. To be a citizen is to adopt an identification with these principles.

Yet how pluralistic will such a society be in reality? It is not clear to me that one can endorse particular political values, and at the same time remain genuinely neutral vis-à-vis morality and religion. Surely these political profiles of liberty and equality are not equally compatible with all moralities and religions? I am left wondering whether Mouffe's political ethic will involve precisely the sort of assimilationist stance that has been roundly criticised by the likes of Bhikhu Parekh in his call for the decolonisation of liberalism.

Another source of concern is this: given that Mouffe subscribes to the Derridean notion of identity as being constructed through the establishment of a frontier (there always being a 'constitutive outside' as a result), if the distinctively democratic political ethic is one which holds the principles of 'liberty and equality for all' to be central, who comprises the 'all' for whom we should seek liberty and equality? Presumably all those within the political community – those citizens of the democratic state in question. Obviously, pluralism can never be total – it requires a legal order and a public power. The 'state can never become merely one association among others, it must have primacy'. What implication does this have for international politics? If our political community needs a constitutive outside, must we draw the boundaries between states ever more tightly? And, if so, how does this fit with the current forces of globalisation and weakening of the power of the state? I detect a somewhat anachronistic commitment to the nation-state in this model, which fails to address the current concern with global interdependence and international justice. To remain silent on this issue is lamentable at a time when the very status of the nation-state is being called into question.

If the relation between the national and the

international is left in need of clarification, so too is that between the economic and the political. In one essay, Mouffe talks not of political liberalism, nor of radical pluralism, but of 'liberal socialism'. Yet I got no sense of what was 'socialist' about her model. Mouffe claims that her notion of the pluralist liberal democracy, 'far from consisting in the articulation of democracy and capitalism, as some claim, is to be sought exclusively on the level of the political'. But what does this mean? What is the role of capitalism vis-à-vis her pluralist liberal democracy? Are the economic and the political simply distinct, allowing Mouffe to rearticulate the political whilst leaving the economic unaddressed? This too requires clarification. Indeed, on all specific questions of practical implementation I was left feeling slightly confused about what Mouffe had in mind. The fact that this is a collection of discrete essays adds to the frustration: there is no single exposition of her position, but rather a series of elliptical arguments around various related themes.

Perhaps I have simply misunderstood Mouffe. But there seems to me to be a tension in her writing over the nature of the political. At certain points Mouffe maintains

that politics is antagonistic, and agonistic; it is about power and passion. To conceive politics as simply being about a rational process of negotiation, or the observance of legal codes, is to utterly misconceive its nature. Mouffe also argues that politics is not located within a particular place; it is rather a specific dimension of our general interactions. Yet how is this to be squared with the talk of parliament and representative democracy that recurs throughout her work? What is the relationship between the institutions of government and 'the political'? I remain unclear.

Furthermore, demands that we assert our allegiance to the state as an 'ethical state' would seem particularly worrying in the current political debate. What mechanisms does Mouffe suggest to make the state worthy of our allegiance? What reforms has she in mind to make us believe in the state as the embodiment of the political values of liberty and equality? This is, I think, the central issue of the moment, and not one that Mouffe can afford to overlook. Nonetheless, far from indicating some fundamental weakness, these queries and concerns testify to the evocative and challenging nature of Mouffe's writing.

**Judith Squires**

## Selves and narrators

Genevieve Lloyd, *Being in Time: Selves and Narrators in Philosophy and Literature*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993. viii + 192 pp., £30.00 hb., £9.99 pb., 0 415 07195 X hb., 0 415 07196 8 pb.

Much is now made of the demise of the 'unified' knowing subject, a view associated in particular with Derrida. In this book Genevieve Lloyd argues that the idea that unified selfhood is fictitious is far from novel. Awareness of the tenuousness of the unified subject has a long history, and it is a mistake to see the whole of western philosophy as based on unquestioned assumptions of 'presence'.

Lloyd examines some of the ways in which debates about the unity of the knowing subject have been connected with those about time and the instability of temporal experience. She looks, for example, at Augustine's view that time is essential to the understanding of human consciousness, and at his use of the metaphor of the 'stretching out' of consciousness which enables time to be experienced as more than just fragmentation and loss. Such themes have not, however, only figured in texts commonly seen as 'philosophical'. They have also been central to much modern fiction, which has explored the fragmentation of consciousness, and the unstable nature of the human self. It is useful, Lloyd suggests, to juxtapose the novels of such writers

as Baudelaire, Proust and Woolf with older philosophical treatments of time and self-consciousness in order to enrich our understanding of the supposed fragmentation of the 'new' self of modernity and the decentred subject of postmodernity.

Through this juxtaposition Lloyd investigates the ways in which a concept of 'narrative' might respond to the experienced instabilities of self-consciousness. The idea of 'narrative' has figured prominently in recent philosophy – in the work of Alasdair McIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, for example. But, whilst it might seem to be at odds with treatments of the fragmented or dispersed subject, this is not, Lloyd suggests, necessarily so. Narratives do not have to deal in unified stories, and the limitations of continuous narrative have been explored by Virginia Woolf and others, who challenged the possibility of seeing life as a coherent whole before such views surfaced in postmodern philosophy. But this does not imply that the concept of narrative has no role to play. In philosophy and fiction alike we encounter the idea that the unity of consciousness is a unity of action and speech. The 'stories' we tell about our lives may have



many 'plots' and be told from multiple perspectives. Such 'unity' as our lives possess is a narrative one, rather than that of a substance which endures through time.

Ricoeur has argued that it is not possible to give a unified philosophical account of time, but that narrative is a response to the human experience of randomness and contingency. Time becomes human when it is organised in a narrative fashion. But this, according to Ricoeur, is a kind of 'poetic' resolution, distinct from the aporias which result from philosophy's incapacity. Lloyd asks whether philosophy and literature can be so readily separated. It is necessary, she argues, to attend to the literary dimensions of philosophical writing: 'Perhaps the conclusion should be not so much that fiction achieves a kind of resolution of problems of time which philosophy cannot solve, as that philosophy too offers "fictions" through which we can articulate our anxiety and wonder at the mysterious experience of being in time.' It is not that there is no difference between philosophy and literature. Fiction, for example, is concerned with 'character' in a way that philosophy is not, and philosophy is more distanced than literature from the emotional aspects of the experience of time. Nevertheless, the use of metaphor is common to both. Lloyd notes that the idea of the importance of metaphor to philosophy goes back as far as Aristotle, and that conceptions of the human experience of time and self-consciousness involve metaphors, such as Augustine's of 'stretchings out' of the mind. Such figures are neither simply discovery nor merely invention. Good philosophical writing may create 'fictions' through which we may achieve a better understanding both of ourselves and of such general concepts as 'time'. Philosophy can be inventive; it can provide good or fruitful metaphors with which to rethink our experience of time and self-consciousness. Whilst these cannot offer

final or conclusive understandings, neither are they merely fanciful. So, suggests Lloyd: 'Rather than seeing philosophy . . . as offering inconclusive "theories" of time, while fictional narrative offers a "poetic" resolution, we might fruitfully regard both philosophy and literature as offering different kinds of "fiction" through which we may come to a deeper understanding of what is problematic and troubling in the human experience of time.'

The main interest of Lloyd's book lies, I think, in two things. The first is the way in which it challenges views of the novelty of postmodern deconstructions of notions of selfhood. The second is the contribution it makes to debates about the nature of philosophy. Lloyd argues that there is a need to recognise the dimension of philosophical writing which has deep emotional resonances, and which can be seen as metaphorically inventive. There are metaphors and 'fictions' even in the writings of those philosophers most attached to a 'metaphysics of presence', who have thought of their work as capable of revealing an 'objective reality'.

There are many potentially interesting interconnections here with other contemporary debates about the nature of philosophical writing. Some of these are explored by Lloyd herself – in her discussion of the work of Ricoeur, for example. But it would also be interesting to compare Lloyd's view of philosophy and metaphor, for instance, to writing about philosophy and rhetoric, to feminist critiques of philosophy, to the concept of the 'philosophical imaginary' used by Michèle le Doeuff, to Irigaray's analysis of Plato's metaphor of the cavern. Above all other disciplines, perhaps, philosophy has constantly engaged in debates about its own nature, and this book provides some stimulating new reflections on these debates.

**Jean Grimshaw**

## **An understanding of moderation**

Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism and Exoticism in French Thought*, translated by Catherine Porter, Cambridge MA and London, Harvard University Press, 1993. xvi + 424 pp., £39.95 hb., 0 674 63438 1.

Corsica is a Mediterranean island whose main resource is tourism, whose political life is dominated by – often violent – nationalist factions; in early February 1994, a Moroccan dustman was killed by a gang of youths in a particularly blatant racist murder. In other words, Corsica epitomises the political problems that plague the world today, from Germany to Bosnia and Algeria: the growing incapacity of society to come to terms with the existence

of the Other, of aliens. This is the problem that Todorov's book addresses – a problem all the more urgent as the plague is spreading, and has spread noticeably further since the book was written.

Although it has crucial political implications, Todorov's brief is not directly political. Rather, he seeks to found our political judgement by examining a French philosophical and literary tradition – sometimes reviving



forgotten writers, sometimes revisiting well-known figures, from Montaigne to Lévy-Strauss. The tradition can be given a double name: universality vs. relativity. The universalism that stresses the fact that humanity is a single species, and that values are for all mankind, often ends by setting up the values in which the universalist's culture believes as universal; the relativism that admits, and sometimes admires, difference often ends either by dissolving values, or by smuggling back the relativist's own values to the top of a hierarchy. Todorov explores such meanderings in considerable detail, drawing, chapter after chapter, the requisite distinctions, between racialism and racism, between cultural nationalism and patriotism, not forgetting the portrait gallery of the ten incarnations of exoticism, from the assimilator to the aesthete of the exotic, to the philosopher. The range of reading is impressive; the authors, like Pierre Loti who, to my mind, do not deserve even criticism, are few; the texts that do deserve to be revived many (I am thinking of Tocqueville's views on Algeria). And Todorov's heart is in the right place: it is difficult not to agree with the positive tradition he sketches (a universalism that recognises difference, to be found in Rousseau and Montesquieu; a defence of universal ethics and political moderation – there is a sense in which Todorov is attempting his own *Esprit des lois* – moral laws as well as political).

The book, however, is flawed, perhaps inevitably so. It is in fact part of the tradition it criticizes, and what started out as an understanding of moderation turns out to be a moderate understanding. Todorov's *doxa* is often not widely different from the *doxa* he examines. Take, for instance, Tocqueville's comments on the adoption of Gobineau's racist views by the Germans: 'Alone in Europe, the Germans possess the particular talent of becoming impassioned with what they take to be abstract truth, without considering their practical consequences.'

Todorov praises this passage for its 'clairvoyance' – Tocqueville has rightly predicted the rise of racism in Germany. Yet is he not doing it – this does not seem to bother Todorov – on the basis of an ahistorical generalization which amounts to xenophobia? Replace 'the Germans' with 'the Jews', and you will immediately realize why such generalizations, in spite of their serendipity, are unacceptable.

It will be argued, quite rightly, that I am being grossly unfair to Todorov: I am quoting him out of context, and practising the old game of symptomatic reading at his expense. And I am reading Tocqueville out

of his historical context, from the anachronistic vantage-point of our present preoccupations. The trouble is that Todorov consistently indulges in the same practice. His reading of Renan, for instance, reveals a racist Renan (which will come as a surprise to those of us who were treated to a progressive and enlightened Renan, the free-thinker and critic of religion). The text Todorov reads is the third *Philosophical Dialogue*, in which the principal speaker, Theoctistes, sketches an ideal form of government based on science, which sounds very much like Orwell's *1984*. In spite of the author's disclaimers, which Todorov quotes ('not one of these characters is a pseudonym I would have chosen'), the views of the character are attributed to the author, and damn Renan as a totalitarian thinker. I agree with Todorov's critique of scientism, but not with his reading technique.

What is wrong with the book is, therefore, its method, which Todorov calls 'dialogue'. By establishing a dialogic link, across historical conjunctures, between thinkers, and between the thinkers and himself, Todorov allows himself all the facilities of anachronism, which is another name for manipulation. A few lines from *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime*, on the stupidity of negroes and the hubris of educated women, will eternally damn Kant. It is all too easy to find similar pronouncements in various Enlightenment philosophers, and to pass judgement. We can only think within the constraints of our conjuncture, and it has a sad tendency to let us down. In the light of the work of Bruno Latour, Todorov's pronouncement on science – 'science achieves consensus only by rational argument and by dialogue' – may already sound naive. And his defence of ethics is part of an overall ideological position – after reading this book, I advise, as an antidote, reading Alain Badiou's *Ethique* (Paris, Hatier, 1994), where the *doxa* is exposed.

**Jean-Jacques Lecercle**

# Close encounters

John Shotter, *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life: Social Constructionism, Rhetoric and Knowing of the Third Kind*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1993. xv + 240 pp., £37.50 hb, £12.99 pb, 0 335 09762 6 hb, 0 335 19120 7 pb.

Today, perhaps more than ever, the most innovative work in academic psychology is insistently pressing this seemingly secure and well-institutionalised subject towards its disciplinary limits. For, while psychological research into the functioning of the brain has increasingly become indistinguishable from neurophysiology, some social psychologists have been rethinking their project in such a way as to blur the line that has traditionally separated it from philosophy.

Amongst the latter, John Shotter has emerged as one of the most provocative and idiosyncratic, but also one of the most thoughtful and imaginative exponents of 'social constructionism' in psychology. This new book expands his earlier concern with language and selfhood to embrace questions of citizenship and the politics of identity, and appears to be reaching towards a broader, less exclusively professionalised audience than that addressed in much of his previous writing. Part of the interest of *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life* stems from Shotter's careful shaping of the book's structure so as to allow us to trace the development of his recent ideas, beginning with a critical re-statement of his views on psychology's scope and subject matter, and concluding with a discussion of how a reinvigorated civil society might bring a more humane political order into being. What links these and other issues examined in the book is the call for a thoroughgoing change in our understanding of ourselves as human agents.

Shotter has long been hostile to the pretensions of grand theory in the social sciences and here he locates the sources of scientistic error in the systematic explanatory goals of Enlightenment philosophy. In place of abstract lawlike generalisations, he suggests we need to recognise the enormously rich yet also highly circumscribed nature of our ordinary experiential knowledge of human affairs – what he terms 'knowing of the third kind'. Building on Gilbert Ryle's classic distinction between the facts and principles we have learned ('knowing that'), and our mastery of specific skills or techniques ('knowing how'), Shotter argues that both of these types of knowledge presuppose 'knowing from within', a practical grasp of the resources and possibilities inherent in our interpersonal circumstances – 'common sense' knowledge which is only available from inside a given social setting. A paradigmatic example would be the often intuitive sense of what a particular context requires that makes it possible for us

to 'know' what to say next in a conversation – precisely the kind of jointly created, open-ended and constantly evolving activity through which so much of our everyday living occurs. Not that such practices are by any means rule-free – we are constrained by the expectations associated with various speech genres, for instance, or by the way 'people mutually judge and correct each other' as to the appropriateness of their actions 'to what they take their reality to be'. But the intrinsically disputatious, 'unfinalisable' nature of social life, with its endless relay of argument and counter-argument, agreement and disagreement, suggests that 'our practical thinking is rhetorical in the sense of involving a developmental, dialogic process of criticism and justification'. Accordingly, Shotter proposes what he terms a 'rhetorical-responsive' approach to social research, committed to 'a radical reappraisal' of these practical-moral forms of knowledge, in order to reveal the emancipatory opportunities they hold out for the future.

In this dialogical spirit, about half the essays consist of close encounters with those interlocutors, old and new, whose work has helped the author to appreciate the importance of 'the third kind' of knowledge. Shotter's debts to Wittgenstein, Vico, Vygotsky, Volosinov, Bakhtin, and Rom Harré are explored in some depth, but elsewhere in the book writers like Rorty, MacIntyre and Bhaskar also come in for shrewd and detailed comment. Yet the results are far less eclectic than this bald list might suggest. For one thing, Shotter repeatedly puzzles over the same topics – joint action, social accountability, the 'prosthetic' or instrumental functions of language, the need for 'practical-theory', to name just a few – coming at them from a variety of different angles. And for another, the use he makes of his 'textual friends' is very much his own – a case in point being his secularisation of Vico's notion of 'divine providence' as a way of elucidating the productive possibilities or 'providential spaces' arising out of our mundane sociality. With its subtle stress upon ordinary human inventiveness, *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life* is perhaps best read as a libertarian ontology of the social, though one which is based on a resolutely non-Chomskyan view of science and language. Nevertheless, despite its immense sophistication and erudition, the book does have a somewhat transitional, uneven feel to it and some issues receive relatively short shrift. Compared to the attention

given to, let's say, conversation and speech genres, the treatment of citizenship is disappointingly thin, advocating a 'continuous debate' that will generate a new and more culturally inclusive 'vocabulary of terms', but offering little else. Similarly, as someone 'on the left' who professes to 'worry about such things as social justice', Shotter has almost nothing substantive to say

about them. Yet, if he is to make good his claim that we can preserve the Enlightenment's emancipatory ideals, while abandoning the rest of its goals, questions of social and political philosophy will need to figure much more prominently in his subsequent work than they do here. In the meantime, this timely and insightful book deserves the widest possible readership.

**David Glover**

## Beyond postmodernism?

Judith Squires, ed., *Principled Positions: Postmodernism and the Rediscovery of Value*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1993. xii + 211 pp., £14.99 pb., 0 85315 780 4.

*Principled Positions* addresses important issues for those who agree with at least some of the claims of post-structuralist and postmodernist thought, but who believe that it fails to replace the political vision it criticizes with any substantive or feasible alternative. Judith Squires' introductory essay sets out this balanced position, recalling postmodernism's central political convention that different subjectivities are suppressed within universal categories of liberation: the 'working class' suppresses gender or race; 'woman' suppresses class, sexual orientation and race; and so on. She then argues there is often a debilitating slide from this to a relativism in which all oppositions of oppressor and oppressed are dissolved because each suppresses some subjectivity. In view of the failure of postmodernism to advance an alternative vision of liberation, Squires calls for the reassertion of values on which political action can be based.

The collection proceeds in two sections. In the first, 'Beyond Objectivism and Relativism', Kate Soper, Steven Connor and Paul Hirst analyze the opposition which underlies modernity and postmodernity, demonstrating how it can be paralyzing. However, they offer few suggestions on the route to 'post-post-modern' values. The next five essays are grouped under the heading 'Pluralism and the Politics of Difference' and aim to resolve political problems caused by the opposition between modernity and postmodernity. Chantal Mouffe, Iris Marion Young and Jeffrey Weeks all generate new political values that are meant to furnish a basis for a renewed left – Mouffe by developing a socialist pluralism, Young through a conception of social justice sensitive to difference, and Weeks by calling for empirically based minimum universal standards. David Harvey argues that the way forward is to develop a materialist epistemology, while simultaneously placing universalism in a dialectical relationship with particularism. Christopher Norris berates Left

intellectuals for succumbing to a nominalist relativism that renders them incapable of any principled opposition to the Gulf War or John Major's election victory. With varying degrees of success the contributors try to advance the debate. While some, such as Soper, represent a straightforward return to modernist positions, others, such as Harvey, Young and Weeks, present arguments that should challenge Left modernists and postmodernists alike to reconsider their politics.

It is difficult to develop general criticisms of such a collection, but there is one important problem with *Principled Positions*. There seems to be a shared assumption that the antithesis between modernity and postmodernity, with its associated oppositions, is already understood. Little attempt is made to outline its philosophical or political presuppositions or the complexities they might obscure. This is particularly the case in the first section, which sets out to explore the opposition between objectivism and relativism but in general simply restates it. The choice between universalism and particularism, etc., is one that most would want to avoid – hence the book's attraction. However, the failure to analyze such a choice in detail, before trying to move on, means that the poles of each opposition are usually made absolutely incompatible, blocking the articulation of a 'beyond'. Many of these essays simply call for a reinstitution of some values (Soper, Harvey, Weeks, Mouffe), but do not show how the criticisms of modernity would be inapplicable to them. In a volume explicitly calling for a move beyond postmodernism, it is striking how most essays seem to reach a stalemate as soon as they articulate the opposition they are trying to surmount.

If the ambition of this volume is to be fulfilled, an adequate analysis of the opposition between modernity and postmodernity in relationship to the Left is required. This may seem harsh, since the context of the two modernities has been at the centre of social thought for

some time. But attention has often focused on a contest between the two, with participants tending to choose sides, rather than analyzing why such an opposition has come about within left-wing politics. Without this analysis, it will be difficult to surmount it and inaugurate a new emancipatory basis for the Left.

**Tim Jordan**

## Terms of endearment

Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy*, London and New York, Verso, 1994. xii + 276 pp., £39.95 hb., £13.95 pb., 0 86091 437 2 hb., 0 86091 602 2 pb.

Intended 'to make critical realist ideas more accessible to those without a degree in philosophy', Andrew Collier's book admirably succeeds in its main aim (if the present reviewer is anything to go by). Lucidly and engagingly written, *Critical Realism* offers a systematic account of Roy Bhaskar's 'philosophy for science'. Its two parts – 'Transcendental Realism' and 'Critical Naturalism' – deal with the natural and the social/human sciences, respectively. They thus roughly correspond to Bhaskar's principal, highly original works: *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975), in which he first propounded his anti-positivist but non-conventionalist position in the philosophy of natural science; and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979), in which a qualified version of it was extended to social-scientific knowledge. The consistency and ambition of Bhaskar's project, aspiring to nothing less than a 'Copernican revolution' in philosophy, clearly emerge from what might be regarded as the authorized version of it (Collier thanks his subject for 'checking the text for any misreadings of his thought'). Whilst some readers may dissent from the evaluation of Bhaskar's contribution – 'the most exciting development in Anglophone philosophy in this half-century ... offer[ing] the possibility of a new beginning' – Collier's meticulous presentation has the great merit of clarifying the precise terms of intellectual endearment and disaffection alike.

*Critical Realism* nevertheless inspires some reservations. For a start, the otherwise commendable focus on Bhaskar's texts has the effect of occluding their contexts, sometimes conveying the impression (albeit inadvertently) that his philosophy was created *ex nihilo*. This is the more surprising in that it apparently contravenes Bhaskar's own (Sraffian) characterization of the theoretical labour-process as 'the social production of knowledge by means of knowledge'. In this instance,

one would like, for example, to know more about Bhaskar's productive relations with the twentieth-century Anglo-American and French epistemological currents with which he is manifestly in critical dialogue, in his endeavour to surmount the besetting rationalism/relativism dilemma. Without an account of the 'raw materials' of Bhaskar's 'underlabouring', it is difficult to arrive at an assessment of the claims staked for its novelty.

A related concern is Collier's neglect of Bhaskar's genealogy in the Marxist tradition. We are informed that he 'resumes the great dialectical tradition in modern philosophy, the tradition of Hegel and Marx'. Yet, as he and his commentator would presumably be the first to admit, and as the diverse schools of Western Marxism, from Lukács to Adorno or Althusser, amply attest, that tradition did not exactly disappear between 1883 and 1975. Timed to coincide with the publication of Bhaskar's *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, where (as Collier notes) the affiliation is rendered explicit, *Critical Realism* contains no discussion of it. (Collier's review of *Dialectic* can be found elsewhere in this issue of *RP*.) This absence is particularly regrettable since, whereas *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (1986) and *Reclaiming Reality* (1989) were largely devoted to the consolidation or elaboration of Bhaskar's earlier work, *Dialectic* promises innovation.

A final cause for complaint is Collier's failure to engage in any detail with Bhaskar's critics, some of whom (e.g., Ted Benton, Alan Chalmers and Wal Suchting) have responded to his work in this journal. For the most part persuaded by Bhaskar's ideas, Collier restricts himself in the main to 'exposition and defence' of them; criticisms (to which I shall return) are reserved for a concluding chapter. The problem, however, is that Collier is too much the exponent, too little the defendant. Long on exposition, short on defence, *Critical Realism* makes insufficient effort to establish the comparative credentials of its subject-matter, treating contending philosophical positions at only the most generic – and unsatisfactory – of levels. Hence it is unlikely to convince those hostile towards, or merely sceptical of, the possibility of realism and naturalism. Meanwhile, even sympathetic critics are given fairly short shrift: queries about the possible circularity of the transcendental deductions (vicious, virtuous, or neither?), or suspicions of an incipient foundationalism vis-à-vis social science and socialist politics ('underlabourer', 'midwife', or progenitor?), are not so much refuted as repudiated.

This is not to suggest that Collier is altogether uncritical of critical realism, and in chapter 8 he enters some reservations of his own about Bhaskar's

development of it. Resuming arguments advanced in *Scientific Realism and Socialist Thought* (1989), against what he regards as Bhaskar's undue optimism, Collier outlines ontological grounds for scepticism about the prospect of the human sciences achieving an epistemological status or results comparable to those of their natural cousins. If, in this respect, he qualifies 'naturalism', when it comes to 'realism', he is, so to speak, *plus réaliste que le roi*, criticizing Bhaskar for unwarranted concessions to relativism, and defending the indispensability of the correspondence theory of truth.

Such differences are matters of realist degree, rather than philosophical kind, and do not diminish Collier's sense of Bhaskar's achievement to date or its future potential. That achievement has found its authoritative exponent; it awaits its suasive advocate.

**Gregory Elliott**

## Revolution postponed

Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought 1790-1800*, Cambridge MA and London, Harvard University Press, 1992. xiii + 434 pp., £35.95 hb, 0 674 25727 8.

Compared with the attention lavished on French and British classics, German political thought of the eighteenth century is relatively neglected. *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism* sets out to rectify this state of affairs. In his customary lucid and informed style, Frederick Beiser offers a comprehensive survey of the German political scene in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Beiser steers his way through the political values, ideals and aspirations of major and minor figures combining philosophical argument with a firm grasp of the historical background. The result is a fascinating topography of German intellectual life in the wake of the French Revolution. Beiser, however, wants to do more than fill a gap in the history of ideas. He wants to refute the 'myth of the apolitical German' and show 'the political purpose of most German philosophy of the 1790s'.

Beiser's account of German intellectuals responding with enthusiasm, caution or alarm to the changing world around them makes for riveting reading. It is less clear though whether this is enough to make someone like Madame de Stael, the first exponent of the view that German thought was apolitical, reconsider her opinion. She might point, for instance, to the scarcity of political

material. A brief look through Beiser's bibliographical notes would confirm this. We find aesthetic, religious, linguistic and metaphysical writings, or examples of this peculiarly German genre, philosophical science, but very few explicitly political texts. Moreover, although French and British political ideas have been associated with political events in France and America, German political theory was always at a further remove from action. The exception to this rule, the short-lived Mainz republic, appears more like an upshot of the conflict between France and Prussia than the result of revolutionary fervour. The sceptical question is this: If German thought was so overwhelmingly political, why did it not have any impact? Assuming that the sceptic will not be placated with a purely sociological argument, the philosophical relevance of her objections cannot be ignored.

As Beiser shows, German thinkers were deeply ambivalent about events in France. Kant's reaction is here paradigmatic. Kant wavered between affirming and



denying the right to rebellion. He offered *a priori* arguments both for and against, puzzling over the problem of whether the moral duty to be autonomous extends to the political right of self-determination. Apart from the problem of legitimacy, Kant had to deal with the difficulty of reconciling the idea with the actuality of revolution. Though his support for the latter was seriously tested with the execution of Louis, according to Beiser, Kant remained an unrepentant Jacobin throughout his life. However, Kant also had serious misgivings about the revolutionary mechanism. Ambivalence towards both the idea and the practice of revolution proved to be a persistent characteristic of German political discourse. Even at its most enthusiastic, support for the revolutionary ideal was tempered by distaste for the revolutionary practice. Fichte 'solved' the problem by recognising the principle of reform, while denying its application to the states of Germany. It is not just the liberals such as Schiller, Humbolt or Forster who vacillate between sympathy for reform and critical detachment. Conservatives such as Moser or Wieland, though predictably condemning the French Revolution, were not totally opposed to the right of rebellion as such.

Few would dispute Beiser's claim that these debates are of great political interest. The fact remains though that with unnerving regularity radical theory translates into conservative praxis. Marx blamed 'the impotence ... of the German burghers'; others might praise their pragmatism. Certainly Friedrich II, the Philosopher King, seems to be vindicated: 'argue as much as you like but obey.' Even so, it would be a mistake to let the sceptic carry the day. With remarkable consistency – and for the first time – German political philosophy problematised the very relation between theory and practice. Jacobi's question 'How do we begin a new history?' encapsulates the German practical dilemma. Kant, who set the terms of the debate, bequeathed this formidable challenge to generations of German thinkers from Hegel through Marx to Habermas. The persistence of this legacy in contemporary political theory is perhaps an indirect piece of evidence for Beiser's thesis. It is therefore a pity that he deals with the theory-practice problem only circumstantially. Nonetheless, this is a very good book and these reservations do not in the least diminish its value.

**Katerina Deligiorgi**

**Philip Hansen, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, History and Citizenship*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993. 226 pp., £45.00 hb, £12.95 pb, 0 745 60487 0 hb, 0 745 60488 9 pb.**

Hannah Arendt's thought seems to have returned from the intellectual wilderness to enjoy a certain modishness in recent times (see the reviews in *Radical Philosophy* 66, pp. 53-5). Philip Hansen's book is a modest, but useful addition to the growing collection of interpretations and, despite over two decades of involvement with the ideas of Arendt, he aims at little more than a straightforward exposition of her thought. According to Hansen, what links all of Arendt's political and philosophical concerns is the need to 'think what we do' in order to judge the world and act better. He places *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as one of her central works and considers it a major contribution to political theory. Far from being a gratuitous attack on Jews and an exculpation of Eichmann himself (a man

so dehumanised that he could condemn *Lolita* as immoral whilst defending his part in the Holocaust), the book shows that 'only if people are willing to judge and in the process show *themselves* to be capable of autonomous agency can the full magnitude of Eichmann's crimes be appreciated'.

Arendt tried to avoid two extreme but widely held positions: first, claiming that Eichmann was simply an inhuman monster (for Arendt, a refusal to judge); second, that we should not judge because we are all guilty anyway (there is a bit of an Eichmann in all of us). Without the ability to judge we are unable to resist the horror of totalitarianism, which was why Arendt criticised aspects of the trial and yet also made probably the most persuasive defence of the need to administer the death penalty yet written. If we cannot judge, there can be no political thought or action.

In one of the few sections where Hansen tries to apply rather than simply interpret Arendt's ideas, he points out

that her reading of revolutionary progress can help to illuminate some possible contemporary political developments. Arendt suggested that revolution would be most successful when it avoided the pitfalls of social questions, because freedom in a political sense would be compromised if it had to be combined or confused with freedom in an economic sense. Such a distinction is not without its problems and seems to transform the Marxist tradition within which Arendt claimed to be working into the promise of an élite freedom for the few (a fear borne out in Arendt's vision of a future where only the political élite make decisions and the majority are 'free' from politics). Yet it might serve to explain why events in South Africa seem to promise some hope of genuine change and why the converse seems to be the case in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In the first case there have been attempts to build new constitutional and public institutions, despite the threat of grinding poverty for the black majority; the second has not



only seen no such efforts, but the perverse creation of a vast propertyless mass.

Hansen adequately and lucidly covers most major areas of Arendt's thought – he deals scrupulously with her arguments with feminists such as Mary O'Brien and Carole Pateman – but, at times, the book veers towards hagiography and is short on critical perspectives.

**Andrew Hadfield**

**J.-B. Pontalis, *Love of Beginnings*, translated by James Greene, London, Free Association Books, 1993. 260 pp., £13.95 pb, 1 85343 129 X.**

Pontalis is one of France's most eminent psychoanalysts, best known for his co-authorship with Jean Laplanche of the indispensable *Language of Psychoanalysis*, but he has never enjoyed the notoriety of other members of his profession. Sadly, Anglo-American enthusiasm for 'French psychoanalysis' does not appear to extend to Pontalis, or to Serge Leclaire, perhaps the most respected of all Parisian analysts. A stubborn insistence on dwelling on the wilder shores of Lacania, as Pontalis calls that continent, tends to conceal the existence of a less dogmatic or sectarian psychoanalysis. Perhaps the appearance in English of *Love of Beginnings* is a minor indication of changes to come.

*Love of Beginnings* is a book by a psychoanalyst, but not exclusively a book about psychoanalysis, although it does contain some informed comments on the difficulty of writing on the analytic experience. It is, rather, a series of autobiographical vignettes combined with a meditation on the author's love-hate relationship with language. His ambivalence reflects that of language itself: the weight of things makes it difficult to speak, but it also gives speech a weight, a presence that prevents it from being hot air. There are no startling revelations or anecdotes here, even

though Pontalis, as a senior editor at Gallimard as well as an analyst, has long lived close to the centre of Parisian intellectual life. It would be difficult to locate it within any identifiable British tradition; in terms of the French context, the book is recognisably in the tradition of Gide, Proust and, perhaps inevitably, Sartre's *Words*. Beautifully written and self-consciously literary, it is a testimony to how a form of classicism can resist and outlast the ravages of modishness, be it phenomenological or Lacanian.

Whilst Pontalis's explorations of his past have a quiet beauty of their own, most readers will remember *Love of Beginnings* for its portraits of Sartre and Lacan. Pontalis was taught by Sartre at the Lycée Pasteur in the early 1940s, and nicely captures the welcome incongruity of the man – 'small of stature ... a proletarian of the existentialist consciousness' – in an environment still dominated by a dreary academicism. He subsequently attended Lacan's first public seminars in the 1950s and even produced summary accounts of certain of them. He convincingly describes the excitement generated by Lacan's teaching at a time when his audience could – not without some justification – believe themselves to be the first to truly read and understand Freud. Pontalis was fortunately enough to know both men 'before the glory of their name preceded and concealed them', before intellectual audacity became sclerotic dogma, and before Sartre became a national monument, and Lacan 'the big Other'.

Neither portrait is hagiographic, but nor are they caricatural or derogatory. Pontalis's writing is imbued with civilised and gentle irony, some of it directed against a young Pontalis who mistakenly thought that Sartre was starting *revue* (rather than a 'review') in 1945 and that he would therefore be surrounded by glamorous exotic dancers. As it was, he became a contributor to *Les Temps Modernes* and the author of some of the first articles to present Lacan to the public he was to conquer in the 1960s.

The author emerges as charmingly urbane, dedicated to his profession as an analyst, but sceptical about the elevation of psychoanalysis into a universal science of sciences and well aware that it too can be a dogmatic trap. His fragmentary autobiography is that most unusual of things: a portrait of a contented man living a circumscribed life divided between his editorial office and his consulting room. Above all, Pontalis depicts himself as a man fascinated by fragments of memory and the mysterious transition from being a child learning letters by a peculiarly arcane rote system in a private school to becoming an *infans scriptor*. *Love of Beginnings* provides no great insights into either psychoanalysis or philosophy, and does not set out to do so. But it does exude enormous charm, and well captures the slightly melancholy delights of a search for lost time and the remembrance of things past.

**David Macey**

## NOTICE

Jonathan Rée and Joseph McCarney have left the *Radical Philosophy* editorial collective. Jonathan has played a central role in defining the character of the journal since its inception in 1972, most recently as Reviews Editor. We wish them well and hope they will continue to contribute to the magazine in the future.

Steve Morley is hoping to form a *Radical Philosophy* discussion group in the Bristol area. Anyone who is interested should contact him directly at: 21a Seymour Road, Bishopston, Bristol BS7 9H5 (Tel: 0272 244035)