

## The tamagochi and the *objet petit a*

Slavoj Žižek, *The Žižek Reader*, edited by Elizabeth and Edmond Wright, Blackwell, Oxford, 1999. xii + 332 pp., £55.00 hb., £15.99 pb., ISBN 0 631 21200 0 hb., 0 631 21201 9 pb.

The question with Slavoj Žižek is: how seriously should we take him? In its wrestle with the limits of consciousness, psychoanalytic theory has often used jokes and narcissism, but with Žižek it's taken to an extreme. Extreme enough to become a sales point: the blurb promises flamboyance, scandal and dazzle. To have been a dissident in Communist Yugoslavia, to have developed a ludic psychoanalysis in opposition to what Žižek calls state-sponsored Frankfurt School Marxism, to have stood as a Liberal Democratic Party candidate in the first election for the five-member presidential body in 1989 – all these imply a sense of engagement belied by the 'isn't he outrageous!' giggles that greet his public lectures.

Žižek is alert to the ambivalence of his position, and in a preface explains that his jokes, poor taste and allusions to pop culture are a 'lure', a compulsive wittiness, which conceal a 'fundamental coldness', 'an utter *indifference* towards the pathology of so-called human considerations'. Such anti-humanism is familiar rhetoric from structuralists as they promise to burn off the cuddly fleece of liberal common sense and expose the machinic terminator beneath.

In a British context, Žižek does have novelty value. His treatments of Kant, Schelling and Hegel are filtered through the terminology of Jacques Lacan. In England, Lacan's reception was bound up with that of Louis Althusser, who made a fierce distinction between the 'mystical' dialectics of German idealism and the scientific, 'structuralist' Marx of *Capital*. Indeed, Žižek's blend of Lacan and Hegel appears sufficiently outlandish to deserve the term 'postmodernist'. His use of the term 'worn-out' to dismiss certain concepts also implies postmodernist self-consciousness about theory as novelty and commodity. In his preface, however, Žižek rebuts the charge of postmodernism, going so far as to claim that 'the Marxist critique of political economy is crucial for my project'. However, this is tempered by an interest in the legacy of Christianity – not for its messianic promise, but for its dogma and institutions. Žižek achieves an oxymoronic climax by calling himself 'a *Paulinian materialist*'.

This is all delivered with such good humour that the critic stands disarmed. Anyone wishing to remind Žižek that Marx's thought actually began with a critique of religion – and cannot be understood except as an assault on fraudulent universality – may suddenly seem too sensible to be admitted to the discussion. Perhaps Žižek's Marxism is only a postmodern tease, another feint in a discourse driven by competitive novelty rather than love of truth. Not so much repressive desublimation as terroristic stand-up by (and for) the intellectually perverse.

The *Reader* falls into three sections: culture, woman and philosophy. Samples of Žižek as cultural critic gradually give way to more explicit philosophical declarations. Under the title 'Burning the Bridges', Žižek claims to have severed any connections with 'the hegemonic trends of today's academia'. However, it is hard to see where else his writings could resonate, since – as commercial editors advise postgraduate contributors – discovering 'high theory' in pop culture hardly constitutes effective journalism. For example, Žižek says a game played by the gang of youths in Ruth Rendell's novel *Talking To Strange Men* 'embodies the great Other, the symbolic universe of codes and cyphers'. This may speak volumes to Lacanians, but others may be less impressed.

Those who dismiss Lacan completely, though, miss something. His lectures were extraordinary performances, pitched at the very edge of credibility. The tension between philosophical profundity and the abjectly absurd was finely judged, forcing reassessment of fundamental intellectual tenets. He woke his students to the here-and-now of the power relations of pedagogy, the sheer oddness of evolved apes mouthing symbols. However, like Tristan Tzara's manifestoes, Lorca's statement of *duende*, or the aesthetic coups achieved by Free Improvisation, such species of Dada art attack are notoriously difficult to translate into stable genre or philosophical doctrine.

In the *Reader*, Žižek hardly comes across as a Jacques Lacan. His absurdities are squibs decorating a stable and assured philosophy that becomes clearer

and clearer as the volume proceeds. Unlike, say, references to Mickey Mouse or Betty Boop in Benjamin or Adorno, Žižek's subcultural motifs always 'precisely' illustrate his schema, blocking any investigation of provenance, suggesting no readjustment of the doxa. The whole game seems locked-in and rule-bound: calling James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* 'unreadable' is sure indication of a categorical mentality. A paragraph from Lacan is quoted, and – despite the ellipses – the sense of someone improvising their thought is palpable. In contrast, Žižek's licks are woodshedded – the Wynton Marsalis of radical theory.

The basic philosophy here is idealist: 'only what is symbolized can be said to exist'. Despite much noise about Lacan's *objet petit a* – 'some annoying, messy, disturbing surplus, a piece of leftover or "excrement"' (which a typographical error on page 28 renders appropriately as 'smell a'), the irreducible residue left behind by concepts – Lacan's terms are deployed as a mantra to *resist* any grappling with the untheorized. The celebrated citations of low culture – the tamagochi, *Jaws*, *Monty Python* – are raided from the larder of collusive reference rather than materialist investigations. Far from calming the hysterical idealism of deconstruction and cyber-theory, Žižek's ironic-flares structuralism becomes yet another polemic against common sense.

Despite declaring that ideology-critique should 'discern the hidden necessity in what appears as a mere contingency', Žižek's materialism is easily distracted. He adopts Wolfgang Haug's thesis of the 'material effects' of Nazi ideology – parades, sport, charity-drives – ignoring how *Volksgemeinschaft* masked massively increased extraction of surplus value from a defeated working class. Postmodernist crowing that – contrary to Adorno's critique – the Nazis in power 'performatively produced the effect of *Volksgemeinschaft*' is not a materialist analysis of economic relations but pragmatic recognition of domination. By omitting war and imperialism from the picture, the material limits of national *Volksgemeinschaft* are left undiscerned.

Žižek compares Marx to Heidegger. After quoting Marx, he cites John L. Austin and Oswald Ducrot on language, and then says 'this, perhaps, offers another way of considering Heidegger's "ontological difference"'. It is indicative

of the reactionary nature of the *Reader's* packaging that these loose and playful homologues become – in one of the editorial summaries printed before each selection – Heidegger's ontological denunciation of Marx's 'taking production to be the foundational principle'. One does not expect a reborn Marxist to allow his editors to recast his words into such familiar – and facile – 'refutations' of the Left's greatest thinker.

Žižek's ability to discern homologues between disparate entities – Hitchcock and Hegel, Einstein and Lévi-Strauss, Stalin and Robert Altman – is certainly funny, but less because it transgresses hidebound concepts of high and low culture than because his pattern-recognition is compulsive and neurotic, an intellectual repetition-syndrome. A scene from *Titanic* or *The Crying Game* is always a 'precise' illustration of Lacan's concept of the Other. But the precision arrives because Žižek is not really interested in the films, only in Lacan's concept.

Despite a desire to upset the smug pragmatism of his academic colleagues, Žižek fails to become a materialist because he is not a dialectician: for him, 'Hegel remains within Kant's fundamental framework'. The unknowable Thing-in-itself is the Lacanian Real – what we really desire – beyond the reach of linguistic or descriptive systems. A radical dualism between mind and matter lurks behind each Žižekian formulation, alternately comic and hysterical. You expect a diabolical cackle at every turn. Žižek finds proofs for his dogma everywhere he looks – in the cinema, on television, in bed. We cannot experience the Real because we only ever find our concepts (a.k.a. 'chain of signifiers'): 'Desire is *non-articulable* precisely as always-already *articulated* in a signifying chain.'

In his impatience to strike a novel posture within post-structuralism, Žižek raises the ghost of Marx. However, deep-dyed idealism guarantees that his



reading will be a caricature. He claims that, 'in his dialectics of the commodity form', Marx 'starts from the need of the abstract universal Value to embody itself in a contingent use-value, to "put-on" a use-value dress'. A glance at the first pages of *Capital* shows the opposite: Marx did not start from an abstract universal (value) and then seek a carrier (the commodity); he started from concrete values (wealth) and then found out who produced it (labour). The idea of an abstraction 'needing' a carrier is *theological*, more specifically Christian (God needed to embody himself on earth, then found the Virgin Mary as a 'carrier'...). Žižek's enthusiasm for the opening words of the Gospel according to St John ('In the Beginning was the Word') shows how tempting scholasticism is to academic structuralists – and how much they are in need of the bracing vandalism of Goethe's *Faust*: 'In the beginning was the Deed.'

Žižek goes on to say that 'at least two use-values (commodities) are needed if a Value is to express itself'. He is doubtless thinking of the famous pages in *Capital* where Marx discusses exchanging twenty yards of linen for a coat. Žižek's way of putting it shows how structuralism – with its doctrine that meaning is only ever the product of a synchronic symbolic order – inevitably vaporizes Marx's materialism. Marx actually points out that a *use value* is the property of the object itself. Once I've got hold of an orange, its refreshing quality is a material feature quite outside any symbolic order. Even a non-signifying monkey knows that! What Marx does argue is that if value is to be *quantified* it must be *exchanged*, this being the fundamental social relation – the 'cell' – of the capitalist order, and one he wished to criticize and hopefully supersede. Žižek's formulation sees no way out of capitalism, and so confuses Marx's critique with prescription.

It's certainly amusing to hear about the Japanese neologism *chindogu* (it means a uselessly overfunctional object, like binoculars with windscreen wipers), but to call language itself a *chindogu* – 'an entity ... which ... can only be defined from within the horizon of language itself' – is to restage Plato's *Symposium*, where wealthy, slave-owning Athenians lay on couches and expounded the doctrine that their discourse is supreme and there is nothing outside it. The whole history of science and civilization – founded on an experimental dialectic with nature and the testing of ideas against materials – refutes this idealism.

If we do not like the 'civilization' that this dialectic has produced, it is not going to be altered by uniting the disaffected under the intricately woven black drape

of post-structuralism. To maintain that power depends on 'the anonymous structure of the symbolic Law' blinds us to the material antagonisms that rend the social fabric. Like the boss who says he regrets what he is doing, but nevertheless must sack his workers according to the anonymous pressure of market forces, Žižek's unitary concept of Law justifies the current order. Tragic recognition of the corruption of all power turns into the ironic smile of the politician politely swallowing a post-prandial gag. If Žižek wants to be a revolutionary, he is going to have to smash his structuralism for Real.

**Ben Watson**

## 'The Germans'

Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, edited by Henry Hardy, Chatto & Windus, London, 1999. 171 pp., £20.00 hb., 0 7011 6868 4.

This book is the transcript of the late Isaiah Berlin's 'most famous lecture series', presented unscripted in 1965 in Washington, and it includes a recording on CD of the last lecture. Given their author's almost canonical status in British intellectual life, the publication of the lectures is obviously a notable event, though perhaps not quite as notable as some of his more enthusiastic advocates might suggest. Berlin's lectures do add significantly to the changing image of Romanticism which is now playing a role in many areas of contemporary intellectual and cultural life, despite the objections detailed below. His conception of Romanticism matters not least because, unlike so many English-language writers, he does not see Romanticism as the product of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and other major English-language literary figures. Romanticism is instead primarily the product of – as he repeatedly (and rather irritatingly) insists – 'the Germans': Herder, Hamann, Kant, Fichte, Schiller, Friedrich Schlegel, and Schelling.

Berlin's version of Romanticism has the further virtue of not giving up in the face of the innumerable ways of defining Romanticism that exist in the literature on the topic. Romanticism is, quite simply, the greatest recent 'shift in the consciousness of the West', whose key aspect is the rejection of the Enlightenment certainty that the universe has an inherent, pre-existing structure which science and philosophy could eventually discover. Berlin's highlighting of the presence in Romanticism of the kind of anti-representationalism

which has formed the basis of some of the most significant developments in philosophy in the last thirty years is in some ways quite prescient for one whose intellectual home was Oxford. At a time when more and more links are becoming apparent between the work of Rorty (who has recently begun to see his own project in terms of a 'Romantic polytheism'), Davidson and Putnam – let alone Derrida and other post-structuralists – to the post-Kantian Romantic tradition, the book offers a lively introduction to that tradition, which conveys some of its excitement and novelty.

Berlin's account is, though, by no means without its problems. The editor, Henry Hardy, sees Berlin's tendency to inaccurate quotation as generally involving 'improvements on the original' which rarely distort the author's meaning – Hardy himself does some helpful editorial work to supply references to the correct text. Now it is clear, as Berlin was himself good at showing, that intellectual movements generally catch on more in terms of what people think is being said by those who initiate them than through what they actually say. However, in the case of Romanticism, it is these days important to get right what was actually said, if the enduring conceptual potential of the major texts is not to be lost, as it largely was in the period between the demise of Hegelianism and today. It is also important to get right what was said, because Romanticism has a notorious capacity for giving rise to hyperbole, to which Berlin all too often succumbs by making the major authors say what he wants them to, instead of carefully analysing their often extremely precise formulations. At times this book makes one understand why the history of ideas can get such a bad name among philosophers: instead of analysing the real arguments, it merely tells us what their supposed consequences were.

One of the most obvious examples of this basic problem in Berlin's approach occurs at the beginning of the chapter on 'Unbridled Romanticism'. Berlin paraphrases a famous remark he attributes to August Wilhelm Schlegel on the three factors which supposedly had the greatest influence upon the 'entire movement' of Romanticism: namely, 'Fichte's theory of knowledge, the French Revolution, and Goethe's famous novel *Wilhelm Meister*'. The trouble is that the supposed remark was not in fact made by A.W. Schlegel at all, but by his brother Friedrich, who lived on a different intellectual planet. A.W. had little time for philosophy; Friedrich, on the other hand, was a truly exceptional philosophical talent. In the passage in question Friedrich is actually referring in deliber-

ately outrageous manner to the 'greatest tendencies of the age', though he does put the French Revolution first. Had Berlin referred to Schlegel's own splendid subsequent commentary on his Athenaeum fragment in the essay 'On Incomprehensibility', where Schlegel insists the fragment was 'written with the most honest intention and almost without any irony at all', or to much of the work by Schlegel already available in 1965, he would not have taken the remark so literally (and would have got its author right). He might also have characterized Romantic irony correctly: Berlin's account here is frankly fictional. The result of this failure is that, like most commentators on the early German Romantics, Berlin regards them as 'Fichtean' subjectivists, who think in the most extreme way conceivable that the world is a product of the activity of the I. This, though, is not even fair to Fichte, if one troubles to read his texts, as people are now thankfully beginning to do. Despite what Berlin says, Fichte was always enough of a Kantian to insist on the extent to which much of our thought about the world was constrained by aspects of the world over which our will had no power.

The fact is – and this is pretty worrying for the overall thesis of the lectures – that the key aspect of philosophical Romanticism was, as Walter Benjamin showed in 1919, actually its *rejection* of Fichte, precisely because of his subjectivism and idealist foundationalism. Far from being idealists, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel and Schleiermacher, after some initial interest in Fichte, moved to a position which tried, as many pragmatists these days also do, to have done with the 'realism/idealism' division. Schlegel explicitly rejected the idea of truth as 'correspondence of subjective and objective' in 1800 because 'reality ... cannot be called either subject or object', and he did so by often very acute philosophical argument, of a kind one would think, on the basis of Berlin's woolly characterization, inconceivable for a Romantic. In another mistaken quotation, whose source is the same assumption about the connection of Romanticism to a crudely characterized Fichte, Berlin cites Friedrich Schlegel as saying that the 'first law' of Romantic art is 'the will of the creator, the will of the creator that knows no law'. What Schlegel in fact says is that Romantic poetry 'recognizes as its first law that the caprice (*Willkür*) of the poet will not submit to any law above itself'. The correct text therefore obviates the idea that the passage relies on a Fichtean notion of 'will', does not use the term 'creator', and shows that Schlegel is really referring to what Kant addressed in his notion of 'genius': namely, the fact that great art does not result



from submission to rules, but rather from a play of the imagination which transcends existing rules.

The underlying problem suggested by these examples is also apparent in the book's tendentious interpretations of some major literary texts. Berlin claims that Büchner's *Danton's Death* suggests that Robespierre 'was perfectly right' to put Danton to death, something which it really is impossible to support from the text. He sees Goethe's *Werther* as involving tragic inevitability, when it is clear from the text that the framing of Werther's letters by a fictional editor makes the novel as a whole into a *warning* against the dangers of Werther's rampant solipsism. Goethe, after all, wrote it as a kind of therapy, in order to avoid the fate to which he had recently seen others disappointed by love succumb. Too many of the other texts referred to are also distorted by Berlin's reductive claims about Romanticism, when specific reference to the texts would have revealed – to take a final example – that far from being a vitalist, as Berlin claims, Schelling specifically attacked the then current notion of vitalism as philosophically incoherent. It is almost as if Berlin is relying on the ignorance of his English-speaking audience, which, as so much English-language work on the Romantics shows, he was pretty safe in doing.

In the last chapter Berlin makes the very 'Oxford' claim that the German Romantics were 'a remarkably unworldly body of men. They were poor, they were bookish, they were very awkward in society.' Besides being unworthy of the better parts of his account of the political significance of Romanticism, this remark is very hard to reconcile with the fact that one of the Romantics – Schleiermacher – both helped found the first modern university and was regularly in political trouble for his liberalism; or that Friedrich Schlegel ended up as a politically active supporter of Metternich, and, despite his later reactionary Catholicism, still had things to say about European politics which have contemporary resonances. Probably the oddest of the major early Romantics, Novalis, was, of course, a mining engineer, as well as being a remarkable philosopher, which Berlin does not mention. At the level of generality which reigns in these lectures, too much important detail gets lost or blurred.

However, despite these objections – and they are in some respects pretty fundamental – one still has to say that the book is worthwhile. It is certainly not boring, it ranges widely and not always inaccurately, and at its best, such as in the demonstration of Kant's unintended help in creating Romanticism, it actually gets to the heart of the matter most lucidly. Whether the book as a whole can really be said to add to its

author's reputation as a major world scholar and intellect is another matter.

Andrew Bowie

## The salon savant

Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1998. 356 pp., £20.00 hb., 0 7011 6325 9.

Sir Isaiah Berlin, OM, CH, who died in November 1997 at the age of eighty-eight, was much honoured in his life by both the political and the academic establishments, and continues to be much praised posthumously. The blurb to Michael Ignatieff's biography of Berlin describes him as 'the greatest and most humane of modern liberal philosophers', and, while hyperbole is the natural mode of such puffery, that is probably the current consensus judgement on Berlin. His scattered writings and lectures are still being devotedly collected and edited by Henry Hardy, and are received by most reviewers with respect and, very often, enthusiasm.

I must admit to never having shared this uncritical attitude to Berlin and his work. The often indiscriminate spraying around of names and references in his writing sometimes conceals some rather careless or casual scholarship, while his thinking – his particular version of liberalism – has always struck me as being too deeply tainted by anti-Communism and Cold War assumptions to achieve the classic status of Mill, or de Tocqueville or Condorcet. Berlin, who was, I think, a genuinely modest man, never claimed any such status for himself as others have conferred on him. The signs are that he possessed self-knowledge to a striking degree.

Ignatieff's biography is, by intention, in some ways the autobiography that Berlin always refused to write. It is based primarily on a series of conversations which took place during the last ten years of his life, and from which Ignatieff obviously obtained a good deal of important information about Berlin's early life. Given this, and given Ignatieff's obvious admiration for his subject, his biography might easily have degenerated into hagiography – uncritical and consistently defensive.

And Ignatieff *is*, for the most part, defensive, as most biographers tend to be. There are episodes on which he puts an unduly favourable gloss. There are others, unflattering to Berlin, which he does not mention at all (Christopher Hitchens pointed out some of

these in his review in the *London Review of Books*, 26 November 1998). But on the whole he acknowledges the criticisms that were regularly made of Berlin, and also gives us the materials on which we can base our own conclusions. Berlin's reputation is not altogether enhanced by the outcome.

Isaiah Berlin was born to a Jewish family in Riga in 1909. Fleeing the impact of World War I, the family spent nearly five years in Petrograd, from 1916 to late 1920, when they left the new Soviet state for Britain. Berlin went to Oxford as a student in 1928, and Oxford remained his home and base for the next sixty years. It was something of a paradox that this Latvian Jew should have become, for so many, what William Waldegrave called 'the ideal of Englishness'. It was something of a paradox for Berlin himself, who was keenly aware of the traps of assimilationism, and who never wished to renounce or conceal his Jewish identity. He was a lifelong Zionist who was at one



time very close to Chaim Weizmann. And British anti-Semitism also reminded him of his 'outsider' identity from time to time. The Bishop of Gloucester objected when he became the first Jewish Fellow of All Souls College in 1934, and he was kept out of the St James's Club in London in 1950 for the same reason.

Given all this, it is curious that his responses to the Holocaust were so ambiguous and inadequate. When news of the extermination process began to reach the Allies during the war, Berlin was among those who underestimated the scale and significance of what was happening, and he endorsed the evasive official Anglo-American view that the Jews would be best aided by a rapid Allied victory. Ignatieff tells us that 'he actively despised the Holocaust industry' and was very hostile to Hannah Arendt's commentary on the Eichmann case.

What is the explanation for this? Ignatieff says that 'It was Stalin's crimes, not Hitler's, that roused his most intense imaginative response', and there is no reason to disbelieve him. As a person and writer Berlin belongs to, and was definitively shaped by, the post-1945 Cold War. Like many liberal writers of that period, he presents his arguments as being directed against 'totalitarianism', 'fanaticism', 'monism', etc. of any kind; but it is Communism rather than Nazism or fascism that he has in mind, and intends *us* to have in mind.

On this key issue Ignatieff sends out mixed signals. On the one hand he tells us that Berlin 'had no difficulty, then or later, in thinking of himself as a Cold War intellectual' or 'a liberal defender of the capitalist world and its freedoms'. But on the other hand he refers to Berlin's 'aloofness from the intense intellectual and emotional conflicts of the Cold War', and even describes this one-time professor of political theory as 'this least political of men'. In fact, as Hitchens pointed out, this supposedly 'sceptical' and 'dispassionate' thinker was a positive supporter of the American war in Vietnam – something which Ignatieff ignores and, indeed, misrepresents. He was always fiercely anti-Communist, to the extent that he refused to believe that Khrushchev's post-Stalin thaw represented any real change in the Soviet regime. His response to the anti-Communist – in fact anti-Leftist – witch-hunts of the period, in both the USA and Britain, was not to his credit or that of the Cold War liberalism he

represented. His influence was decisive in preventing the distinguished Marxist biographer of Trotsky and Stalin, Isaac Deutscher, from getting a chair at Sussex University in 1963.

Part of the interest of Berlin's life lies in its unrepresentativeness. He was not a conventional academic. He hugely enjoyed social life, and after his period of wartime service in the British Embassy in Washington he began to move in the smarter reaches of London society – to the dismay of some of his friends. Ignatieff suggests that Berlin was 'more comfortable socially among Conservatives', which may explain why he was happy to accept Mrs Thatcher's invitations to Downing Street in the 1980s. Rather paradoxically, Ignatieff says that he was 'not interested in enjoying or cultivating active political influence', and that 'He was not drawn towards the flame of power', but his

evident enjoyment of the company of political leaders and opinion-makers makes this implausible.

This taste for life at the top interfered with his intellectual commitments: 'he loved company too much to spend the best years of his life in the library'. Ignatieff tells us that he 'hated writing', and he dictated everything, and, more damagingly, that he was 'never a rigorous scholar: many of Berlin's "quotations" were paraphrases of the original'. I think it is clear that much of Berlin's work is weakened by this rather sloppy approach. There are too many unsupported claims and assertions, and the famous long sentences are too often designed to be spoken rather than read. On the page they often come across as clumsy and clotted. His collected essays and lectures are far more variable in quality than his admirers have been willing to recognize.

On the other hand, Ignatieff is quite right to stress his importance and originality as a pioneer in the historical study of ideas, a discipline which 'barely existed at Oxford' when Berlin began to break away from the purely philosophical interests of his contemporaries such as J.L. Austin and Stuart Hampshire, in favour of a more historically oriented approach in which synthesis rather than analysis was the essential aim.

Berlin was in many ways – not all of them admirable – a significant and important intellectual figure of the mid-twentieth century. Michael Ignatieff's vivid and sophisticated account of his life will certainly help us to form a more balanced view of his achievements and their limitations.

**Anthony Arblaster**

## Mind the gap

Maria Pia Lara, *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998. ix + 229 pp., £45.00 hb., £13.95 pb., ISBN 0 7456 2042 6 hb., 0 7456 2043 4 pb.

Social theory during the last quarter of a century has strained between two competing paradigms. The mantle of the Frankfurt School has been taken over by Habermas, whose analysis of discourse ethics has long dominated both German and American debates in social theory. Yet theories inspired by French post-structuralism have encroached on areas of debate concerning power and resistance that previously had been the province of Marxist intellectuals.

Feminist theorists have aligned themselves with one or the other of these competing paradigms, or sought some sort of compromise position. For example, Seyla Benhabib avowedly carries on and reworks key issues in the Frankfurt School of critical theory; while Judith Butler aligns herself with strategies initiated by Lacan, Derrida and Foucault. For feminist theorists, as for many of their male colleagues, at issue are questions of critique, universality, normativity, resistance, and emancipation. Feminist critical theorists ask: how can social theory (including feminist theory) develop a critique of social relations, unless it justifies the universality of its normative principles? And how can it intervene in political life, unless it is inspired by some, albeit utopian, vision of emancipation? The

questions for post-structuralist feminists are different: how are so-called universal categories (including the category of 'women') themselves based on exclusion? And how can one elaborate a theory of resistance, without succumbing to the naive vision of a world emancipated from strategies of power?

Maria Pia Lara's book, *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere*, is located within the first of these paradigms, presupposing the need for universal norms and focusing on the emancipatory potential of women's narratives. She argues for the mutually beneficial relation between Habermasian critical theory and feminist theory. Lara adopts Habermas's concept of 'illocutionary force', which refers to speech-acts that aim to achieve a consensus based on mutual understanding. She seeks to take Habermas's theory beyond itself, however, in pointing to the aesthetic dimension of communication. Imaginative speech, she argues, not only attracts the attention of the other to participate in communicative acts, but opens up 'possibilities for creating different kinds of recognition and solidarity between both parties'. Lara makes a special claim on behalf of women's narratives: all women's narratives have an 'emancipatory

content'. That is, they implicitly include an account of marginalization and oppression, as well as aim for a consensus that requires a reconceptualization of justice. These emancipatory narratives mediate between group identities and universal moral claims, by allowing those who are not members of the group to gain access to a new framework for thinking about self and civil society. Women's narratives achieve this reordering of values and concepts by building a bridge between aesthetics and morality. Historically, women have needed the expressive sphere of aesthetics in order to present new experiences that both enabled a transformation in women's self-conception, and could engender new concepts of justice. Women's example of linking aesthetic and moral spheres, Lara argues, provides a new approach to understanding the nature of moral subjects.

In exploring the relation between aesthetic expression and moral understanding, Lara draws on Albrecht Wellmer's writings on aesthetics and Hannah Arendt's work on narrativity. Wellmer focuses on art as a form of expressive rationality, while Arendt brings into focus the relation between normative and aesthetic elements in narratives. Thus, Lara seeks to move away from the thin proceduralism of Habermas's theory towards a recognition of the complex 'strategies of deconstructing, retelling and reconfiguring the symbolic order'.

The originality of Lara's contribution lies in her attempt to deepen a theory of communication in order to acknowledge the interplay of aesthetic and moral aspects. For example, she argues that 'recognition' and 'solidarity' can only be attained through imaginative speech which opens up the possibility of creating different kinds of recognition and solidarity. Thus she addresses a crucial problem both for Frankfurt School theory and for Foucault's analysis of power and resistance: how can change in the 'agency' of individuals and social groups actually take place? Lara's answer is to focus on how narratives transform the 'public' imagination and hence concepts of justice and the good life. In focusing on the link between imaginative and moral transformation, she seeks to preserve the 'emancipatory' content of resistance which disappears in Foucault's account. Nonetheless, Lara does not clarify crucial terms in her analysis, such as 'narrative'. She points to both Jane Austen and Judith Butler as important examples of women's narratives that become 'illocutionary forces' in the public sphere. But these authors have a rather different relation to what one might consider the aesthetic realm. Her concept of narrativity risks becoming so

broad that its links to imagination, emotion and art become tenuous.

Even more problematic, in my view, is Lara's relation to debates within feminist theory. She makes strong claims about the emancipatory, non-exclusionary character of women's narratives, and the need for a 'feminist universal model'. Yet she fails to engage in the critical debates among feminists about these terms. A decade ago Denise Riley and Judith Butler argued that the concept of 'women' is normative and exclusionary (i.e. based on particular racial, class and sexual identities). How, then, can Lara simply assert that women's narratives are implicitly non-exclusionary? Moreover, Lara's view that women's narratives are emancipatory 'whatever their particular viewpoints' is contradicted by accounts of women's historical and contemporary role in social life. Historians have documented the complicity of many Southern white women with the system of slavery in pre-civil war America, and the complicity of many German women with the fascist policies of the Third Reich; studies of right-wing women in America point to the highly visible role of women activists in the anti-abortion movement in the United States. Would Lara argue nonetheless that narratives by these women are emancipatory and non-exclusionary?

Oddly enough, although Lara is committed to providing cultural content to the theoretical debates about language in Habermasian circles, her empirical references to women's narratives are extremely limited (and she provides only passing reference to narratives by Latin American women, though she is professor of philosophy at Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana in Mexico). Her assertion that feminism is 'the most relevant' twentieth-century revolution seems a bit optimistic in the face of the uneven gains for women's rights. For some depressing examples of recent developments I refer the reader to Katha Pollitt's commentary 'Women's Rights: As the World Turns' (*The Nation*, 29 March 1999): an Italian judge recently ruled that women wearing blue jeans can't be raped, because it takes two to pull them off; El Salvador enacted a law which rejects abortion even to save the mother's life; and the new global economy has thrown millions of women and girls into prostitution and sex slavery.

Lara's book gives interesting proposals for reworking the concepts of communication in Habermas's theory to include an account of imagination, conflict and transformation. But her attempt to anchor this contribution in a theory of women's narratives is weak. Perhaps the difficulties Lara has in reconciling the latest work in critical theory with that in feminist



theory manifest deeper difficulties with such a project? These difficulties may be testimony to how little feminist debates have made an impact on the 'public sphere' in which critical social theory is debated.

**Robin May Schott**

## The gift of things

Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, trans. Nora Scott, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999. 256 pp., £49.50 hb., £14.99 pb., ISBN 0 7456 1964 9 hb., 0 7456 2151 2 pb.

One of the recurrent questions of our time is whether or not there is, or could be, anything outside relationships based on exchange – apart from the non-relationship of master and slave where the slave is conceived not as a human but as a thing (and thus as incapable of entering into exchange other than as an object). The material and ideological dominance of the market economy is such that it has become hard for thinkers to conceptualize any other kind. When we discuss gift-giving we often fall into a vocabulary of gift-exchange which suggests a (perhaps mystified) form of barter in which the giver gets (and calculates) a return on his investment. The characterization of the giver as *he*, whether explicit or not, is of course symptomatic. However, while many philosophers and anthropologists (never mind economists) are eager to embrace what they present as a rational and objective demystification of the gift, there is another camp which still pursues what Godelier terms the *engima* of the gift: that within gift-giving, and within the overlapping domain of our relationship to *things*, which somehow escapes the logic of the market.

For Godelier, what defines the gift is social obligation; commercial exchange leaves each party free of obligation, and the goods wholly alienated, at the conclusion of the transaction. But even if a gift is immediately reciprocated by a counter-gift of an identical object (most common in non-agonistic gift-exchange), the counter-gift does not annul the gift – a relationship of reciprocal dependence and reciprocal inequality has been set up. Godelier's work combines two useful aspects. On the one hand it is a careful and patient account of previous anthropological work on the gift – in particular Mauss and, via Mauss, Lévi-Strauss. It is Lévi-Strauss's famous *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (1950) which has shaped our reception of the subtle and complicated *Essay on the*

*Gift* (1923–24) as a work which really presents the gift as a form of exchange. Godelier's account is respectful and sympathetic to Mauss, and yet scrupulous in following up any perceived problems. On the other hand, drawing on his own fieldwork investigations in New Guinea, Godelier formulates a number of original theories in the area of gift-exchange.

Godelier challenges a reductively exchangeist account of society both by re-analysing Mauss's most famous examples of agonistic gift-exchange (potlatch and kula), and by focusing on non-agonistic gift-exchange, as a precursor to the agonistic forms. With respect to agonistic gift-exchange, Lévi-Strauss famously critiques Mauss's acceptance of the native informants' theory that *hau* explains the giver's continuing bond with his gift (which obliges recipients to reciprocate). Godelier accepts that *hau* is not an *explanation*, but refuses to reject it as *false*; he argues that this kind of indigenous 'knowledge' has a content which 'consists of the practices in which they are involved, those of gift-exchange, and of creating lasting, sacred obligations, those of marking differences, hierarchies and so on'. *Hau* is thus not so much the spirit of the thing as the power of the original donor – thus the inalienability of the gift is less a question of (spiritual) beliefs (and thus false, for Lévi-Strauss) than of social realities. In agonistic gift-exchange there is a fear that the gift might be cancelled out; hence there is often a deferral of the counter-gift, and always a need to outdo the last gift. Godelier specifies that agonistic gift-exchange only arises where there is a competition for social rank; otherwise non-agonistic gift-exchange may continue to be the norm.

Godelier's other main line of argument, which draws on the work of Annette Weiner, is that anthropologists in the wake of Mauss have underestimated the importance of things which are *kept* rather than given or exchanged. This entails an analysis of the sacred, and here Godelier wants to challenge the overarching importance bestowed on the symbolic realm (fostered by Lévi-Strauss and, more generally, Lacan). For him the imaginary is equally, if not more, important. He defines the imaginary as everything mentally added to, or subtracted from, our real capacities. Godelier's interest in the role of sacred objects – things which are kept rather than entering into any kind of exchange – leads him to look at processes not directly governed by the laws of the human mind. He writes:

we are dealing with a certain type of relations *between man and himself*, relationships which are therefore *at the same time social, intellectual, and affective*, and which are materialized as objects.

And he goes on to argue:

the sacred object brings us to the extreme point at which the *opacity necessary* for the production of society is fully realized, where the misapprehension necessary to the preservation of society *runs no further risk of recognition*.

One aspect of the book left me a little disappointed: Godelier mentions the general exclusion of women from studies of gift-exchange, in which they largely feature, if at all, as objects to be given. He does hint at the role of women in certain societies as owners of valuable goods rather than as goods themselves. However, very little of his own work does more than hint at ways in which women might be included. I wondered, for example, whether his deployment of the imaginary might have a link with the work of Luce Irigaray – however, she does not feature in his bibliography. In the New Guinea case studies, women feature largely as victims – the men legitimize real violence against women by imaginary myths of violence against them in which sacred objects (power) were stolen from them. Homosocial male bonding even goes as far as gifts of semen from older men to adolescent boys.

Godelier is self-reflexive about the work of the anthropologist up to a point. His close relationship with Lévi-Strauss enables a foregrounding of questions such as why anthropologists choose to study certain aspects of a given culture rather than others; for example, why focus on the ‘symbolic’ as opposed

to the material conditions of production? However, there is limited analysis of the (surely necessarily dialectical) relationship between anthropologist and informants – and perhaps this is justifiable in so far as this is not the issue on which he chooses to focus. However, the apparent transparency of information about societies so distant from our own may leave the more suspicious, or simply cautious, reader feeling she should borrow the strategy of the theatre spectator and simply suspend disbelief.

Godelier does see a significant gap between our own society, in which the (capitalist) economy defines social existence and excludes many individuals from that existence, and societies in which it is gift-exchange which produces and reproduces fundamental social existence (common to *all* members of those societies). In our own society, he argues, the gift has largely been reduced to two forms: the gift imposed by the state (‘solidarity taxes’) and charity, in particular the potlatch of the telethon. It seems to me, however, that the gift survives in more forms (both agonistic and non-agonistic) than he suggests. For instance, gifts exchanged without calculation between friends and relatives remain a major part of social existence for many of us – mothers, for example, can find very large parts of their lives constructed by ‘unthinking’ giving. Perhaps Godelier’s (and other anthropologists’) interest in the gift of *things* – at the expense of the gift of services – has a somewhat skewing effect. Perhaps a focus on ‘feminine’ domains would suggest an even broader sphere in which the ‘obligation’ to give still nurtures our sense of our social selves.

Judith Still

## Who knows?

Alessandra Tanesini, *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998. viii + 288 pp., £50.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 0 631 20013 4 hb., 0 631 20012 6 pb.

Rather than taking the view that we have come to the ‘end’ of epistemology, in this book Alessandra Tanesini argues that the impact of feminist accounts of knowledge on



the field of epistemology has been, for the main part, invigorating and innovatory. Feminists may start their thinking about problems of knowledge from what she calls 'unusual places', and this freshness of approach can enrich ongoing debates as well as producing critiques of more traditional approaches. Having set out the geographical terrain and geological (historical) strata of the main epistemological traditions, Tanesini gives cogent, clearly stated accounts of the finer details of the feminist arguments which now constitute a significant body of work in this area.

Tanesini's reconstruction of traditional epistemological thinking identifies three central tenets which have acted as provocations to feminist thinkers and which, she says, they should certainly question, if not reject. The first is the notion that we can discern by philosophical reflection what the features of 'real' knowledge are and differentiate what is 'real' knowledge from what is not; the second is the notion that knowledge depends on a secure foundational base; and the third is the definition of knowledge as individual subjects representing their environment. She points out that not only does the solitary and autonomous individual enquirer have a specific history and context (from Descartes to Locke to Kant, for example, although individualistic assumptions also persist in more contemporary theories), but the nature of the representations change as well (for example, the notion of evidence only emerges in the early modern period along with probability, and this changes the significance of observations and creates new epistemic practices). The reason for drawing attention to such characteristics is the charge that epistemological individualism tends to preserve notions of emotional detachment and value neutrality, which not only block broader investigations of the epistemic subject, but go hand in hand with claims for objectivism, realism and a rationalist internalist account of science. Furthermore, such characteristics may also occlude the extent to which knowledge as human practice is socially constituted and contextualized, influencing the nature of discoveries as well as the formulation of theories.

Thus far there may not appear to be anything specifically feminist about these kinds of objections since they do not uniquely concern the question of gender. However, picking up on the work of Alison Jagger, Evelyn Fox Keller, Lorraine Code and others, Tanesini indicates that an epistemic subject whose main characteristics are autonomy, emotional detachment and value-neutrality finds alignments with certain values of masculinity and that such alignments make it difficult for science to claim it is free of all bias.

The recognition of possible bias does not necessarily invalidate scientific knowledge: it may just mean good science is less common than was thought. An internalist account of science could accommodate objections about its assumptions to preserve its credibility as value-neutral. Nevertheless, most feminists would take the view that this may not be enough to screen out all possible bias, and in any case the recognition of values and the social context of practice may even enhance science. Tanesini is careful to distinguish the different strands of feminist responses to these lines of thought, using the three broad headings of feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory and feminist post-modernism, under which more detailed points and differences may be worked out. Feminist empiricists such as Lynn Nelson and Louise Antony, influenced by Quine, develop a version of naturalized epistemology which can accommodate the situatedness of the knower. Feminist standpoint theory argues for the epistemic privilege of certain marginalized positions which offer a critical perspective on mainstream practices. Feminist post-modernist writers like Jane Flax broadly take a negative view of notions like the progress of history and the project of epistemology and, like Rorty, remain sceptical about philosophy's suitability for addressing questions of knowledge at all.

Tanesini maintains a broad range to her discussion, working across and between the 'divide' of analytic and continental philosophy to locate and critically assess the effectiveness of the arguments she considers. She shows how critical debates within analytic philosophy about, for example, the ontological issue of the nature of reality (Quine, Rouse) and the tendency of continental philosophy to acknowledge the socio-historical character of knowledge and to raise questions about power, reason and objectivity (Foucault, Habermas, Heidegger), may find common ground with the diverse work of contemporary feminists such as Sandra Harding, Lorraine Code, Helen Longino, Nancy Hartsock, Genevieve Lloyd and Luce Irigaray, among others.

One of the strengths of the book is Tanesini's attention to detail in argument and her capacity to draw fine distinctions between the positions she discusses. She refuses to homogenize the different philosophical implications of the feminist epistemologies under discussion. However, this is slightly at odds with her occasional references to 'the Heideggerian framework' which she suggests offers a viable alternative to the impasses of traditional epistemology and which she says may find some resonance with feminist

epistemologies. This may be the implicit background to some of the points she makes, as it would capture the aim of knowledge as a contextual social practice which begins in practical involvement and refuses to espouse value-neutrality, but the exact nature of the connections are not really spelt out and would need to be examined in greater detail.

Alison Ainley

## From eudaimonia to me-daimonia

Alessandro Ferrara, *Reflective Authenticity: Rethinking the Project of Modernity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998. xii + 187 pp. £14.99 pb., 0 415 13062.

Alessandro Ferrara has written a fine book, which affirms the project of modernity, but does so in an independent way. Ferrara follows Habermas in defining the project of modernity as ‘the project of grounding our validity claims in the transindividually objective and yet humanly “subjective” structures of subjectivity’. He is critical, like Habermas, of those philosophers, such as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and Rorty, who abandon the aspiration to possess such validity. Yet Ferrara also has reservations about endorsing the project of modernity in the spirit of Habermas and Rawls because they fail to offer adequate accounts of the issue of ‘first-person validity’.

In attempting to ground first-person validity, Ferrara draws upon an impressive range of knowledge from philosophy, sociology, and psychoanalysis. His ambition, though, is hardly limited to sorting through such perspectives, endeavouring to contribute to a formal theory of the good that bases itself in subjective experience. Despite the rather modest self-evaluation of adding ‘one possible way of enriching our vocabulary about the good’, Ferrara establishes a creative solution to the impasse that he discerns in contemporary ethical theory. This impasse is between conceptions of ethics that are exclusively concerned with justice, and thereby ignore the good, and those that see the good as having primacy, understanding it in terms of self-realization, and thereby ignore justice.

At the centre of the present work is the idea that validity can be located in the concept of authenticity. Ferrara compares authenticity to a number of related concepts. He argues, for example, that authenticity

includes autonomy, but it is nonetheless distinct from it. Authenticity, in contrast to autonomy, ‘has the quality of being somehow connected with, and expressive of, the core of the actor’s personality’. Yet it has neither essentialist, individualist, nor humanist connotations. Ferrara distances himself from viewing authenticity as a matter of rescuing subjectivity from the oppressive weight of society; he believes that authenticity should be construed as complementary to intersubjectivity, but he does not linger in showing how they are related or whether tension between them remains. It is fair to wonder about what role others have in the constitution of first-person validity – to what extent could one say that first-person validity is impossible without others?

Ferrara’s sources are diverse: Aristotle’s notions of *phronesis* and *eudaimonia*, Rousseau’s introduction of authenticity as a matter of distinguishing amongst aspects of one’s inner world those that are crucial rather than expendable, Kant’s notion of the *sensus communis* and his distinction between types of judgement, and Simmel’s conception of singular or exemplary normativity. The Kantian distinction between determinative judgement, where the universal exists prior to and independent of particularity, and reflective judgement, where the universal is exemplified through the particular, is key for Ferrara. It is the latter sense of judgement that Ferrara wishes to import to establish the validity of authenticity.

Yet Ferrara’s argument about authenticity ultimately rests on his own theory. He delineates four factors that determine authenticity: coherence, vitality, depth and maturity. These factors are conceived not as criteria of identity, but as guidelines. They cannot dictate to us, and, as Ferrara appealingly puts it, we ought to think of them as seducing, rather than conquering us. Coherence has to do with a sense of identity that has cohesion, continuity and differentiation; vitality has to do with joyful empowerment that occurs through the fulfilment of one’s central needs; depth has to do with access to one’s own psychic dynamisms and the reflection of such awareness in the construction of one’s identity; and maturity has to do with one’s ability and willingness to come to terms with the facticity of the natural and social world – both acknowledging reality and enjoying illusion. Ferrara discusses these factors both in connection to individual identity and then moves on to suggest that they are applicable to collective identity as well.

He draws heavily from psychoanalysis. The practice of psychoanalysis holds open the prospect of self-understanding through dialogical self-reflection about



the past with the aim of promoting greater honesty, flexibility and awareness about oneself. The theory of psychoanalysis offers a detailed description of the inner lives of human beings; it provides an alternative conception to philosophical views of the mind, which dwell upon rationality and minimize the importance of other mental functions. But ought psychoanalysis to be understood as lending support to authenticity?

Consider Trilling, who traces the concept of authenticity as it replaces the earlier modern ideal of sincerity. Authenticity arises once it is realized that sincerity can be false; thus, as Trilling emphasizes, authenticity is a polemical concept that marks a space in which one faces oneself more intensely, and, it was originally averred, without the intrusion of society. This reading of authenticity can be understood as a Hegelian rejoinder to Ferrara's more Kantian reading: whereas Ferrara attempts to capture the conditions of authenticity, Trilling follows out the concrete, historical developments of how the concept came into existence and subsequently unfolded as the dialectical counterpart to the concept of sincerity.

Since psychoanalysis is critical to Ferrara's account of authenticity, he is obliged to contemplate Trilling's question of whether psychoanalysis 'subverts' rather than 'advances' authenticity: 'Must we not say that Freud's theory of the mind and society has at its core flagrant inauthenticity which it deplores but accepts as

essential in the mental structure?' Although Ferrara does acknowledge pathological varieties of authenticity, his main concern lies with the capacity for self-reflection that is at the heart of exemplary judgement. Yet this still does not absolve Ferrara from having to face the sense in which the unconscious represents an obstacle for the ideal of authenticity. All psychoanalytic orientations would concur here, regardless of whether one is partial to an upbeat ego-psychological perspective, a downbeat Lacanian perspective, or an object-relations perspective that can go either way.

Ferrara calls his own ethical theory 'postmodern eudaimonia'. This is meant to hark back to Aristotle (but without accepting the kind of assumptions about tradition and community that attract MacIntyre) and to impel us to embrace the world today, armed with what we have learned about first-person validity from Kant, but also Hegel and Heidegger. According to Ferrara, eudaimonia is predicated upon unifying one's biography into a coherent narrative. It entails the assumption that each of us is unique and bears the responsibility of owning and embracing an identity. In contrast to Habermas and Rawls, Ferrara insists upon a psychological understanding of the good. Rationality is a necessary but insufficient condition of being a fulfilled agent. At the same time, Ferrara resists the identification of the good with pleasure. He makes a compelling case that an ethical theory which does not contend with coherence, vitality, depth and maturity cannot complete the project of modernity in a satisfying way.

In distancing himself from Habermas, one might expect Ferrara to register sympathy with first-generation Critical Theorists, for whom psychoanalysis was also crucial. Ferrara mentions Adorno, but the figure of Marcuse is ignored, and Ferrara's acceptance of the project of modernity means that he does not seriously contemplate the danger of authentic conformism; his eudaimonism is not motivated by the wish to revalue bodily pleasures. Nonetheless, Ferrara's contribution has a debt to the wilder but more profound discourse that went by the name of 'Critical Theory'. I would have liked Ferrara to engage more radical critiques of authenticity, instead of simply rejecting them. After all, one does not have to indulge hyperbolic ideas about the authenticity of madness to worry about the limits of authenticity in modernity. Still, we can be grateful to Ferrara for offering us an original, uncompromising vision of modernity.

**Elliot Jurist**



# A morally pink complexion

Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, trans. Quintin Hoare, Verso, London and New York, 1998. 122 pp., £12.00 pb., 1 85984 187 1.

My local radio station keeps playing a commercial featuring 'Mary', student of English literature by day, supervisor in a call centre by night. She earns a proper salary (amount unspecified) and, it goes without saying, loves her work. Call centres are one of the North's growth industries, apparently because northern accents are perceived as friendly and trustworthy. Kracauer's salaried masses obviously did not work in call centres – he was writing in 1930 – but aspects of their lives would be familiar to Mary. The aptitude tests had been introduced, there was already great emphasis on 'human and personal development', and letters of application were already being studied by specialists in the voodoo science of graphology. Ageism had set in: a salesman of twenty-five came into the at-risk category of 'older'. One of Kracauer's informants was the personnel manager of a Berlin department store. He told him that sales and office staff should have 'a pleasant appearance'. When pressed, he explained that a 'pleasant appearance' meant 'a morally pink complexion'.

The salaried masses were the employees (*Die Angestellten*) of Weimar Germany, a distinct sociological group with a curious status. Legislation adopted in 1911 gave the white-collar workers of the service industries – commerce, banking and transport – legal privileges including insurance, health schemes and job protection – denied the industrial working classes. In 1930, there were 3.5 million of them, including 1.2 million women, and they helped to form a human bulwark against the threat of socialism. Sports clubs were organized to help them keep their good pink complexions, and to promote what we would now call corporate loyalty. The salaried masses represented 'the newest Germany', and Kracauer studies them like an anthropologist confronted with a new culture. By the time he began his investigations, inflation had eroded their economic privileges, and rationalization and concentration their social status, but false consciousness is a force to be reckoned with. The shopgirl wanted to marry a metal worker, but her father – a court usher, no less – refused to countenance having a mere worker in the family. The skilled worker gave up his job and

found a position as a lowly bank messenger. He lost money, became an employee and gained a fiancée.

Kracauer (1889–1966) is best known for his *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) and *Film Theory* (1960), both written in English long after he had left Germany for the usual reasons. They have never been well known in Germany, and little of the huge output of journalism he produced before 1933 has ever been translated into English. Journalism was his preferred medium, and *The Salaried Masses* was first published in instalments in the daily *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Its appearance in a good translation and with an excellent introduction by Inka Mülder-Bach is very welcome. Although short, this is a rewarding work, but it becomes richer still when read in conjunction with the selected 'Weimar essays' published as *The Mass Ornament* (Yale University Press, 1995). The 'mass ornament' of the title is made up of the drilled bodies of the Tiller Girls dance troupe, and it says it all: mass entertainment for the salaried masses, the industrialization of entertainment and the industrialization of the body. Despite all their desperate attempts to enjoy themselves, these masses are 'spiritually homeless', seeking their pleasure in 'shelters for the homeless' and the 'pleasure barracks', or in other words the giant cinemas, dance halls and cavernous taverns of Berlin where cheap popular songs drill themselves into the brain and stay there to deaden the critical faculties. Rationalization in the workplace goes hand in hand with the rationalization of pleasure.

Kracauer insists that his ethnographic study of everyday life in the newest Germany is not an exercise in reportage, or the random observation of facts. He also rejects the myopia of 'expert-culture', concentrating on 'exemplary instances of reality' or inconspicuous surface-level expressions of normal life in all its 'imperceptible dreadfulness'. Kracauer was personally close to both Adorno and Benjamin, whose sympathetic review of *The Salaried Masses* is included as an appendix to the present edition, and the kinship is obvious. Much of Kracauer's Weimar work invokes a dialectic between *Vernunft* (understanding) and *Ratio* (abstract reason) which looks forward to Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment. The comments on the mind-numbing effects of rationalized distraction sound like an early version of the critique of the culture industry, though there is an element of sympathy that is not in evidence in Adorno. The tone is one of wry and knowing empathy rather than mandarin contempt. Stylistically, the juxtaposition of 'exemplary instances of reality' is worthy of the 'thinking in pictures' of the Benjamin of *One-Way*

*Street*. Whilst Kracauer is obviously applying a form of critical theory to the sociology of everyday life, another influence is also apparent. The references to 'spiritual homelessness' allude to Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, whilst the rejection of reportage in favour of a mosaic of significant impressions is curiously similar to the Hungarian's critique of surface naturalism in the name of typical realism.

Without wishing to credit Kracauer with the gift of prophecy, some of what he describes is uncomfortably familiar. The pleasure barracks are still open for business, and they are getting bigger: one recently-opened bar in Leeds boasts of being able to hold 1,500 people. Entry is controlled by doormen (you must not call them bouncers) and having a pleasant appearance no doubt helps if you wish to gain admission. Just as a friendly northern accent will help, should you wish to join Mary in the call centre until such time as it is downsized.

**David Macey**

## Decadence

Daniel W. Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997. xii + 163 pp., £37.50 hb., £11.99 pb., 0 415 10068 2 hb., 0 415 10069 0 pb.

Daniel W. Conway, *Nietzsche's Dangerous Game: Philosophy in the Twilight of the Idols*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1997. xii + 267 pp., £37.50 hb., 0 521 57371 8.

Conway is possibly the most perspicacious of Nietzsche critics, and arguably the most judiciously judgemental. Situating Nietzsche firmly within the decadent epoch that spawned him, Conway takes Nietzsche's self-proclaimed decadence as his point of departure and proceeds to examine the self-referential implications of Nietzsche's immanent critique of modernity.

In *Nietzsche and the Political*, Conway retrieves the moral perfectionism that lies at the heart of Nietzsche's philosophical project and that a decadent age inevitably precludes. It is, Conway argues, the realization that the depleted vitality of modernity can ill afford the luxury of a hierarchical moral pluralism, predicated on a morality of breeding, that precipitates Nietzsche's focal shift from the political macrosphere to the political microsphere. In the absence of such a (purportedly) morally invigorating 'natural aristocracy', Nietzsche looks to the heroic exploits of exemplary individuals to expand the horizons of human perfectability.

*Nietzsche's Dangerous Game* focuses on the self-referentiality of Nietzsche's post-Zarathustran writings to which his retrospective prefaces of 1886 advert; and, by implication, on the manifest symptoms of Nietzsche's decadence to which his symptomatological critique of modernity provides the diagnostic key. As Conway argues, the ultimate goal of Nietzsche's post-Zarathustran work is 'to found a tragic age in which a thoroughgoing naturalism will supplant the anti-affective animus of Christian morality'. This naturalism, however, is grounded in vitalism, the deficiency or excess of which is determined by the regnant system of instincts to which the individual is subject: if the instinctual system is impaired (by Christian morality, say), then so too is the vital force. Vitalism, moreover, vanquishes voluntarism, and Conway goes on to demonstrate how in Nietzsche's post-Zarathustran writings individual agency is reduced to a mere conduit of an amoral, trans-individual will to power which further undermines an effectively affective naturalism.

Within Nietzsche's economy of decadence, this debased will to power manifests itself in a lack rather than a surfeit, a sacrifice rather than a squandering, in art, law, ethics, politics and philosophy; and, as Conway is at pains to point out, this sacrifice is in no greater evidence than in Nietzsche's philosophy. For, in a decadent age, this debilitated will to power will ultimately will its own destruction, and decadent souls such as Nietzsche's will be compelled to enact their constitutive chaos, 'expressing themselves creatively in their own self-destruction'. At once theorist and exemplar, physician and patient, Nietzsche bodies forth the very decadence he deplores: his experiments with vitalism and will to power cause him 'to relapse recidivistically into metaphysical prejudices he so expertly debunked'; his persistent appeals to truth 'suggest his "perspectivism" does not preclude his access to truth'; 'his' teaching of eternal recurrence, never stated by Nietzsche himself, 'remains mysterious, occult, oblique – and therefore full of promise'; his priestly resentment and brute prejudices 'motivate and vitiate his critique of Christianity'; and, most dangerous of all, his fatal decision to furnish the symptomatological tools necessary for the diagnosis of decadence, enables his more discerning readers, of whom Conway is one, 'to plumb the murky depths of his lacerated soul' and to extract therefrom 'his personal confession'.

Conway's trenchant and withering critique of Nietzsche's paradoxical post-Zarathustran position is unequivocally the most dangerous challenge yet to Nietzsche's credibility as a *critic* (as opposed to an exemplar) of decadence, modernity and Christianity.

**Francesca Cauchi**

# Purchasing power

Henry Tam, *Communitarianism*, Macmillan, London, 1998. £16.99 pb., ISBN 0 333 67483 9.

Whereas the communitarianism of Sandel and MacIntyre focuses on actually or once-upon-a-time existing 'communities' marked by shared traditions and values, Henry Tam's communitarianism is largely a matter of practices and values that exhibit the value of 'community'. He examines, criticizes and proposes practices in terms of their answering to three cardinal communitarian principles. These Tam extracts from a selection of political philosophers from Aristotle to Habermas and from non-individualist political sociology and psychology. The upshot is a conception that is liberal, democratic and socialistic. Though an admirer of Etzioni, he is aware of the authoritarian and conservative spin Etzioni has given the communitarian movement, whose deeper roots he finds in English ethical socialist thinkers.

Both state and market ideologies, Tam urges, conceptualize social relations in terms of coercive and incentive pressures on individuals conceived in atomistic terms. The cultural communitarianism that has grabbed the headlines partakes of this outlook in so far as it conceives of the individual, especially the growing child, as a sort of target to be blitzed by normatively irresistible requirements. It displays a hermeneutics of mistrust for natural impulses, treated as animal, selfish, or in other ways base. In this respect, although he makes no reference to Kropotkin, Tam shares much of the tradition of libertarian communism with its core notion of the spontaneous sociability, cooperativeness and mutuality of human nature. The communitarian society for Tam is one whose institutions foster such qualities while dampening their opposites.

Tam's 'three communitarian principles' are: cooperative enquiry, mutual responsibility and citizen participation. What Tam does, on the basis

of wide research and practical experience (he chairs the UK Communitarian Forum and works in local government), is treat social-institutional areas with a reformist, sometimes restorative agenda based on these principles. Thus he considers: 'Education', 'Work', 'Protection', 'The State Sector', 'The Business Sector' and 'The Third Sector', before returning to deal with general criticisms in the light of his specific analyses and proposals. Towards the end, he addresses a variety of anti-communitarian positions.

Although in many ways a radical book, *Communitarianism* is unashamedly reformist in its project of bending existing structures in a communitarian direction. Sometimes this reformism is expressed in general 'musts' and 'shoulds' whose responsive audience is unclear, given that the account of the dominant institutions would often lead one to a pessimism about the potential for movement in the direction advocated. Tam's suggestions might be helpful, but not always to the powers that be.

What from some points of view might be 'theoretical' or 'philosophical' weaknesses in the book are in other respects a strength. Tam's mind is a galaxy of bright ideas, at once general and pragmatically specific. He writes as one attuned to the pitfalls of communitarian thinking as much as to the disasters of capitalist-statist ideologies and practices. He plugs into current debates and grasps in remarkable detail the political options under discussion and, in particular, their impact on the prospects for 'inclusive communities'. This holistic quality immunizes Tam from the seductiveness of bogus utilizations of communitarian values masking authoritarian disempowerments. The name Blair comes to mind here...

Those studying contemporary political philosophy will be aware of the gap between academic abstraction and such political reality as may be connected with it. What Tam's book does is supply a context for such thinking to get some life and purchase.

**Tony Skillen**