

# Laboratory Latin America

Patrick Barrett, Daniel Chavez and César Rodríguez-Garavito, eds, *The New Latin American Left: Utopia Reborn*, Pluto Press, London, 2008. 320 pp., £19.99 pb., 978 0 745 32677 1.

There is widespread agreement that Latin America is currently the site of the most promising experiments in political organization and creativity to be found anywhere on the globe. Specifically, in the words of Barrett, Chavez and Rodríguez-Garavito, it is 'a privileged laboratory for analysing the identity and future evolution of the left and progressive left politics'. This is the Latin America of the Zapatistas and the *piqueteros*, of Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, of tumultuous protests and successful election results that seem to have transformed the continent over little more than a decade.

The breadth of the transformation is indeed extraordinary. In 1990, with the electoral defeat of Nicaragua's Sandinistas, the only avowedly left-wing government in Latin America was that perennial exception, Fidel Castro's Cuba. In Chile, the Chilean Socialist Party was in the ruling coalition, but the president was a Christian Democrat, and overall the government was more right than left, dedicated to continuing Pinochet-era neoliberalism, albeit without resort to authoritarian methods. Indeed, in the Americas as a whole, from Brian Mulroney and Kim Campbell in Canada, George Bush the Elder in the USA, down to Carlos Menem in Argentina, the early 1990s were a low-water mark for left-wing parties. Arguably, things began to change as early as 1991, when Haiti, that other perennial Caribbean exception, saw the accession to power of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, on the back of his popular movement, Lavalas. But Aristide's term of office was interrupted a mere eight months after his inauguration, and it was not until 1994, with the outbreak of the Zapatista insurgency in Southern Mexico, that there were any other visible signs, picked up by the international media, of Latin American resistance to what had become known as the 'Washington Consensus' of neoliberal economics and low-intensity democracy. And it was only in 1998, with the election of Chávez to the Venezuelan presidency, that the 'left turn' of Latin American electoral successes began in earnest.

Now, almost exactly ten years after Chávez's February 1999 inauguration, if El Salvador's former guerrilla

force, the FMLN, win that country's forthcoming presidential election (as is likely), there will be more Latin American presidents in power on the left than on the right. Already, after electoral victories in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador and Bolivia, as well as Paraguay, Nicaragua and Uruguay, the majority of the region's citizens live in countries whose governments declare themselves to be on the left. Moreover, these governments have generally increased their support while in power, while elsewhere left electoral movements have almost won in Mexico (arguably Manuel López Obrador *did* win, only to have the election stolen from him) and Peru. Even the United States, with its Obamania, has finally caught up with the trend. In fact, in the hemisphere as a whole only Canada and (more arguably) Colombia have shown a movement to the right in recent years. Everywhere south of the forty-ninth parallel, then, has been marked by triumphs at the polls for parties and leaders proclaiming commitment to the poor, affirmation of social rights, rejection of neoliberalism, and determination to remake their nations on fairer, more egalitarian foundations.

So with all this excitement, these promises of new eras and 'utopia reborn,' why is what is written about the Latin American Left so tedious and uninspired? There have been a host of books about the Latin American left of the past ten years. These range from accounts of individual figures or countries, such as Richard Gott's *In the Shadow of the Liberator: Hugo Chávez and the Transformation of Venezuela* (now reissued and, significantly, retitled *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution*) or Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing's *Impasse in Bolivia: Neoliberal Hegemony and Popular Resistance*, to comparativist attempts to synthesize and contextualize the region's experience, such as Tariq Ali's *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope* or Jorge Castañeda and Marco Morales's *Leftovers: Tales of the Latin American Left*. Often, the titles and the cover art say it all. The dustjacket of Ali's book, for instance, shows Castro crowned with a halo, flanked by Chávez and Evo Morales. *Leftovers*, by contrast, has a cover with two pictures: one of Chávez pointing menacingly at the camera; the other of Luiz

Inácio Lula da Silva backing away with a finger in the air, as though the Brazilian leader were trying to get a word in edgeways, and as though he were repeating the Spanish King's famous rebuke to the Venezuelan, 'Why don't you shut up?'

All too frequently, discussion of the Latin American Left devolves into either celebration of its more radical incarnations, usually represented by Hugo and Evo, or a call for what Castañeda and Morales term 'a more *responsible* approach' (my emphasis). The problem with this division of academic and political labor is that it fails to interrogate the very notion that there is indeed a fundamental division between the 'good' and the 'bad' Left, 'social democrats' and 'populists.' This is a distinction established by right-wing and manifestly reactionary commentators such as Castañeda and Alvaro Vargas Llosa, son of the novelist Mario, who gives us the purported distinction between a 'vegetarian' Left, represented by Lula and Uruguay's Tabaré Vázquez, and a 'carnivorous' Left found in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and of course Cuba, whose leaders allegedly 'cling to a Marxist view of society and a Cold War mentality; they seek to exploit ethnic tensions, particularly in the Andean region' ('Beware of the Carnivores,' *Washington Post*,



7 August 2006). The political import of such a Manichaean division is plain to see, and it was eagerly picked up by Bush the Younger's administration, whose strategy was precisely to demonize the 'bad' Left while splitting off the 'good' Left with promises of bilateral trade agreements. Yet *soi-disant* radicals reinforce these same distinctions, albeit now to condemn the Southern Cone (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay) and to praise the Andeans, not least for the ways in which they are said to mobilize a project of decolonization, often supposedly on the basis of counter-cultural logics of indigeneity or subalternity.

Barrett, Chavez and Rodríguez-Garavito's collection, whose cover shot features a crowd of ecstatic and

distinctly non-white women *chavistas* with red t-shirts and Venezuelan flags, seems at first sight to fit squarely within one side of the above critical dichotomy. Indeed, it opens with a swing at Castañeda's influential earlier book, *Utopia Unarmed*. And it immediately proceeds, in its first chapter by Félix Sánchez, João Machado Borges Neto and Rosa Maria Marques, to declare that Brazil's Lula is not even really leftist at all: a focus on gaining and maintaining power, and a refusal to antagonize the international markets, 'led the government and the party progressively to distance themselves from their historical roots'. The Brazilian Worker's Party, in short, is merely a tropical version of Blairite New Labour.

The surprise, however, is that this disenchanted tone never really goes away, even when the book moves on to the Venezuelan and Bolivian cases. Indeed, gradually the collection more and more belies its title. It turns out that the two most salient characteristics of the 'new Latin American left' are that it is neither new, nor particularly left, and that we are a long way from seeing 'utopia reborn'. Hence in Venezuela, it is not until 2007 that *chavismo* defines its goal as a 'twenty-first century socialism,' and even then 'Chávez did not explain ... in what respect [it] should differ from the Soviet experience of the twentieth century.' In Uruguay, the *Frente Amplio* ends up merely 'fulfilling the programme of neo-liberal "structural reforms" that the traditional parties had not been able to complete'. In Colombia, the left-wing opposition remains 'without a detailed agenda of alternative policies'. In Argentina, 'the situation approximates a repeat of the classical political confrontation ... during the second half of the twentieth century.' In Mexico, the revival of oppositional *cardenismo* and anti-system mobilization meant that 'the initial phase of the new left had to be nostalgic, whether for twilight or dawn is unknown.' And in Bolivia, we have both a transposition of 'European social democracy' and 'the re-emergence of an old project of the Bolivian left, focused on direct popular participation in government'. There is, it appears, nothing new under the sun, or at least under the Latin American 'New Left' umbrella.

There are several reasons for this bait and switch that converts the radical promise of the book's title into a profound myopia in which its contributors would be hard put discerning novelty even if it hit them in the face. The most important is the inadequacy of their definition of the Left, which is twofold: turning back neoliberalism, and fomenting popular participation in civil society. More or less explicitly, every essay in the collection suggests that the Left should initiate a

massive renationalization and a return to something which, if it is not quite the import substitution industrialization of the 1940s and 1950s, is pretty close to it. Atilio Borón, for instance, expects the Left to reinstitute a command economy in which 'the community, through its political expression, the state, should assume control of the processes of production and distribution of wealth.' What he and his fellow contributors miss is the fact that any new Left arising from neoliberalism has to be post-neoliberal, rather than simply anti-neoliberal. Indeed, the social movements and struggles that have propelled the recent left turns are an (unanticipated) *effect* of neoliberal restructuring, rather than the vehicle for its negation. Likewise, the emphasis on 'participation' is indelibly stuck in a statist perspective in which the problem is perceived to be the crisis of confidence in political institutions, most famously encapsulated in the slogan of the 2001 Argentine protests: '*¡Que se vayan todos!*' or 'All of them must go!' What the book fails to recognize is that the loss of prestige suffered by the organs of political representation is *caused* by these same movements and struggles. If the social pact has been broken, the demand is for a new constitution, not that the Left should entice its notional 'people' back to participate in the fantasy of a pre-existent civil society.

Overall, in fact, the book has very little to say about social movements, preferring to focus on the shifting contours of party organizations and the fine details of government policies. Its prose therefore often devolves into a turgid soup of acronyms and labels: it opens with a full six-page list of acronyms of everything from the AD-M-19 to the WTO. And the chapter on Venezuela spends much more time on the splits in the PCV that give us the MAS and the Causa R, or on the transition from EBR 200 to MBR 200 and then to MVR, than on the *Caracazo*, the massive outburst of popular anger and energy on the streets of Caracas (and other major Venezuelan cities) in February 1989, to which the entire edifice of *chavismo* responds. Laboratory Latin America is reduced to an exercise in memorizing some kind of political periodic table.

The spectre that haunts this book is the spectre of the multitude. I mean that in two ways. First, it is spooked by *Multitude* and *Empire*, the twin-volume work by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri dedicated to overturning the shibboleths of the nationalist Left. Hardt and Negri are seldom mentioned directly, though there are brief dismissals of the somewhat similar approach taken by John Holloway (in *Change the World without Taking Power*). But it is as though to ward off their theoretical challenge, this book's

contributors determined that they had to be resolutely anti-theoretical. As Armando Bartra puts it, following a slap at Holloway, 'this is a theoretical digression and in Mexico the dilemma is above all of a practical nature.' The implication is that it is theory per se that is the digression. Almost the only other theorists mentioned are a couple of cursory gestures towards Laclau and Gramsci. This is a book dedicated to dogged description rather than theoretical analysis. But this description is haunted, too, by the multitude, by which I now mean the expansive, varied, common and persistent subject of the constituent power that is today everywhere visible in Latin America. The most pertinent divide in the region is not that between Left and Right; as this book notes, if anything the Left is stepping in to reconstitute a social pact that the right is no longer able to hold together. Rather, the operative distinction is that between constituent and constituted power. It is not as though this book's authors can be completely blind to this most pressing of tensions within contemporary social formations. However, they translate it into the unhelpful demarcation between a 'social' Left and a 'political' Left, with the latter always called upon to represent and speak for the latter, as though the social were not itself political and the political already social. Indeed, the essays in this collection duly observe that a priority for the social movements in almost every one of the countries covered (Mexico, Venezuela, Bolivia, but also Ecuador and implicitly elsewhere, too) is the demand for a constituent assembly, for the wholesale dismantling of the institutions of the creole republic, and for a radical reshaping of social life. But they interpret such demands in terms of the supposed contingency of corruption or the vapid notion of democratic participation.

Barrett, Chavez and Rodríguez-Garavito's book no doubt seeks more sympathetic and patient readers than I am willing to be. But where will it find them? Not among the social democrats such as Castañeda, whose goal is to demonize one-half of Latin America and to co-opt the other. Nor among the cheerleaders such as Gott, who will have little time for its level-headed disenchantment about the manifest limits of state power. And the rest of us are probably better off reading the work of people such as Benjamin Arditi, the Colectivo Situaciones, or Raúl Zibechi, all of whom take laboratory Latin America as an opportunity to rethink the political goals and strategies of what was once called the Left, rather than as an exercise in timid lamentation.

**Jon Beasley-Murray**

# Divine violence, fatal splitting

Dayan Jayatilleka, *Fidel's Ethics of Violence: The Moral Dimension of the Political Thought of Fidel Castro*, Pluto Press, London, 2007. 248 pp., £60.00 hb, £17.99 pb., 978 0 745 32697 9 hb., 978 0 745 32696 2 pb.

There is a trend on the left to valorize the one that got away: the rebellious other face of revolutionary movements which, unburdened by consolidating the revolutionary state, remains a pure potentiality in our cultural iconography. Think Trotsky's legacy vis-à-vis Lenin, Guevara vis-à-vis Castro. Recently it has even been proposed (by Gao Wengian) that Zhou Enlai should occupy the vacant chair of 'perfect revolutionary' to complement Mao Zedong's imperfect rule. The cop-out is obvious: untarnished by the act of inscribing a new police order upon society, the lovable rogues of Trotsky and Guevara, and supposed restraining influence of Zhou, play to the liberal Left's aversion to accepting the violence apparently required to effect lasting radical change.

Expanding the canvas further, this dialectical structure can be seen to repeat itself: Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; Martin Luther and Thomas Muntzer; Georges Danton and Maximilien Robespierre. The 'moderate' of the pair is seen, dialectically, to realize the radicalism of the 'extremist' from the vantage point of our present-day cultural consciousness. There is, however, a discrepancy between these two sets. Whereas the examples of Trotsky, Guevara and Zhou function both as unrealized potentialities for the Left to cling on to, and as phantom potentialities that conservative historians can use with which to beat the legacy of really existing communist leaders, the examples of Danton and the two Luthers are instead exalted in our liberal social orders to mask the constitutive violence of the status quo, due in equal measure to the extremists Robespierre, Malcolm X and Muntzer, who are thus much less revered, even taboo.

Walter Benjamin famously discussed the brute foundation of all law, distinguishing between mythic violence – the bloody constitutional violence that legitimates our social order – and divine violence – messianic violence that fights from a position of weakness and aims for non-violence (St Paul's band of renegade Christians being the emblematic example). The question of who might be the true bearer of Benjamin's divine violence is currently splitting the theoretical Left in rancorous upset: Lenin or Trotsky? Castro or Guevara? The state consolidator or the renegade? The moderate or the extremist?

On the one side of the divide are what we could call the neo-anarchists, including Ernesto Laclau, Simon Critchley and Antonio Negri. On the other side is a 'return' to all-or-nothing communist revolution through 'Lacanian Hegelianism' (Slavoj Žižek) and elaborate set-theory ontology (Alain Badiou). Although this is seemingly another yawn-inducing academic dogfight, the implications are urgent. In a recent exchange between Žižek and Critchley the fight over both the Christian legacy and the correct use of violence ends up in an entirely different appraisal of the 'authoritarian turn' of Hugo Chávez's rule in Venezuela since 2006. While Žižek fully embraces Chávez's consolidation of the parties of the Left into one, Critchley fears for the democratic pulse of progressive opposition. This debate also inscribes itself onto the legacy of twentieth-century revolutions. So whilst Laclau and Critchley denounce Lenin's consolidation of Bolshevik power, Žižek and Badiou maintain that we need to maintain fidelity to Lenin's legacy. And just as Critchley claims, along with Negri, that violence should be the last resort of oppositional power and that the aim of left politics should not be to capture the state, Žižek argues that only the spectacular event of state capture contains the possibility of undermining global capitalism.

It is in the context of such intellectual dichotomies that we can begin to understand the significance of Dayan Jayatilleka's enthusiastic assessment of Fidel Castro's legacy. For here we have a state consolidator, with an ethics of violence based on a Jesuit upbringing that values honour and morality, and who at all times attempts to minimize violence in the revolutionary struggle. Is this a genuine divine violence? Jayatilleka builds a case that Fidel's ethics of violence provided the critical exception to the collapse of the international revolutionary movement dubbed 'The End': 1974–80. The fact that his guerrilla struggle returned prisoners of war to the Cuban Red Cross, renounced tyrannicide and kidnappings, committed only exceptional executions, and always vied for the moral high ground, contributed to the lasting legitimacy of the regime and the attainment of a moral hegemony on the international scene. Jayatilleka provides an excellent example in the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, where

Castro's choice to accept the thermo-nuclear devices is framed as one of realist solidarity, and includes an excerpt from a remarkable top-secret exchange with Khrushchev, in reaction to an early communiqué in which the Soviet premier believed Castro was advocating a first strike against the United States: 'I did not mean to suggest, Comrade Khrushchev, that the USSR should have been the aggressor, because that would have been more than wrong, it would in my view have been immoral and disgraceful.' Castro later repeatedly lamented the USSR's secrecy in the matter as a loss of the moral high ground.

The implications for the revolutionary movement in general are where Jayatilleka's motives for this exceptionally positive portrayal of Castro's regime derive. As he describes it: 'This study was born of a prolonged, intense personal experience and is intended as an intervention in a particular global conjuncture.' The personal: his persecution at the hands of other Sri Lankan liberation movements such as the People's Liberation Front and the Tamil Tigers. The global conjuncture: the prevalence of 'neo-barbarism in the anti-systemic space'. 'The End', as he describes it, was constituted by a single lateral fissure among all the revolutionary movements of the Left in 'Third World' theatres, including Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Grenada, El Salvador, Chile and Iran. Jayatilleka attributes the fissure to the extreme internecine violence between factions of the revolutionary Left and the loss of moral advantage exemplified by the barbarism of the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot. Opposed to this, Castro's ethical treatment of rival factions and even of the enemy represents a unique 'Cuban synthesis': 'the moral-ethical element, humanism, dialogue with Christianity and other religions as sources of the moral-ethical, socialism and a militant commitment to anti-imperialism and rebellion'.

There are two reactions to this hypothesis. The first is that it is a refreshingly old-fashioned corrective to some of the most overblown speculations on the change in the terrain of revolutionary subjectivity à la Hardt and Negri. In vogueish terms we could say it is a defence of the all-or-nothing event of communist revolution and an unfashionable eulogy to a state consolidator over a tearaway rebel. The second reaction is that there is an unavoidable discrepancy between the credible facticity of Castro's use of restrained force and its conceptual universalization to the entire global revolutionary movement.

Here's the problem: Jayatilleka works entirely within a subject-centred lexicon of authentic decision (Heidegger), commitment (Sartre) and fidelity (Badiou)

that coincides equally – in his emphasis on the Christian basis of these philosophies in Castro's ethics – with the movement from Jacob Taubes to Badiou in establishing St Paul and Christianity as the foundation of communism. Yet the Christian predication of Castro's ethics is precisely what undermines its own real-world universality. Can it be entirely coincidental that, for Jayatilleka, communist movements in Catholic Latin America are perceived to have been the most successful? And what does this say to the universality and hopes of communism embedded in other cultures? The resulting line of thought ends in some awkward questions: were Mao's excesses a result of the Sinification of Marxism through its hybridization with Confucianism? Is Islamism predestined to be bloody and anarchical like the early Karijite movement? If the scientific basis of Marxism was all along just a front for modernized Paulian love, what hope was there ever for a global revolutionary movement at all? Equally, one could argue that 'commitment to anti-imperialism' – which in itself does not specify a transcendent universalism, but more a generality through common association – actually contains within it the seeds of the destruction of Marxist Communism, which laid the basis for the collapse of a unified philosophy in the revolutionary movement of the 'Third World' and resulted directly in the bitter internecine fighting Jayatilleka denounces.

The important question Jayatilleka's analysis poses is: even if the hegemony of subject-centred leftist thinking arose out of the collapse of really existing communist movements, can we retroactively apply this vein of thought to explain the collapse itself? Doubtless excesses of violence have some role to play in the loss of internal coherence and moral legitimacy of these movements, but we have to go further to explain the logic of fatal splitting that took place. It is not enough simply to reduce the singularity of the failure of the revolutionary movement by 1980 to the lack of a positive ethical model. The splitting was implicated in real and increasingly heightened ideological divisions, as stark as day and night.

In the case of Iran, for example, the failure of the Left resulted directly from its inability to articulate a persuasive message in the vocabulary of Marxism-Leninism and the appropriation of many of the categories of the Left in the Islamo-Marxist fusion ideologies of Ali Shari'ati and Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari. Sartre and Fanon in particular influenced Shari'ati, and his ideologies were strongly conditioned by situational philosophical trends in France related directly to the vagaries of the PCF: stuck in the rut of a defence of

Stalinism, disownment of the Algerian struggle, and plagued by dissent and rivalry with the Maoists. At a more fundamental level the revolutionary movement by 1980 had split in a way not at all similar to the situation of Petrograd 1917. There is no way we can compare the split among the soviets in the gap between the February and October Revolutions (Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries and Bolsheviks) to the split between, say, in Iran, the Mujahideen (Islam-Marxist), Fidayeen (Marxist–Leninist), Tudeh party (Stalinist), and the Islamists’ big tent under Ayatollah Khomeini’s leadership (Islam-populist). When Lenin arrived back on the post-revolutionary scene and wrote his *Theses of April 4*, even the Bolsheviks were toeing the line of the Compromisers, stuck in inaction due to the perceived lack of objective conditions in Russia for a proletarian revolution. Move forward sixty-two years and the inverse problem presented itself: every organized party and guerrilla group in Iran wanted revolution, all with different, even ambiguous, ideas about what its determinate ideological content should be. Apart from the Tudeh, pure voluntarism ruled the day. As such, any consideration of establishing a base, thinking creatively about social contradictions, systematically inspecting the compatibilities of ideologies, and so on, is reduced, even in the case of the most orthodox guerrilla unit, the

Fidayeen, to variations on Janzani’s ‘little motor, big motor’ theory of using spectacular acts of violence to awaken the masses from their zombie-like slump.

What happened during the evolution of twentieth-century revolutionary theory was a loss of belief in the ‘final instance’ of economism, opening the door to all sorts of wild speculation and incredible actions. Whilst subject-centred voluntarists are wont to use Lenin’s arrival in 1917 as the archetypal example of the significance of decisional intervention, the fact remains that it would have been meaningless if the masses were not already prone to hear the message. The duff ear of later revolutionary movements resulted from that act of decision being subtracted from any more objective view of society. If violence could be used to awaken the masses, then there is no line between that and using violence to silence competitors in the revolutionary contest. This dynamic – as part of the wider effective history of the global revolutionary movement – is far more important than any hypostatized subject-centred factors. Rather, to ascribe it to dubious ethics and morals, in light of Jayatilaka’s emphasis on Castro’s Jesuit upbringing, is tantamount to saying the problem with the global revolutionary movement was that it just wasn’t Christian enough. Such an explanation will not do.

**Nathan Coombs**

## Limits of language

Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language: From the New Economy to the War Economy*, trans. Gregory Conti, Semiotext(e), New York, 2008. 165 pp., £9.95 pb., 978 1 58435 067 5.

This is Christian Marazzi’s third book, and the first to be translated into English. Unfortunately, it is not his best: a sequence of loosely connected chapters, composed of sequences of loosely connected sections, so that the subject indicated by the title is treated in a disjointed and sporadic manner, and presupposes more than a little knowledge of Marazzi’s first book, *The Place for Socks*, an important work, fortunately soon to be translated with the same publisher. Although it purports to be an analysis of the linguistic turn taken by contemporary capitalist society, the current book is, in fact, mostly an account of the New Economy, the result of the passage from the Fordist–Taylorist stage of capitalism to its post-Fordist stage, with special reference to the 2001 financial crisis (the bursting of the dotcom bubble) and, in spite of the subtitle, with scant reference to the passage to a ‘war economy’.

Christian Marazzi is an Italian Swiss economist. He was associated with the Italian Autonomia movement in the 1980s, and was a close associate of Antonio Negri, and writes within the tradition of Italian workerism (*operaismo*), better known to us through the work of Paolo Virno and Negri and Hardt’s *Empire* and *Multitude*. His main contribution to that tradition is an analysis of the linguistic turn of the economy, which makes him an important point of reference for analysts of cognitive capitalism and the cognitariat.

Marazzi’s main thesis can be summarized thus: (i) in the last thirty years, the organization of labour has moved from Fordism to post-Fordism; (ii) this passage is characterized by a linguistic turn; (iii) the linguistic turn consists in the fact that in post-Fordism communication is an integral part of production; (iv) in turn, this means that the worker is no longer a mere cog

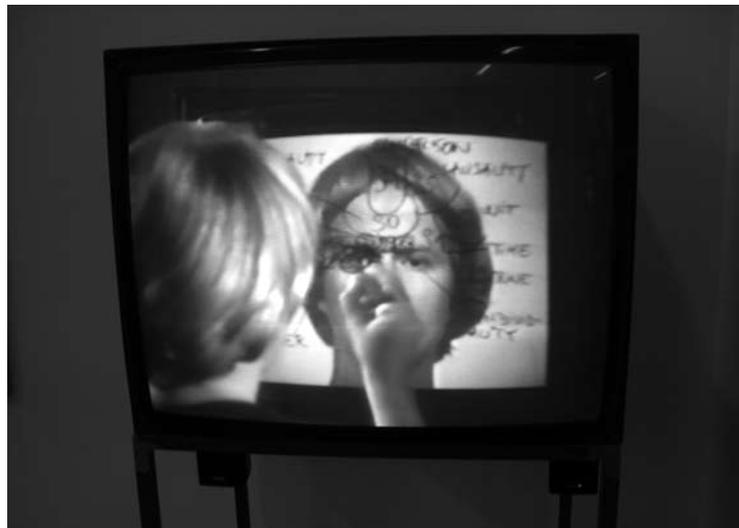
or tool in a highly organized and centralized labour process: he or she must communicate (with machines, with management, with fellow workers) in order to produce. I leave it to the reader to decide whether this is an accurate description of the contemporary labour process in developed countries (a certain optimism can be sensed here), and will rather take note of the consequences this main thesis entails.

The first consequence is that the language required for production has to be swift and efficient. Its model is the logico-formal language of abstract codes, the language of instructions for use, or instructions *tout court*. That this language is an artificial one is obvious: the tendency to unification and abstraction is not a natural characteristic of what is known as natural languages. But the linguistic turn has another consequence, which contradicts the first. The new labour process based on communication cannot do with silent workers: instructions must be discussed and sometimes adapted or negotiated. So the *prise de parole* of the individual producer is encouraged, even necessitated, by the work process. Yet such *prise de parole* is not conducted in the abstract language of algorithms, but in the natural language of communal being, which is also the language of politics.

We have a problem here, because the abstract language of production is not *that* abstract, it is not a purely artificial, logical language: the instructions are couched in a natural language, which is also the worker's maternal language or vernacular, the language of his or her daily intercourse and affects. In other words, there is no more an abstract language of production than there is, according to Lacan's famous dictum, metalanguage. So the contradiction holds not so much between two different languages or dialects, as within language itself. This is, according to Marazzi, where Habermas's irenic view of language and communication fails, as language is not only the medium of rational discussion and of the expression of affects, it is also that which betrays the speaker's individual experience of phenomena, the speaker's *vécu*, at the very moment when it attempts to express it. And it achieves this betrayal because it is always also a convention violently imposed on the speaker, violently imposing meanings that are exterior or anterior to her. In his first book, Marazzi formulates this contradiction, which is at the heart of his concept of language, by borrowing a formula from the Italian philosopher Umberto Galimberti: 'Language does not reproduce, but on the

contrary distorts truth; yet truth can only be formulated through the distortion of language.' The contradiction of language is that it betrays the lived experience of the speaker but allows her individual expression.

But what interests Marazzi is not mainly the workings of language, fascinating as the subject is. It is the form this contradiction takes in the conjuncture of post-Fordism: the form of the contradiction between two languages, the abstract language of production which cannot help also being the concrete language of politics. Here we grasp a theme which is also present in Negri and Hardt's *Empire*: the description of a crisis in politics, in the form of a crisis of political representation. Because the political use of language is already present in production, an autonomous form of political language and political representation becomes unnecessary; because of the coincidence between language and production, every worker, as autonomous speaker, seeks to represent herself. In this context, where it



appears that personal language is also political language, the feminist struggle is, for Marazzi, of peculiar importance. For the traditional role of women in the domestic sphere, darning the socks as the title of his first book suggests, made them specialists, so to speak, of the relational-communicational language which has now its full place in production: the domestic becomes directly political. But it is not only production which is affected by the linguistic turn of post-Fordism, it is also classes. For Marazzi a class is always also a rhetorical class: it is constructed in language; it is a set of discursive positions, a system of places created by discourse. Thus, the class struggle is waged not only using language as one of its instruments, it is waged *within* language. A class is a linguistic imagined community – politics is nothing but a linguistic *Mitsein*, and the class struggle consists in the construction

of spaces of interpretation, where projects of social life can be proposed and realized. This results in a new definition of freedom as linguistic freedom, the freedom that a plurality of competing languages gives their speakers.

Marazzi's account of the linguistic turn of post-Fordism enables us, I think, to understand the extent of the displacements which the intellectual tradition that culminates with *Empire* imposes on Marxism, but also their systematic character. It is obvious that the first casualty of the analysis is the classic concept of proletariat, as the difference between work and non-work is blurred (the language of affect is equally present in both fields). Hence what is an obviously idealist conception of classes and of the class struggle. But beyond those obvious objections, I would like to insist on two positive points in Marazzi's account: a due attention at last paid to the question of language (a political question that Marxists have largely tended to ignore), and a critique of Habermas which takes him in his own terms – that is, which shows the flaws in his own account of communication.

I have outlined Marazzi's account of the relationship between language and capital, which is explicit in his first book, and largely presupposed in this book. What is interesting, however, is the developments and inflections that the account undergoes in *Capital and Language*. The first concerns the concept of general intellect. The concept is central to the tradition of *operaismo*; it stems from a reading, notably by Negri, but also by Virno, of a passage from Marx's *Grundrisse* entitled the 'Fragment on machines'; and it is usually taken to be an account of the scientific and technological revolution of late capitalism, whereby science directly become a productive force. Marazzi's development of the concept in this book suggests that general intellect in the New Economy is no longer a matter of science and technology, but of language: it is made up of living knowledge, of the capacity for linguistic and communicational cooperation that resides in the body of the multitude. The second inflection is an insistence on the rooting of language in the human body: our language faculty is one and the same with our living bodies, which means both an extension of the field of exploitation of workers by capital (exploitation concerns the bodies of workers and their linguistic capacities even outside official work time) and a possibility for resistance (the multiplicity of bodies of the globalized workforce is what constitutes the multitude). The third inflection is an analysis of financial capital, now the dominant form of capital, as linguistic. Marazzi draws here upon Virno's

concept of the 'absolute performative' – propositions like 'I say this' – which, unlike 'I take this woman', are purely self-referential and do not involve the world outside language. The herd behaviour of investors, on which the fluctuations of finance capital depends, are governed by such pronouncements by financial gurus (I suppose Madoff would be an excellent example), with the danger, when communication breaks and the absolute performative founders, of a crisis of panic. The book contains a fascinating section on the linguistic nature of panic. So the New Economy is linguistic through and through: it has the nature of a linguistic convention. The last inflection concerns the emancipatory vistas that this latest stage of capitalism opens: they are based on the fact that the linguistic turn opens up a space for the multitude, as multitude of speakers and communicators. Marazzi analyses dotcom enterprises as prefigurative of the general intellect turned collective enterprise, in which the multitude will come into its own.

I have pointed out the importance of Marazzi's conception of language as general intellect. But there will be objections. The most obvious is that of linguistic idealism: one often gets the impression, while reading Marazzi, that everything is text: the class struggle is linguistic, the New Economy is linguistic, its crises are determined by a breakdown of language. As a result – this is the irony of the publication of this book, which first appeared in its Italian version in 2002, in the year of the great financial crisis – the help it provides in understanding the current events is limited. It may shed light on the Madoff scandal, but hardly on the crisis of the subprime sector in the US economy, which is certainly not a mere matter of communication or lack of it. One senses, with Marazzi as with the whole tradition of analysis of cognitive capitalism, a fascination for a novel aspect of the economy which is hypostatized into *the* central aspect of late capitalism. Another consequence is that when Marazzi, in his last chapter, broaches the subject of a post 9/11 'War Economy', his remarks are not particularly convincing: in a phase of recession of the New Economy, war is an opportunity for absorbing part of the surplus of informational goods produced in a more euphoric phase. This is a mere translation into informational terms of a classic analysis of the function of war in a capitalist economy, and consequently hardly news. But when the whole of Marazzi's corpus is at last available in English, its undoubted importance will be recognized by anyone interested in the philosophy of language that can be (loosely) derived from the Marxist tradition.

**Jean-Jacques Lecercle**

# Unlike McDowell

Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2008. xx + 327 pp., £54.00 hb., £13.99 pb., 978 0 82234 178 9 hb., 978 0 82234 195 6 pb.

In this book, his last before an untimely death, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze offers a sustained defence of philosophical, yet ordinary, reason in history. He rejects calls for condemning reason as a ruse of Western domination, and instead argues vigorously for the importance of granting to reason (and morality) autonomy from politics. In this respect the book is an extension of some of the arguments Eze offered in his earlier monograph: *Achieving Our Humanity* (2004). There, Eze defended reason, whilst claiming that racist prejudice is internal to (and an essential plank of) some philosophical aspects of the Enlightenment such as Hume's naturalism and Kant's idealism. In that earlier work he also looked at the importance of the philosophy of negritude as the origin of contemporary Africana philosophy, whilst distancing himself from Senghor's adoption of a specifically African ideal of reason. This is a theme to which Eze returns in the second half of *On Reason*.

The first half is dedicated to descriptions of the various forms that reason can take and to a defence of the view that reason, when properly understood, can do justice to difference or diversity. Eze motivates this last claim by way of reference to Kant's antinomies of reason and to Hume's sceptical arguments about reason itself. He chooses to interpret Kant's conclusion that reason is compelled to go beyond the limits of its rightful employment as showing something about the historical fate of reason. It is destined to be subject to gaps in thought. Each gap is experienced as a 'breach in tongue', as a need which cannot be voiced. Ethics and morality flow from experiencing these gaps. Eze's reasoning here is not always transparent; I take his view to give prominence to the moral and ethical demands that others make on us. Often, in Eze's view, there is no available language in which to express these demands because the necessary concepts have not yet been created. In such cases, demands appear as gaps within reason, when the latter is understood as the domain of that which is expressible in language. Nevertheless, such gaps are bridgeable by reason. The bridge is built on moral perception. Moral needs and demands can be experienced, they can be the objects of

perception. Thus, since the contents of experience are conceptually articulated, new concepts become available to reason to express some previously inexpressible facts. Thus rationality becomes 'a bridge of a breach'. Of course as soon as a breach is bridged another opens. Nevertheless, in this manner reason can be continually engaged in the practice of doing justice to diversity, and of creating new forms of agency and freedom.

This is Eze's main thesis, which is developed in the introduction and further expanded in the five chapters that follow. In chapter 1 Eze describes various forms reason can take. He identifies six of them: calculative, formal, empiricist, hermeneutical, phenomenological and ordinary. I find several aspects of this chapter to be rather unconvincing. I see no argument for the claim that rationality takes exactly these six forms rather than more or fewer, or for the distinctiveness of those Eze mentions. For instance, I am unclear why phenomenology is listed as a separate form of rationality, or how empiricist rationality is different from calculative. Similarly, Eze does not spell out whether a stretch of reasoning must be an instance of only one of these forms or could exemplify more than one of them. Further, the treatment of formal reason in this chapter is rather problematic, including several misapprehensions about formalism and the nature of logic.

Chapter 2, however, returns back to the main thread of argumentation by way of a defence of the notion of ordinary or vernacular rationality discussed in the introduction. In this chapter Eze compares his position with that held by McDowell and notes that they share the view that there is a distinctive form of moral perception which anchors moral judgements. It is in this chapter above all that Eze demonstrates an excellent ability to bring together work in the Anglo-American, African and Modern European traditions in philosophy to support his non-relativistic account of rationality. Rationality, as he understands it, is historical, in the sense that it is always called upon to answer new moral demands, ordinary and practical, because it is concerned with moral action, non-relativistic but moderately sceptical, because it acknowledges the existence of universal values whilst denying the existence of metaphysical foundations for any moral claims.

If the introduction and chapter 2 provide us with an abstract account of Eze's views, it is in the last three chapters of the book that Eze develops the themes indicated in the subtitle of the book. There, he investigates how reason plays out in the context of twenty-first-century Africa, and of race relations worldwide. Chapter 3 steers the difficult course between the Scylla of believing that there is nothing left to African

identity and philosophy beyond the deconstructions of the very ideas of race and Africa, and the Charybdis of ideological attachments to myths of tradition and of *authenticité*. Eze's path is not straightforward, and I am not certain I have grasped all his moves. But there is a suggestion here that I think illuminating. It is the view, which Eze rightly attributes to Aristotle, that moral perception requires a moral sensibility which is shaped by the accumulated wisdom of the culture or cultures to which one belongs. Or, to put the same point in a different way, character – which is essential to moral rationality – is necessarily shaped by culture. Hence, Eze (unlike McDowell) concludes that there is a place for cultural distinctiveness in the space of moral reasons. Further, against cosmopolitanism, there is rational space for the moral significance of attachments to one's own culture.

These themes are continued in the last two chapters, the first of which foregrounds the question of language and the second those of politics and forgiveness. The first theme is discussed through the lenses of the choice confronted by all African writers between traditional languages and the language of the colonizers. In this chapter, as in rest of the book, Eze resists easy conclusions. Instead through a careful analysis of writers as diverse as Achebe, Soyinka, Conrad and Kafka, he finds value in the choice of writing about the loss of one's culture in the language that caused the very wreck that one laments. Such writing recovers a sense of history, as a history of loss itself. At the same time he notes the importance, for reasons that should be apparent from his views on moral perception, of developing new uses of Yoruba, Igbo and other African languages as well as of traditions of patois and of 'broken' or 'rotten' forms of English.

The same even-handedness characterizes the final chapter in which the role of politics and its relation to the law, to forgiveness and philosophy, is examined through a close scrutiny of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. The chapter is both a defence of the autonomy of reason and morality from considerations of *Realpolitik* and a careful analysis of some of the genuine concerns raised by its critics about the work of the Commission. Two worries come to the fore in that analysis, both relating to the idea that the Commission has instituted a view of morality based on the logic of requiring something extraordinary. The first concerns the concept of *ubuntu* (humanity), which has led to the requirement of forgiveness and transformation of the victims of injustice. The second concerns the institution by the Commission of practices of so-called temporary justice. With regard

to the first Eze raises serious doubts about a morality based on *ubuntu* because of its naive assumptions about the goodness of human nature. He agrees that presenting this notion as an ideal might in a narrow context work in practice, but he insists that the notion has no claim to universality. Further, he is particularly critical of a morality that requires forgiveness and transformation, thereby imposing extraordinary demands on the victims of crime, whilst asking very little of the perpetrators. Eze raises similar worries with regard to the second of his concerns. In his view, there is no justice other than ordinary justice, no law other than ordinary law. When supporters of the Commission invoke temporary justice, they are not really invoking a new form of justice. Rather, they are invoking the temporary suspension of justice, the temporary suspension of the law. Thus, they arrogate on behalf of *realpolitik* the right to trump morality. Eze does not ignore the practical success of the Commission, but rightly queries why, when Africa is concerned, it should be acceptable to suspend justice in the name of long-term political order and to demand that the victim forgives whilst the perpetrator goes unpunished.

There is much to admire in this book, despite the density of the argument, and the patchwork feel of some of its parts. It is a fitting last word by the African philosopher whose work represents to date the most sustained engagement with Enlightenment theories of rationality and their consequences for the world we live in.

**Alessandra Tanesini**

## Next to now

Colin Milburn, *Nanovision: Engineering the Future*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2008. 280 pp., £16.99 pb., 978 0 82234 265 6.

'If our world survives, the next great challenge to watch out for will come – you heard it here first – when the curves of research and development in artificial intelligence, molecular biology and robotics all converge. Oboy. It will be amazing and unpredictable, and even the biggest of brass, let us devoutly hope, are going to be caught flat-footed.' Penned by Thomas Pynchon in 1984, this passage is a rare instance in which its uncommonly canny author is himself caught a little flat-footed. For Pynchon misses the emergence of a key vector among the curves of research and development tending towards the point of 'convergence' that he

prophecies: nanotechnology. Just three years prior to Pynchon's essay, the Scanning Tunneling Microscope was developed at IBM labs in Zurich by Gerd Binnig and Heinrich Rohrer, enabling the precise resolution of single atoms. Before the decade was out, the same instrument would be used by researchers at IBM Almaden Labs to *manipulate* single atoms into the configuration of their corporate employer's logo in a brazen demonstration – one that Pynchon must have grimly relished – of technocapitalism's 'absolute' control over the structure of matter.

That demonstration played a central role in the certification of nanotech as a 'real' science, such that it has come to lead the way, at least nominally, among the curves of research and development tending towards the singularity now typically referred to as the NBIC Convergence: the point at which nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science will supposedly fulfil their collective eschatological vocation. But while biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science have all been the subject of extensive reflection and debate in science studies, media studies and critical theory (one might name influential texts by Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Friedrich Kittler, Eugene Thacker, Richard Doyle and Catherine Malabou), Colin Milburn's *Nanovision: Engineering the Future* is the first full-length study to address nanotechnology from the perspective of these fields.

What Milburn calls 'nanovision' is 'a way of seeing, a perspectival orientation' emerging from the potential of nanotechnology to alter radically the human life-world, and from the recursive effects of that unimaginable future upon the technocultural imaginary of the present. Nanovision operates by positing the full-blown development of nanotechnology as 'the event horizon of an unknown future ... the proximal limit of a future that cannot be known', precisely in order to transgress that limit by speculating upon the technoscientific constitution of that future. It performs this paradoxical operation, Milburn argues, by projecting nanotech's scopic access to hitherto invisible *spaces* onto a hitherto unthinkable *time*. Nanovision makes an otherwise unimaginable future available to the imagination, now, by mapping the inhuman otherness of a molecular 'inside' onto the posthuman otherness of a temporal 'outside', beyond the blinding singularity of technological convergence.

The focus of Milburn's book is thus on the operation of nanotechnology as a fundamentally *speculative* science – or, as he puts it, as a form of 'science (fiction)'. *Nanovision* interrogates 'the complex inter-

face where science and science fiction bleed into each other', and Milburn's argument is that they do so to such a degree that 'nanotechnology should be viewed as simultaneously a science and a science fiction'. In order to demonstrate this point, the book attends in some detail to the controversy surrounding the work of K. Eric Drexler, whose 1986 volume *Engines of Creation: The Coming Era of Nanotechnology* established the popular conception of nanotech as the production of self-replicating molecular machines, or 'nanobots'. Drexler's vision of the field propelled a subsequent generation of sci-fi plots, and also became the crux of a split in the nanotech community between those affirming the speculative prognostications of Drexler's Foresight Institute and those seeking to dissociate its 'cult of futurists' from the 'hard science' of actually existing nanotechnology. The rhetoric of these efforts to scapegoat Drexler in order to establish the scientific legitimacy of nanotech inevitably backfires, Milburn argues, collapsing the very distinction between science and science fiction that it attempts to police.

Exhibit A in this regard is the foundational narrative that Milburn calls 'the Feynman origin myth': the gesture – endlessly repeated in writings on nanotech – of referring the origin of the field back to Richard Feynman's 1959 lecture 'There's Plenty of Room at the Bottom', in which the Nobel laureate suggests the inevitability of molecular engineering and asserts its consistency with physical law. The irony of this effort to buttress nanotech's scientific legitimacy through an appeal to high scientific authority, however, is that Feynman's talk was itself an assemblage of genre science fiction tropes of the 1940s and 1950s, with its most memorable passage apparently culled from Robert A. Heinlein's 1942 novella *Waldo*. The Feynman origin myth thus 'contains in itself the deconstruction of the nanotech–science fiction dichotomy'.

Milburn thus installs the recursive determination of nanotech's present priorities by speculations upon its future within an inescapably reflexive relation between its historically constitutive debt to science fiction and the rhetoric of legitimacy through which it attempts to secure funding for the future upon which it speculates. He further argues that these temporal and discursive feedback loops are instantiated in the instruments and operations of nanotechnological research and development through what he calls a *tropic protocol*: 'the semiotic algorithm that sets out in advance an available vocabulary and an available phenomenology for the dynamic interaction of a human user with an instrument'. Addressing the Scanning Tunneling Microscope, Milburn analyses the manner in which demonstrations



of its capacity to image and position atomic structures have been conditioned by neocolonial, heterosexist and carceral discourses circulating through both speculative and empirical accounts of encounters with the molecular 'other'.

This last theme carries over through the final two chapters of *Nanovision*, which address speculative scenarios of disintegration. Chapter 3 analyses the psychology of 'molecular abjection' characteristic of apocalyptic 'grey goo' scenarios, in which autonomous molecular machines effectively liquidate the environment into flows of disorganized matter. Chapter 4 considers the future of 'life itself' in the era of 'the postbiological body'. In both cases, Milburn is concerned with the prospective eruption of *surplus* matter as organized bodies and materials are broken down into flows and multiplicities, and with conflicting desires for material mastery and embodied transformation that attend such speculative scenarios. These concluding chapters display Milburn's agility as an analyst of contemporary technoculture, treating a wide range of texts – including films, advertisements, science-fiction novels, video games and scientific articles – with the tools of gender/sexuality studies, psychoanalysis, biopolitical theory, deconstruction, science studies and media theory.

*Nanovision* is exhaustively researched and carefully argued. The central thread of Milburn's argument, however, is likely to divide his readership. Without in any way wishing to deny the complex and manifold constitution of scientific knowledge and technological

invention, one might nonetheless want to retain a firmer distinction than *Nanovision* allows between the contingent, contextually established facts and actually operative devices of technoscientific practice, on the one hand, and the speculative projections of science fiction, on the other. Even if, as Milburn convincingly demonstrates, it is indeed the case that science fiction suffuses the collective imaginary of the nanotechnology industry, and even if its influence can in no way be dissociated or exiled from the supposed purity of 'hard science' (let alone the rhetoric of scientific writing), in my view it remains crucial that we emphasize the important difference between what is actually being done with carbon nanotubes today and the space elevators some might imagine building with them tomorrow – as well as the concrete barriers confronting researchers attempting to get from A to B, or to another point altogether.

Milburn's book begins and ends with an evocative about-face: 'It's coming. Or rather... it's here.' One might want to insist more strongly on the stubborn fact that some of 'it' is here and some of it isn't here just yet, and that an insistence on this point really does matter to our understanding of how technological change – and its impact upon our environment and subjectivity – takes place. Carbon nanotubes, for example, are a material with a tensile strength up to a hundred times that of steel at about one-sixth the weight. They were first fabricated, accidentally, in 1991, and they are currently the strongest material we know of. These geometrically glamorous, highly conductive, perfectly

symmetrical structures, we are told, promise a new era of exceedingly lightweight materials with any number of novel properties. They also tend to clump up in clusters and bundles when added to polymers in which they are supposed to form evenly dispersed matrices, and are then often damaged by the strenuous mixing necessary to distribute them properly. Now that the speculative nanotech boom of the new millennium appears to have waned somewhat, it seems to me that the most interesting and most vexed exchanges between *vision* and *technology* happen in the spaces of such entanglements: in the vat, as it were – that is, in the mundane negotiation of concrete structural problems, more crucially than in the rhetorical and cultural negotiations that *Nanovision* investigates with admirable care.

**Nathan Brown**

## (Side-)splitting

Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2008. 240 pp., £12.95 pb., 978 0 262 74031 9.

Psychoanalysis and comedy have a rich joint history. Leaving aside comedy that explicitly details the awkwardness of life on the couch (as in Woody Allen et al.), psychoanalytic theory, from Freud's 'Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious' onwards, has recognized the potentially symptomatic truths inherent in the comic form. Lacanian theory, in particular, plays on the subtle slippage between the comic and the tragic in the relationship between our surface modes of identification, be they Symbolic or Imaginary, and the Real of our modes of enjoyment. This is to say nothing of the stuttering, comic dance between philosophy and psychoanalysis themselves: an awkward promenade that often – paradoxically – reveals its benefits at those moments when it trips, those moments when the two disciplines seem condemned to mutual incomprehension. Alenka Zupančič, as a member of the Slovenian Lacanian school of thought most prolifically represented by Slavoj Žižek, pitches her work at these productive, generatively awkward interstices between psychoanalysis and philosophy, and it is in this mode that her short but rich philosophical study of comedy acquires its particular resonance.

Like Žižek, Zupančič uses the tools of dialectical thinking, extracted from a Lacanized Hegel, to probe the contradictions and aporias of contemporary culture

and thought. A previous book, *Ethics of the Real* (2000), took the now familiar Lacanian radicalization of Kantian ethics – sustained, in part, by Lacan's provocative insistence that the very 'emptiness' of the categorical imperative underwrites an injunction to *jouissance* – as a base to explore other less obvious connections between Kantian thought and Lacan. Unlike much of Žižek's, Zupančič's work is characterized by a certain sobriety and systemacity, and it avoids much of the more florid and unappealing jargonizing chronic to some Lacanian approaches to philosophy. If Zupančič's *Ethics of the Real* often appealed to the tragic form to illuminate her psychoanalytic argument, most notably in discussions of Antigone and Claudel's *The Hostage*, *The Odd One In* posits comedy as the form that most pressingly illuminates current philosophical and psychoanalytic problems.

The book is appealingly structured, with an early and instructive section on Hegel's comments in the *Phenomenology* on comedy in relation to the tragic and the epic giving way to reflections more heavily indebted to psychoanalytic thought. Zupančič offers an exploration of the comic split between the ego and its various others (both internal and external), a discussion of Bergson's comments on comedy, and an analysis of comedy as it pertains to temporality and repetition, arguing that comedy, at its best, intervenes in, and creates its own, time. In a broad sense, Zupančič's philosophical aim is to counter the notion of comedy as the art form that uses the 'individual, the concrete, the contingent' to undercut the 'universal, necessary, the substantial'. Instead, Zupančič, following Hegel, argues that comedy should be best understood as the point at which the universal becomes subject, or, in slogan form, that 'comedy is the universal at work'. If, in the epic, the 'subject narrates the universal', while in tragedy the subject 'enacts or stages the universal', then comedy should be understood as the point at which the subject becomes universal, and the universal becomes subject. (Or, perhaps, as the point at which abstract universality becomes concrete universality.)

Throughout, Zupančič enlivens her text with numerous examples drawn from literature, film and philosophical traditions not necessarily always associated with the Slovenian Lacanians, although her analysis is never overwhelmed by an overabundance of eclectic references. Crucially, Zupančič's aim is not simply to expound philosophical concepts through the medium of comedic examples. On the contrary, and in a truly dialectical sense, Zupančič aims to reveal something formally inherent in the best comedy, in and through philosophy, and vice versa. There is often a temptation

to resort to what Hegel called ‘picture-thinking’ in the philosophical elucidation of a particular cultural topic; that is, to conceptualize something while keeping the example and its theoretical exposition static. Zupančič, instead, allows her object of study and the means of her theoretical exposition subtly to inform one another.

A wider concern for what she perceives as the downgrading of truly ‘subversive’ comedy animates Zupančič’s concerns here. In the introduction, she identifies the ‘imperative of happiness, positive thinking, and cheerfulness’ as a prevailing ideological mystification of our times, stating emphatically that the notion of comedy she hopes to advance is opposed to any such escapism. Interesting comedy, for Zupančič, ‘thrives on all kinds of short circuits that establish an immediate connection between heterogeneous orders’; that is, that provide a jolt of uncomfortable interruption within the surface static of cultural data, the degraded realm of what Badiou derisively calls ‘opinion’. Readers familiar with the dialectical Lacanianism of Žižek and his cohort will recognize this trope of the ‘short-circuit’, and Zupančič’s text is perhaps at its weakest when it most closely cleaves to the abiding concerns of the Slovenian Lacanians. An appendix on the Lacanian reinvention of the psychoanalytic notion of the phallus feels, for instance, like old ground. Nonetheless, the political frame that animates Zupančič’s concerns here is welcome, if only because it wards against the old cultural studies temptation to reduce applied philosophy to the form of the soundbite.

Despite the putative political frame, however, Zupančič’s book works best in isolated moments of inspired analysis. In a discussion of the various ‘Others’ that comedy sets up to be humiliated, Zupančič subtly undercuts the common-sense notion that the best comedy asks us to laugh at those powerful ‘Others’ that rely on a sense of inscrutable authority for their control over us. Instead, it is not the ‘inconsistency/failure of the Other’ that motivates the best comedy but, rather, what materially emerges upon the suspension of the Other’s authority (in the form of slips of the tongue, physical pratfalls, and so on). To put it another way, the best comedy doesn’t still rely on the authority of the Other that it suspends, but rather produces a material surplus that eludes the symbolic logic of authority all together and, in so doing, elevates error to a kind of artistic and symbolic dignity.

Zupančič is particularly good at analysing this ‘material’ dimension of comedy. Henri Bergson defined comedy as ‘something mechanical encrusted upon the living’. If comedy cannot be said to exhibit fully

the vitality of Bergsonian ‘life’, it nonetheless hints at it in those moments when the full flow of life is snagged on something ‘mechanical’, by the production of the aforementioned material surplus, or, as Zupančič characterizes it, ‘rigidity and automatism getting the upper hand over elasticity or impulse’. The benefits of a Bergsonian reading, for Zupančič, lie in its formalism. Instead of empirically restricting the comedic short-circuiting of two levels, Bergson allows for a level of analytical flexibility by remaining at the level of form. In different comedic situations, the level of that which is ‘inert’ or ‘encrusted’ might be very different depending on context, but it is still in the intervention of limit in the plenitude of life that comedy becomes a universal cultural form. The insights that Zupančič’s turn to Bergson offer raise the question as to whether the largely uninterrogated theoretical assumptions that underpin this book – namely, that a combination of dialectical philosophy and Lacan remains the best tool for examining diverse philosophical and cultural questions – might have been productively disrupted by allowing those other references, in particular Bergson, to take on more of a structuring role in the overall argument of the book.

For all its insights, then, Zupančič’s book is haunted by a more general question relating to its theoretical basis in Hegel and Lacan. There’s no doubt that the Slovenian Lacanian tendency in contemporary theory has been a fruitful one, particularly in providing a revised, non-tautological reading of Hegelian dialectics. Their almost heroic recuperation of Lacan for philosophy and cultural theory is an achievement few would have considered possible given the French Freud’s notorious difficulty and eccentric approach to system and argumentation. Despite all this, however, it is arguable whether Zupančič, Žižek, Mladen Dolar, and others, have actually provided a philosophically thorough justification for their unique synthesis of Hegel and Lacan. Occasionally in reading *The Odd One In*, I wanted the perspective to shift to a more general – perhaps even more ‘traditionally academic’ – outlining of how Lacan, a thinker who is surely as anti-dialectical in his assertion of constitutively unresolvable paradoxes and aporias as he is dialectical, can be so easily manoeuvred into Hegel’s shadow. Such questions, perhaps, are to be left for larger, less culturally specific works than this. Nonetheless, I wonder how much longer the theoretical tools in evidence here can function without a more measured justification for their philosophical legitimacy.

**Tom Eyers**