

# Turn left and follow the path of least resistance

Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Arts of the Political: New Openings for the Left*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2013. 240 pp., £62.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 978 0 82235 387 4 hb., 978 0 82235 401 7 pb.

This book makes a much-needed attempt to revamp the Left's struggle to 'voice a politics of social equality and justice'. Problematizing the Left's ongoing failure to capture and cohere people's aspirations, to organize politically and to secure achievements, they focus on an essential and, as they rightly claim, neglected aspect of Left politics: the art of doing politics. Their diagnosis is that the Left has lost political knowledge and imagination concerning how to force open space for alternative programmes, to project alternative futures and to substantiate latent possibilities for a different world. What has thus been lost, the authors contend, is the ability of 'world making'.

After a brief investigation of the organizational skills and political successes of various socialist movements in Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the book focuses on discussing and reinterpreting three core political arts of such 'world-making': invention, affect and organization. An affective politics clearly assumes the central role in *Arts of the Political*, towards which the understanding and portrayal of the arts of political invention and organization are geared. The problem is that this affective politics remains shapeless in terms of both its content and its form – a result of the authors' embrace of recent posthumanist and new materialist thought, which seeks to decentre radically the political subject, extends the political realm into 'atmospheres' or 'ecology of life', and understands political communication as 'resonance'.

Let me interject a political note that touches upon the personal. I had lately been (re)thinking what it means to do academic work and about constructive engagements with the Left. I have my doubts whether, as academics, we are necessarily and automatically doing politics, but I do believe that writing and theorizing, as Amin and Thrift would probably agree, can and should be part of world-making – and *could* be a political contribution in this sense. No doubt, in this sense, one can unhesitatingly concur: the Left has lost almost all of its political ground and much of its political purchase; the urgent task is that of making a new world, of creating new subjects and of building new organizations; and the challenge is that of imaginary

and mobilization, or 'world-making capacities' as Amin and Thrift call it. Considering that no one can do it alone, and that the Left often appears to be better at attacking itself than forging a common goal, and wondering what, in this context, has become of the little adjective 'critical' with which we usually adorn ourselves, my ambition in this review was critically to acknowledge and add to the possibly emerging foundation of a political edifice. In short, I sought to bear in mind that our gaze should be primarily directed at the world, and that our (conflicting) engagements should be the product of a concern with the world that we have made rather than the peculiar joy of self-referential and eclectic trench warfare.

At the outset, Amin and Thrift seemed to be driven by a similar ambition. However, if the book begins in a promising manner, it quickly slackens in delivery. What initially appears to be its greatest strength turns into its greatest weakness. In the end, there is not much on offer to which one *could* contribute or add in order to help construct collectively a new political edifice of the Left. It is precisely this problem that makes the book paradigmatic, aligning it with, rather than unsettling, contemporary theoretical and political fashion. Nevertheless, by the same token, its (re) conceptualization of a political art for the Left is also unique – a uniqueness that consists in the culmination of a process of transvaluation: here, an autopoietic ontology of emergence comes to be celebrated as the new world-making of the Left. Consequently the book no longer feels compelled to eschew, or even reject, a direct comparison with 'old' progressive politics but, to the contrary, can establish an analogy between old programmatic politics of artifice and a new ontological politics of 'life'.

Being imbricated in and advancing an inversion of autopoiesis and programme, the book is underpinned by two central and closely linked tenets. First, in its problem-framing it reinterprets shortcomings of Left politics as ultimately undesirable goals. Second, and consequently, it redefines as a political art of 'worlding' and achievement that which needs no making. The initial success of leftist movements and politics, Amin and Thrift acknowledge, consisted in 'bridg[ing] the

pragmatic and programmatic' and 'balanc[ing] between principle and pragmatic reform'. In other words, there was a clear link between overarching political vision and the ability to design political tactics in relation to this vision. At the same time, the authors contest the ways in which the organized Left, in general, 'has spent too much time telling people what the future ought to be', thereby neglecting the question of how it can be brought about. From today's vantage point, this appears to be a questionable diagnosis. If anything, contemporary successors to 'leftist beginnings' have thus far distinguished themselves precisely by their incapacity to give an account of the future (instead turning to the ethics of giving an account of oneself). Since at least the onset of poststructuralist sensitivities to ontological difference, we are firmly educated in a truth that tells us that it is not only dangerous but fundamentally impossible to transcend difference through goal-driven imaginaries.

In addressing the questions of *Where to Begin?* (1901) and *What Is to Be Done?* (1902), Lenin understood something about the problems, dangers and requirements of transformative political art and tactics. He saw that unprincipled eclecticism and blind adaptation to different circumstances or spontaneously changing situations were among the most detrimental factors in 'world-making'. Precisely in times of 'declining revolutionary spirit', it was even more important, Lenin argued, to put work, effort and zeal into political leadership, meaning and organization to maintain the ability to project an alternative future. Otherwise all demands, in their fragmented and immediate nature, would be consumed in their own particularity and immediacy, leading to homoeopathic solutions at best or, at worst, ending up consolidating existing hegemony. Moreover, this was precisely because, absent the work required to artificially cohere and construct a political meaning that transcends contingency, all events of the world, from an ontological perspective, are 'spontaneous outbursts' and 'unforeseen political complications' that frustrate goal-driven, transformative political agency. The Leninist emphasis on programme and theory thus did not deny or ignore contingency but sought to provide an edifice of meaning through which contingency could be appropriated for the art, tactics and mobilization of 'world-making'. A 'freedom from all integral and pondered theory' implied 'eclecticism and lack of principle', failing to provide orientation to political agency.

Today, by contrast, in having learned to start all reasoning from the vantage point of unintended consequences, we are way too aware, way too considerate,

and ultimately way too fearful, to project, begin and see through anything that might 'exclude' in an interconnected world full of difference. Don't we all know that 'there is a long legacy of leftist inculcation of alternative subjectivities with dubious credentials', that 'on more than one occasion, leftist templates of vanguard subjects, model citizens, and ideal states have crushed human vitality and freedom'? We have begun to reject theory, authority and anything that smacks of centralization, hierarchy and responsibility for that reason. '[W]e do not believe', Amin and Thrift confirm, 'that theory can be used as it if it were ... a base from which it is possible to foray out and righteously pronounce about how the world is and what it does', because 'abstractions' do not 'pay attention to what might escape them'. Shying away from abstractions because of what escapes them unsurprisingly leads them to see 'the political as a field whose form and content are other than constantly shifting' to be a 'categorical mistake'; a mistake dictated by the excess of life's contingencies rather than the excess of programmatic politics. 'Every action produces a reaction', we thus learn from Amin and Thrift, 'and the Left has to stop thinking that in a complex world these reactions can be controlled'. Leaving aside the fact that the Left has *already* largely stopped thinking this, if we follow the literature drawn upon by Amin and Thrift, including Deleuze, Latour and Stengers, as have a vast array of economists, ecologists, natural scientists and organization theorists (as a quick Google search on 'complexity theory' will reveal) – and that, indeed, *so has the Right* (see, for instance, the recent UK government document on 'Responding to Emergencies') – Amin and Thrift's assertion also begs the question of how, in fact, it is possible to reinvoke the values of old programmatic politics, its organizational skills and its capacity of intentionally shaping the world people lived in, if this is the case.

Key here is the re-signification of world-making into worlding, where the former is a programmatic project driven by the transcendental subject and the latter is an autopoietic process of embedded, mutually affecting 'actants'. What the Left, according to this new understanding, has thus forgotten is 'how centrally the politics of transformation relies on intervening in the ecology of life by bringing more and more of its actants into the political domain and by working on the pre-personal, the affective and the habits of habituation'. Consequently, the authors formulate the world-making task of the Left as one of 'mak[ing] way for a new world'. This notion of 'making way' rather than constructing a new world is

tied up with understanding the political realm as an indeterminate “psychotopical” atmosphere’ of ‘affective politics’. Affective politics, we learn, is ‘neither structured narratively nor organized in response to our interpretations of situations’. It works ‘not through “meanings” per se’ but denotes a state that ‘moves through bodies, dreams, dramas and social worldings of all kinds’. As such, affective politics ‘remains determinately indeterminate’ but in its determinate indeterminacy is effectively actuated and fully consumed in this contingency of life in which ‘we are pushed this way and that by the ebb and flow of affect’. What this means for political organization, the authors explain, drawing on the work of Stengers and the trope of ecology, is ‘not compromise or conversion’ but ‘adaptation’. In construing processes of adaptation to be the both the core and the goal of the new tactics of an ontological (left) politics, ‘political organization can become a series of different kinds of practices for organizing the world, which are able to coexist and, at their best, bring something new into existence or use existing features for a novel purpose that add something to all of the parties.’ Effectively, the new political art of world-making is portrayed as a stepping aside, a relinquishing of the new undesirables of abstractions and constituted meanings, and letting a life-world self-generate through its inherent energy and excess of contingency, now politically valorized in and of itself.

Against the emerging opportunistic critique of tactics-as-plan that was already noticeable at the very beginning of the twentieth century, it was again Lenin who warned of the dangers of such whatever politics. He saw that critics of tactics-as-plan diminished horizons of opportunity and ultimately ended up ascribing the political struggle of the Left to ‘that which is going on at the given moment’ in a way that ‘passively adapts itself to spontaneity’. More importantly, and with considerable relevance for contemporary leftist thought (Amin and Thrift portray opportunism and passivity as representing new political virtues in a self-worlding world), Lenin was particularly receptive to the degrading inversion of political values, virtues and practices. The new political virtues and tactics of adaptation inoculated themselves against error and leadership responsibilities, ‘just as a man who talks, but says nothing, insures himself against error’. The most worrying development, however, was not simply that this opportunism made its way in daily political practices. Rather, it was that contingent adaptation practices became transvalued into ‘tactics-as-process’ and as such were elevated to an ultimate principle of

radical politics: ‘those who are determined always to follow behind the movement and be its tail are absolutely and forever guaranteed against “belittling the spontaneous element of development”’. Reflecting Lenin’s critical observations, today we no longer value abstractions, such as theory or programme, that are carried externally to context, as giving meaning to life – we know that life is, instead, in excess of theory. We elevate life’s contingent ontology into programme and consider adaptation to be the ultimate means and principle of transformative political agency.

While we are now safely on the Left, inoculated from error and, absent better ideas, at least protected from unwittingly belittling the unknown potentiality of emergence, we live in a self-making world, freed from meanings and abstractions, that, as Arendt once put it, lacks its ultimate *raison d’être*. Yet, it appears almost as though we have now found a new *raison d’être* in the very deprecation of political aspirations to any ultimate *raison d’être* itself. In this light, the book creates the impression that the new future is here already, just as long as we make way for it. To modify one of Arendt’s conclusions in *The Human Condition*, for Amin and Thrift we should thus rejoice simply in being in a heap of hyper-related things in which all actants are constantly adding something to the affairs of the world that are as ‘floating, futile and vain, as the wandering of nomad tribes’.

**Jessica Schmidt**

## Media theory without media

Boris Groys, *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media*, trans. Carsten Strathausen, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012. 199 pp., £34.50 hb., 978 0 23114 618 0.

The history of media, particularly in the modern era, is one that has been marked by deception, dissimulation, doubt and socio-cultural complexes bordering on the paranoid schizophrenic since the outset. But whilst entertaining suspicions about spooks on the line might once have been quite reasonably dismissed as idiosyncratic phantasm, in the Western world post-9/11 it is simply the very real but very ordinary operative condition of digital media use. Concerned citizens in the contemporary world now have every justification