

### Culture and admin

Béatrice Hibou, *La bureaucratisation du monde à l'ère néolibérale*, La Découverte, Paris, 2012. 223 pp., €17.00 pb., 978 2 70717 439 0.

Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*, Zone Books, New York, 2012. 182 pp., £19.95 hb., 978 1 93540 826 0.

The ascendancy of neoliberalism was accompanied by all sorts of mendacious advertising for the roll-back of the state. Bureaucracy became a byword for everything oppressive, rigid and inefficient about the planner-state, everything that marketization promised to dissolve into supple flows and individual solutions. The opposition of market and state is so entrenched that awareness of the grotesquely bureaucratic character of neoliberal capital still has some difficulty in making inroads into our common sense. Yet our everyday life is in many ways permeated by procedures, interactions and interfaces that are demonstrably bureaucratic, by what Béatrice Hibou captures as a 'normative inflation'.

Hibou begins her helpful survey of the return of neoliberalism's repressed with the chronicle of a day in the life and work of French nurse Alice, in the absurdist 'wonderland' of infinite auditing, relentless form-filling and automated calls. There is tedium and comedy in these tales, gruellingly familiar as they are. There is also what Ben Kafka – who delights in recounting the tragicomedies of bureaucracy that accompanied its revolutionary apotheosis in France – identifies as a compensatory 'satisfaction': the dark pleasure we take in retelling our personal calvary with paperwork, unable as we are to get what we want from the state. In methodologically and stylistically divergent ways, both these books are preoccupied with the everyday life of abstraction, as well as with our misrecognitions of bureaucracy, and the way in which it parlays ubiquity into invisibility, or occupies the deepest recesses of our psyche. Both inevitably begin with epigrams from Max Weber, grave prophet of bureaucracy's inevitability. Yet their choices are indicative: where Hibou's selection from *Economy and Society* underscores the fusion of bureaucracy and capitalism, Kafka's draws our attention to the 'bureaucratic medium' – the folders, files, the *paperwork*.

A careful synthesizer of a vast range of literatures about the political economy of 'the rule of desks', Hibou takes some inspiration from writers like Rizzi,

Burnham, Crozier and Castoriadis, but especially Claude Lefort, who took the rise of bureaucracy not as a generic index of rationalization and disenchantment, but as a feature of capital. More precisely, it is the optimal social and organizational framework for capital accumulation, permitting, in Lefort's words, an 'immediate socialization of activities and behaviours'. How, then, can we specify the current conjuncture of bureaucratization?

First, the public–private (or state–business) parallelism present in Weber has developed into a *sui generis* hybridization, namely in terms of a hypertrophy in the private production of norms. Much of the book provides a panorama of contemporary research on this phenomenon, from the sociology of quantification to the study of 'audit cultures'. It is punctuated with discussions of various fields and agencies at the forefront of this 'normalization': credit raters, university evaluators, promoters of transparency, food standards regulators, transparency NGOs, the International Organization for Standardization, border agencies, risk assessors of all stripes. Though Hibou's specific references are all tucked away in notes, the commendable effort to cover the gamut of bureaucracy's manifestations, and the range of theoretical perspectives on it, suffers from some of the generality and flat prose that plague the social science literature review.

Second, and key to Hibou's stance, is an intensification of the 'formal' character of bureaucracy. As she writes: 'The process of abstraction and categorization is so advanced and so generalized that it makes one lose the meaning of the mental operations that guide it and tends to assimilate coding and formalization to reality.' This passage encapsulates both the promise and the shortcomings of Hibou's book. To extract bureaucracy from the Weberianism of fools that would see it as a transhistorical fate, and conceive it in terms of the current configuration of capitalist power, requires without doubt a theory of abstraction and formalization. Unfortunately, Hibou's penchant for a *mental* theory of abstraction – which she somewhat

leavens with her advocacy of bureaucratic formalizations as an effective fiction – blocks the path to thinking how the proliferation of modes of ranking, commensuration and evaluation relates to the real abstractions of capital. We are closer here to the early Marx – for whom bureaucracy was an imaginary state alongside the real state – than to the critic of political economy. We are also at some distance from some of the sociological literatures that Hibou relies on, which are increasingly concerned with the complex social assemblages and material constructs necessary to reproduce and make efficacious such fictions as GDP, bond ratings or league tables. Different as their approaches may be, both Marxism and contemporary economic sociology militate against the idea that abstraction is a reduction of complexity, as Hibou seems to suggest, or that they are ‘in reality nothing but codes on which people have ended up agreeing at a given moment to exchange informations, act, orient behaviours, in brief, to govern’ – an exceedingly idealistic image of bureaucracy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given its attempt to integrate such a range of often incompatible approaches, *The Bureaucratization of the World in the Age of Neoliberalism* can be both theoretically and politically eclectic. Thus its humanist critique of bureaucracy as an imposed abstraction – which finds inspiration in Marcuse’s intuitions about the production of indifference, and takes the form of a defence of the ethics of the *métier* against the domination of homogeneity – is accompanied by a rather more fashionably Foucauldian stress on strategies, on power as the conduct of conduct. The prescriptive tenor of the former sits uneasily with the descriptive distance of the latter, and with the useful reminder of the dialectic between formality and informality, with the one exacerbating the other. Thus, Hibou provides a persuasive argument for the ways in which the capillary diffusion of neoliberal bureaucratic practices (with their hideous newspeak: ‘benchmarking’, ‘best practice’, ‘poverty governance’, etc.) has enforced an inequalitarian paradigm and a concomitant discourse of euphemism, where inequality becomes exclusion, domination unhappiness, injustice suffering and violence trauma. Yet she also wishes to argue that the process of bureaucratization is impelled by ‘popular’ demands for security, by a complicity that is built into procedures that already set out the terms in which they can be contested – through more forms, further committee meetings, more accountability, another audit (of the audit of the audit...). The fact that the book concludes with the call to see bureaucratization

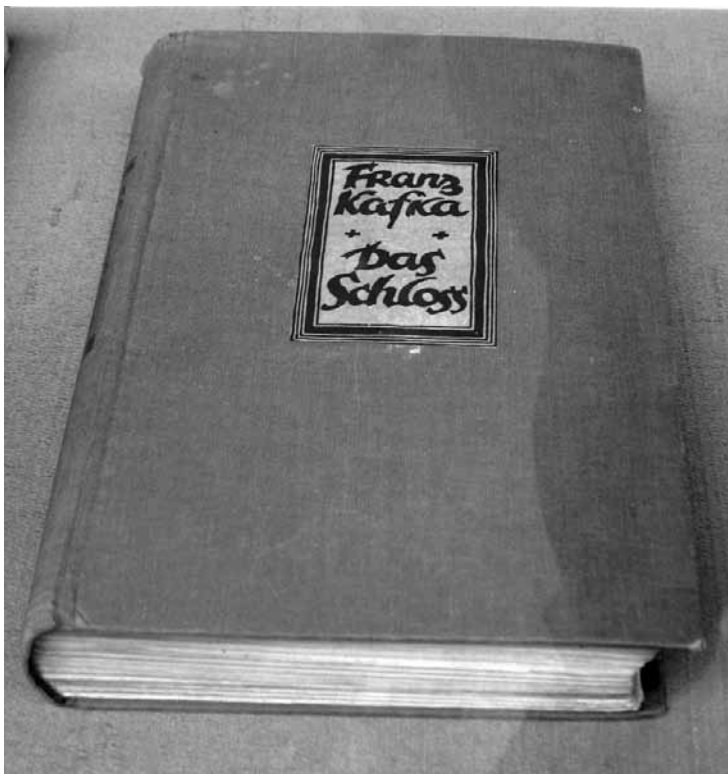
as a ‘space for political practice and a site for the enunciation of politics’ – to abandon the iron cage and embrace the idea of a multiple, plastic, negotiable labyrinth – jars with the moment of denunciation in Hibou’s critique of bureaucratic abstraction.

This tonal and political imbalance, between the description of strategies of power and the indictment of forms of abstract domination, could be generously regarded as a contradiction in the object, as well as an index of our own everyday ambiguities towards different strains of bureaucratization. Yet I think it is also an effect of the profound limitations in Weberian conceptions of abstraction. These incline towards seeing the logics of capital as a product of epochal processes of rationalization, rather than regarding state and market bureaucracies as unstable, conjunctural responses to shifts in economic imperatives, as well as products of the lucid strategies of determinate capitalist agents (from the Mont Pelerin Society to hedge fund managers). The ‘bureaucratic construction of markets’ of which Hibou speaks has little to do with a general process of reduction of complexity – the juxtaposition of a three-bedroom house and an asset-backed derivative might suggest as much – but a lot to do with legal, institutional and political-economic strategems to extract surplus profit at a period in which other sources of revenue have dried up. I’m not sure if abstraction is the ‘constituent imagination’ of society, but it does seem to be both its symbolic tissue and, in crisis conditions, its real.

Where Hibou seeks to produce a composite sociological picture of bureaucracy’s mutations after the welfare state, Kafka mines the archives and pamphlets of the French Revolution – bureaucracy’s crucible – to illustrate the necessity for theory to tarry with the psychic and material life of paperwork, instead of dismissing it, in the style of ‘paranoid’ criticism, as a mindless Moloch or a conspiracy. Kafka’s inquisitive and ironic prose certainly enacts the satisfactions he argues we all draw from recounting our misadventures in the world of files. His account of a French clerk’s hysterical odyssey through the revolutionary state’s proliferating bureaus, of the subtle exculpations of the accused of Thermidor, or of the mythopoiesis of Labussière – who impaired the Terror by supposedly eating exterminatory verdicts, later to find himself immortalized in Gance’s *Napoléon* – are small triumphs of historical narrative, the comical anecdote well balanced with historical insight. State archives turn into cabinets of curiosities, as we behold fantastic plans for universal filing machines, baroquely ornamented archival juggernauts, imagined in the age of

*Encyclopédie*, then surpassed in the improvisational chaos of revolutionary rule.

Kafka eschews any historical sociology of the Terror, and does not show sympathies for the Furetian teleologies that would see its invention of the ‘national-security state’ as the matrix for all totalitarianism to come. Nor does he seem to share the enthusiasm for Jacobinism of much contemporary theory: Saint-Just appears here not just as the zealot immortalized in a frame from Gance’s film, but as perhaps the original paranoid enemy of bureaucracy. Calling out for decisive brevity, and seeking to break through what Kafka insightfully portrays as the contradiction between extensive surveillance and intensive acceleration, Saint-Just’s cry against the practico-inertness of paperwork gives the book its title: ‘The demon of writing is waging war against us; we are unable to govern.’ The virtuous terrorist is the legitimate heir of Rousseau, another enemy of files, and Kafka’s emphasis on the ineradicable supplement can be traced back to its Derridean sources. In spite of the levity of Kafka’s touch, the politics of this position are clear. *Différance*, mediation, the comedy of bureaucratic errors, the joys in the failure of paperwork and the inevitability of inscription are an antidote of sorts against a political metaphysics of presence whose epistemology is necessarily paranoid. The Terror’s attempt to dominate (through) paperwork hankered after ‘a much longed-for immediacy, presence, and plenitude of sovereignty against the dangerous supplementarity of paperwork’.



It is not bureaucracy itself, then, but a certain relationship to it – namely the paranoid one – that calls upon the resources of a deflationary critique, one that draws extensively from paperwork’s historical ties to comedy, satire and what Foucault beautifully termed the ‘administrative grotesque’. Some of this takes a genealogical cast. *The Demon of Writing* narrates with dramatic poise the emergence of the idea of accountability – so dismayingly central to the rhetoric of neoliberal bureaucratization – in the dense and hasty debates over Article 16 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. This moment and the ‘radical new ethics of paperwork’ borne by the revolution bear the promise (and the menace) that ‘[s]ociety, every member of society, had the right to keep track of the state and thus to ensure that his interests were being accurately and effectively represented ... paperwork had become a technology of political representation’.

It is here that his tale is closest to classic historical-sociological arguments about the role of the Revolution in state-making and centralization, arguments here explored through Tocqueville’s acknowledgement of ‘administration’ as the critical legacy of 1789. But it also tells us of how the very neologism ‘bureaucracy’ – making its debut in Melchior von Grimm’s 1764 *Correspondance littéraire* – was rarely unaccompanied by sarcastic laments or fiery denunciations; a common target for otherwise hostile parties (conservatives defending custom, liberal paladins of civil society, revolutionary radicals). As Kafka suggests in a more psychoanalytic vein, the symbolic dimension of paperwork (the intelligibility of the world and its functioning) keeps collapsing into the imaginary (attachment and aggression). The satisfactions of all of these complaints, against what Balzac denounced as the ‘power of inertia called the Report’, also served to contain the opposition to bureaucracy, deferring a critique of what Kafka calls ‘the alienation of clerical labour’ (a theme that he alas does not develop). The cry of the beleaguered French clerk, ‘Does truth have departments, where it can be suffocated?’, thus blocks a patient detection of the archive’s aporias.

If political theory’s paranoid proclivity has hindered it from giving its due to the frustrations and unpredictabilities of paperwork, is there a way out beyond the deflations of comedy? I mention the latter because of Kafka’s endorsement of Simon Critchley’s alignment of comedy

on the side of materiality against tragedy's idealism (the deeply material character of modern tragedy evidenced by Sartre or Raymond Williams is ignored). From its tale of Labussière turning terroristic edicts into spitballs to its account of Roland Barthes's index cards, from its defence of close reading to its attention to the tactility of paperwork – culminating in a critique of Timpanaro's dismissal of the Freudian slip, which enjoins the reader of *The Demon of Writing* to photocopy and snip a facsimile of one of Freud's bank withdrawal forms – the book is a committed defence of a scriptural materiality and a certain materialism, one drawn from deconstruction and psychoanalytic theory.

Kafka calls for a theory of paperwork that conjoins praxis and parapraxis. The tutelary figures are Freud and Marx, whose thinking of paperwork is here gleaned from the very margins of their corpus – in the aforementioned slip at the bank, and in the patient excavation of a little-known text of the very early Marx, his 'Justification of the Correspondent from the Mosel'. Kafka confidently tells us that the 'story of Marxist state theory after 1843 is a story of missed opportunities'. It would have been nice to know more about them. He suggests that had Marx persisted with his 'media theory' and not embraced the paranoid critique of bureaucracy voiced in his Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State, his materialism would not have slipped into fantasies of immediacy which neglect the insistence of materiality, and of paperwork in particular.

Yet the mediation that the young, radical-democratic Marx calls for, that of the press, hardly seems adequate to theorizing bureaucracy's psychic life and its political-economic entanglements. Curiously, and unlike Hibou, Kafka seems to retain the anachronistic notion that bureaucracy is fundamentally a matter of the state. And while he mentions it in passing, his facile dismissal of the state's 'smashing' doesn't give its due to the fact that Marx and Engels were hardly partisans of the incineration of files, and might perhaps be faulted for an excessive faith in the necessity of administrative mediation (see Engels's 'On Authority') rather than tritely accused of delusions of transparency. It's a shame that despite his praise for close reading, and his enviable erudition and curiosity, Kafka neglects how large 'paperwork' loomed in the mature Marx, as recorded in this wonderful passage from Paul Lafargue's reminiscences:

in order to write the twenty pages or so on English factory legislation in *Capital* he went through a whole library of *Blue Books* containing reports of commissions and factory Inspectors in England

and Scotland. He read them from cover to cover, as can be seen from the pencil marks in them. He considered those reports as the most important and weighty documents for the study of the capitalist mode of production. He had such a high opinion of those in charge of them that he doubted the possibility of finding in another country in Europe 'men as competent, as free from partisanship and respect of persons as are the English factory inspectors'. He paid them this brilliant tribute in the *Preface to Capital*. From these *Blue Books* Marx drew a wealth of factual information. Many members of Parliament to whom they are distributed use them only as shooting targets, judging the striking power of the gun by the number of pages pierced. Others sell them by the pound, which is the most reasonable thing they can do, for this enabled Marx to buy them cheap from the old paper dealers in Long Acre whom he used to visit to look through their old books and papers. Professor Beesley said that Marx was the man who made the greatest use of English official inquiries and brought them to the knowledge of the world.

Kafka rightly notes how Marx struggled from the start against the 'childish-sensuous materialism' that treats abstractions as mere figments. This was an ambivalent struggle, and Marx often, and sometimes with good reason, vented his wrath against those merely derivative abstractions that dominated and depleted living labour. To call them supplements would make them no more acceptable, nor more necessary. Yet, as Lafargue's passage suggests, this was a struggle in which Marx showed far greater respect for paperwork than his adversaries. The idea of a tragically paranoid Marx, to be leavened by comic materiality or unsettled by parapraxis, is a rather tired legacy of philosophical critiques of Stalinism whose day has long passed. Read alongside Hibou's survey of the contemporary revenge of formalizing power, however, Kafka's accomplished account of the psychic and political life of paperwork provides a fine starting point for truly bringing together the forms of value and the value of forms, in a manner that would be sensitive to the psychopathologies of bureaucracy's everyday life. Such a theory of bureaucracy, which both books invite but do not realize, would not pit materiality and history against an impoverishing abstraction, but account for how material devices of abstraction – all those forms and audits, chits and chads, and now algorithms, servers and databases, about which we entertain fantasies of incineration or deletion – are integral to a society in which abstractions really dominate individuals. Just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean they aren't after you.

**Alberto Toscano**

# 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

for suspicion about who might be listening to them, but so – under conditions of global socio-economic crisis – do those state agencies doing the listening. Fear of the other and the suspicion this entails are, in this respect, a particularly widespread phenomenon.

In a somewhat indirect way, the dark and menacing threats that are the subjective effect of media are the concern of *Under Suspicion*, the latest in the growing number of English-language translations of Boris Groys's writings. With a critical discussion of media as its pretext, the book focuses on the 'economy of suspicion' that undercuts not just any attempts at a final revelation of the truth of media, but critique more generally. The tone of the book is recognizably that of Groys – mordant, ironic and self-consciously provocative. Whilst its subject matter – media philosophy – might appear to be something of a departure for a writer who made his name with his controversial observations concerning Stalinism and modern art, the account Groys offers of the economy of suspicion is clearly coordinated by his continuing concerns with modern art and the fate of the avant-garde. The reader who picks this book up expecting to learn something about media, then, is likely to be a little disappointed. As the compound terms themselves suggest, a delicate balancing act is required in any discussion of 'media philosophy' or 'media ontology', and here the emphasis feels rather heavily weighted towards philosophy (albeit reframed as media ontology). Not necessarily a shortcoming per se, just something of a warning for the uninitiated.

*Under Suspicion* begins by framing Groys's argument in terms of the discussion of cultural economy proposed in his as yet untranslated book *On the New*. Reversing the order of priority between the 'cultural archive' and reality, such that it is the former that generates the latter, according the spaces and institutions of culture an overwhelming generative privilege, Groys situates the problematic of *Under Suspicion* in relation to what he sees as a 'media-theoretical, ontological, metaphysical desire' to know what lies behind the media carriers of the cultural archive. The problem as he sees it is as follows: the process of innovation in the cultural economy and our consequent understanding of reality rest on the stable distinction of the space of the archive from that of the insignificant 'profane' space that the cultural archive illuminates and gives meaning to. But for that distinction and a sense of reality to remain in place, there must be continuity of the archive; it must endure. The importance of media arises because of the role that they have in ensuring the endurance of the archive. The essential quality

of the archive is, in Groys's view, that it is semiotic, hence the 'medial' carriers of those archived signs cannot be known in and of themselves: any attempt to 'know' media transforms those media into signs, hence the impossibility of that knowledge; hence equally the need to posit some sort of dark and unknowable 'submedial' space. Groys doesn't believe that the endurance of the archive can be explained by society, because archived artefacts can outlast the societies out of which they emerged (e.g. Renaissance art, Baroque sculpture, etc.), but nor does he think it can be accounted for by the technical properties of media. Indeed, sharing a by now fairly common predilection among continental philosophers for the dismissal of positive knowledge practices, Groys argues against 'scientific-technological' angles on media ontology. This leaves him – and the reader he has persuasively enrolled into this account – with ineradicable suspicion as the inevitable consequence of this supposition of the unknowable submedial. As he puts it, 'behind the sign surface of the archive we may suspect an obscure, submedial space in which receding hierarchies of sign carriers descend into dark, opaque depths.' The subject matter of his book thus becomes one of investigating an 'economy of suspicion' concerning this shadowy depth, which whilst being 'the dark space of suspicion, speculations, and apprehensions' is 'also that of sudden epiphanies and cogent insights'. Such epiphanies and insights, which Groys calls 'acts of sincerity', emerge at moments in which the medium becomes the message, as it were, generating momentary revelation before ineluctably being transformed into signs once again.

The book as a whole is divided into two sections. The first explores what he calls the 'submedial space' whence suspicion arises. The second explores the economy of suspicion of that medium, and is framed in terms of critical readings of Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, Bataille, Derrida and Lyotard. Of the two sections of the book, the first is probably the more interesting, in so far as Groys develops within it his understanding of the problem of suspicion, the difficulties with purely semiotic accounts of media, and the possibility of truth under conditions of what one might call transcendental mediation. The second section of the book effectively sustains Groys's broader account of the cultural economy, and develops the theoretical support for his claim that particular configurations of economic exchange, such as that characteristic of a market economy, are dependent upon an economy of suspicion, which has absolute primacy.

Somewhat decorously, Groys doesn't name the key targets of his criticism in this book, although, as



the translator points out, Groys shares a predilection with a number of German scholars of his generation for attacking critical theory of the Frankfurt variety. Indeed, his eminently contestable view that the archive isn't sustained by society is accompanied by pointed references to 'progressive critical theory'. In any case, in this book, Groys' views about the inescapability of media as a – if not the – determining element of our condition, bear a passing resemblance to the views of Friedrich Kittler and the Humboldt school of media philosophy. But family resemblances of this kind don't really matter too much in themselves. Articulating media and ontology in the way that Groys does facilitates an argumentational strategy of assimilating media to philosophy and, more pointedly, to the rather familiar Aristotelian heritage of ontology, understood in terms of the by now heavily deconstructed substance-subject. Although he doesn't clarify his interpretation of the 'very traditional' understanding of ontology in Western philosophy, it is difficult not to read this as a reference to Heidegger's hermeneutic radicalization of phenomenology. Whilst Groys clearly doesn't accept Heidegger's claims in detail, his insistence on the fearful and anxious nature of suspicion has an existential flavour to it that is difficult to ignore. More pointedly, though, the largely polemical assimilation of media to philosophy and philosophy to ontology in *Under Suspicion* allows Groys constantly to slip between media and philosophy and make claims derived from the latter that would appear to be valid as claims about the former. A chapter on 'media-ontological suspicion and philosophical doubt', for example, rehearses some old discussions about the epistemological qualities of Cartesian doubt, Heideggerian concealment and the semiotic dissolution of suspicion.

Whilst coy about some of its polemical targets, *Under Suspicion* is considerably more candid in its criticisms of poststructuralist philosophy. Much of Groys's argument regarding the place and significance of the medial in the economy of suspicion depends on a commonplace reading of 'French Theory' as uniquely a set of claims about semiotics and the infinite play of signs: 'the poststructuralist philosophy of flux is primarily concerned with the problem of signification'. Critical readings of the onto-theological heritage of subject-centred philosophy, such as that practised by Derrida, Groys argues, do not allow for a purchase on the problem of submedial suspicion, and are ultimately reassuring, because, he thinks, they deny subjectivity. Arguing that floating in a 'subjectless, infinite, obscure sea of signs belongs to normative market behavior', and hence that deconstruction is ultimately

an 'up-to-date market and management strategy', is an amusing enough provocation. But claiming that this (composite) theory of the infinite flux of signs is created 'to invalidate media-ontological suspicion' smacks rather more of wishful thinking, and ignores some of the ways in which 'poststructuralism' problematizes, rather than simply denies, subjectivity. Not every 'poststructuralist' is so easily inscribed in the Aristotelian metaphysical tradition.

One of the more interesting arguments developed in *Under Suspicion* concerns Groys's reading of McLuhan's oft-repeated pronouncement 'the medium is the message'. This statement is crucial to the overall argument of the book, given its investigation of acts of sincerity that emerge out of the dark space of suspicion, but Groys's interpretation of it is nuanced and interesting. McLuhan's claim is, for Groys, a *prima facie* statement about the sincerity of media, because it suggests that whatever strange contortions and distortions may take place on the semiotic surfaces of media, ultimately the message is the medium itself. But, taken as such, this statement implies infinite sincerity, because McLuhan did not say 'the medium is *sometimes* the message', an implication that is problematic and at odds with the existence of suspicion. Nonetheless, Groys finds McLuhan's use of this statement problematic, since on closer inspection the latter's understanding of the message here appears to be understood simply as what remains when one subtracts from it all individual communicative intention. Groys traces the belief that one can separate these two messages out to formulations of the essence of modern art as proposed, in particular, by Clement Greenberg. Greenberg's views about medium specificity, the 'unique and proper area of competence' for each form of art, are reframed by Groys as a 'search for the sincerity of the medial'. The problem this poses for understanding media, as he sees it, is that McLuhan's use of it ignores the way in which disclosing the sincerity of the medium was an active practice on the part of modern artists, and hence entailed some role for the subject. McLuhan thus transferred patterns of explanation used to 'legitimize the strategies of a specific, advanced art, to the entire image world of modern media – without, however, subjecting this same image world to the same procedures of reduction, targeted destruction and coerced sincerity'. In McLuhanesque media theory, as Groys sees it, what we cannot get is an understanding of the strategies of submedial subjects.

This is an interesting insight and it is a useful, albeit very general, counter to readings of media that preclude the agency of subjects. But it is also



something of an exaggeration to claim that all media theory after McLuhan is stuck within this problem, and it is Groys's own reluctance to consider the possible implication of social forces within media that allows him to overlook the possibility that strategic analyses of the kind he is interested in might already be going on. However, whilst problematic, this claim does allow Groys to make one further, interesting move, in relation to overcoming the ineradicable suspicion that pertains to the submedial. McLuhan, as he sees it, is wrong in tacitly thinking that the sincerity of the media is a given which it is the prerogative of the media theorist to reveal (whilst the rest of us continue thinking the medium is the medium and the message is the message). But if he is wrong in this respect, the modern art practices to which he refers are right, to the extent that the Cubist paintings to which the Canadian refers as disclosing the truth of the medium are *exceptional cases* capable of generating the kinds of insight that can overcome the general prevalence of suspicion – if only briefly, and subject to their potential indistinguishability from the clever manipulation of signs. However, given that Groys doesn't want to talk about the social much, there's little chance of acquiring a view here about how such exceptions arise outside of the art world.

Much could be said about the discursive strategies adopted by Groys. In his excellently clear introduction, the translator points out that Groys likes to affect an impersonal use of language, rarely adopting first-person utterances, a trait that he argues exemplifies the loss of self and Groys's deliberate assumption of 'the voice of a dead man'. Yet for all his perhaps

deliberate eschewing of the first person singular, Groys makes abundant use of the first person plural throughout *Under Suspicion*, a use which, combined with other traits of his style, complicates this view and serves to enrol the reader in a problematic that, with a little less strong-arming and invocation of philosophical tradition, she might be inclined to refuse. 'Why is it', he asks, 'that today we celebrate only those who flow rapidly and refuse to be located or pinned down at some precise point? By and large, we must be dealing with a program of radical fear, of extreme paranoia, of absolute suspicion'; 'When we confront the media, we are constantly aware of the hidden presence of submedial space. Yet as mentioned before, we are structurally incapable of seeing through it'; and so on. Persistent recourse to this kind of invocation generates a different kind of suspicion – not a media-ontological one, but a suspicion about the author's own rather mundane doubts about the claims he is making.

*Under Suspicion* is not really a book about media. At least it is not a book about media in the way that, say, his earlier *The Total Art of Stalinism* was a book about the Russian avant-garde. Its references to media are limited – brief comments about the film *Alien* or *The Truman Show*, for example – and its major discussions are of the art world and of figures in twentieth-century French philosophy. In its account of the undecidability of the exceptional truth and the clever manipulation of signs, it is suggestive of an intriguing way to consider the relationship between media and propaganda, but where that move seems fairly logical we have a discussion of modern art. But perhaps that's the point, not least given Groys's other writings. *Under Suspicion* is entertaining, sometimes witty, provocative and often insightful. But it says a lot more about Groys's own philosophical and cultural obsessions than it does about media. This should not detract from some of the interesting insights the book contains, but as a philosophical approach to media it leaves something to be desired.

**Andrew Goffey**

# A contribution towards the refoundation of the SWP

Eugene Gogol, *Toward a Dialectic of Philosophy and Organization*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2012. 304 pp., €129.00 hb., 978 90 04 22468 1.

A cursory glance at this book shows it to be a history of Marxist politics from the Silesian Weavers' uprising of 1844 to the Hungarian revolt of 1956. However, although this is well-trodden ground, Eugene Gogol is looking from a very special place. The second half of the volume is an extended coda expounding Raya Dunayevskaya's innovative 'Marxist Humanism'. (See my review of Dunayevskaya's *Correspondence* in *RP* 178, March/April 2013.) Gogol springs from the *News and Letters* group set up by Dunayevskaya in Detroit in 1955. This volume attempts to pursue and develop the argument she was working on when she died in 1987: a critique of her own organization with fissiporous results – four splits over the next ten years. Her working title was *Dialectics of Organization and Philosophy*. Gogol includes a photograph of her plan for the book – on one side of a foolscap sheet – and uses it as a 'primary source' for his own research. This concision is typical of Dunayevskaya, able to follow Hegel right up to the sublime of the Absolute Spirit, yet also keen to summarize under pithy new headings. Indeed, for sheer concept-crunching force of intellect, it's hard to find anyone to equal Dunayevskaya since Rosa Luxemburg: two thinkers who, as female Marxists, do not fit into the 'culture wars' of Stalinist hard-boys and feminist bleeding-hearts that commentators have come to dwell on.

And probably live, as Dunayevskaya would doubtless add – forever rooting abstract ideas in the Man/Woman question (where, according to her, Marx started by writing scathingly about the role of marriage and prostitution in the bourgeois Paris of the 1840s) and questioning the thinker's niche in a capitalist system which separates mental from manual labour. Yet Dunayevskaya's return to Hegel has been viewed as cranky and eccentric by the rest of the Left. Continental philosophers have no problem with the opening of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* ('Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed'), but Dunayevskaya's proposition that car workers and fast-food chefs should wrestle with the Absolute Idea is greeted with a raised eyebrow. Adorno has been misinterpreted by readers unaware of his politics; given Dunayevskaya's bluntness, such

recuperation is not possible. In this respect Eugene Gogol is a loyal follower.

Dunayevskaya's pithy mode of expression wasn't just a foible or style, it came from the way she developed her ideas: testing them on left activists who were not conversant with academia – both in conversation and in letters. Her correspondence with 'the last of the Red Clydesiders', the indefatigable Harry McShane, is stunning for its depth, energy and candour. (This correspondence is surveyed by Peter Hudis, erstwhile comrade of Gogol, in a pamphlet published by Glasgow's John Maclean Society: *Harry McShane and the Scottish Roots of Marxist Humanism*.) Contact with Dunayevskaya led McShane to develop a new revolutionary socialism devoid of the Stalinist organizational tropes still bedevilling the Left today. But is there any point in enshrining these activist ideas in so formidable a tomb?

Well, yes, because the book bursts with new findings and unheralded discoveries. Issuing forth from collective discussion, its prose avoids the sterility of what Bakhtin called 'monologism'. This unacademic provenance has certain drawbacks, but activist culture tends to be oral, so footnoting the results is a hard task. Publication under a single author's name is likewise somewhat problematic. In this context, ideas don't belong to anyone, but suddenly they do. Difficulties of ascribing ideas to individuals is, though, a sign of life. (Compare the confusion around who exactly wrote what in the Volosinov–Bakhtin–Medvedev circle.)

So the book itself points at the social flaw it is talking about: in an exchange system, those who produce use values are not rewarded equably. Like all production, intellectual production is social (Marxist-Humanist collectives; discussion in pubs and student bars; blog comment-threads and Facebook posts; seminars and conferences; domestic discussion), while property rights remain individual (academic credit points). The inability of legal and common-sense categories to deal with this process explains why so much of what is called 'intellectual life' is meant to revolve around a small cluster of stars (Žižek, Badiou, Rancière, etc). It's so much easier to realize profit if it's clear who 'invented' the ideas, who they belong to,

‘each thought branded with the identity of its author’, as William James put it, revealing the origin of modern American wealth in slavery and cattle. But genuinely progressive ideas arise from liberty of expression unconstrained by institutional title or celebrity status. For Dunayevskaya, dialectical philosophy is not a mystery or a cult: it arrived in the fifth century BCE, in Athens, with democracy.

Liberal equality is abstraction, equivalence, the refusal of specificity and difference. Gogol’s equality is different. It is more akin to the equality of de Sade:

No distinction is drawn among the individuals who comprise the Sodality; not that it holds all men equal in the eyes of Nature — a vulgar notion deriving from infirmity, want of logic and false philosophy — but because it is persuaded and maintains that distinctions of any kind may have a detrimental influence upon the Sodality’s pleasures and are certain sooner or later to spoil them (Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, 1797).

The philosophical kernel of Dunayevskaya’s Marxist-Humanist idea is that Hegel’s logic supersedes the antinomy between selfish subject and moral law in Kant. This means that the denunciations of ‘ultra-leftism’ and ‘petit-bourgeois individualism’ we find in ‘post-Marx Marxists’ (Dunayevskaya’s term for Social Democracy and Communism) are pushing the genie back into the bottle, reverting to bourgeois categories and closing the gate to the ‘new continent of thought’ discovered by Marx. The Situationists called this transcendence of Kant ‘radical subjectivity’; Marxist Humanists call it ‘the absolute becoming of revolution permanence’ or ‘PERSONAL AND FREE’. Both attempt to theorize the postwar drive to mass freedom exemplified by Berlin (1953), Budapest (1956), Paris (1968) and the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements in the USA, a drive perhaps most palpably experienced today by listening to *Ascension* by John Coltrane (Atlantic, 1966) — or looking at the aerial views of vast crowds gathering in Cairo, Istanbul, Rio or Bucharest regularly posted on Facebook.

History has proved Dunayevskaya right. After anti-capitalism and the advent of social media, those on the Left talking about ‘discipline’ and ‘democratic centralism’ look increasingly like company lawyers defending a brand (hear money talk: ‘this is not a game’ ‘we are not a debating club’). They have nothing to do with anti-capitalist movements provoked worldwide by corrupt governments, war plans and austerity agendas. But if Dunayevskaya is ‘spontaneist’ (in ‘Leninist’ parlance), why organize, in fact why do anything at all? Even if their critique of orthodox Leninism may sound

like Autonomism, Marxist Humanists are very different. (My first encounter with the Autonomists was in a 1980s’ Leeds riven by weekly physical confrontations between the Anti-Nazi League and the National Front; the contribution of Italian delegates to an Autonomist Conference at the Polytechnic was to spray ‘FUCK THE LEFT’ in giant letters in a subway leading to the Poly.) Dunayevskaya was keen that the critique of vanguardism should not be the group’s full-time activity. Likewise, Gogol’s proletarian Hegelianism does not breathe the despair of intellectuals who see the forces of history as beyond reach; instead, we *are* the working class, we inhabit philosophy, *we* are actually where it’s at. In this, it could be defined as a religion or a mysticism, but only by using anti-humanist or positivist categories. From the point of view of anyone who believes the task of philosophy is to make us examine the life we lead — the basic Socratic position — it is a programme for anti-ideological activism.

As mentioned earlier, autodidacticism has its pitfalls. The book would be much improved by a sympathetic edit. But its solecisms are quickly forgiven because Gogol’s argument is urgent and single-minded, and his materials refreshingly original. Contemporary debate in London about ‘Leninism’ has become so far removed from anything Lenin actually said that it is best depicted as farce by online satires (Ian Bone’s ‘Game of Trots’, BloggingJBloggs1917’s ‘Occupy Marxism!’). But read Gogol on the difficulty of reconstructing Russian society on socialist principles after 1917, and you begin to hear the voice of the real Lenin, that unique way of piling up telling adjectives in a stream as nuanced and expressive as a tenor sax solo when Art Blakey is on drums:

One of the most important tasks today, if not the most important, is to develop this independent initiative of the workers, and of all the working and exploited people generally, develop it as widely as possible in creative *organizational* work. At all costs we must break the old, *absurd*, savage, despicable and disgusting prejudice that only the so-called ‘upper classes’, only the rich, and those who have gone through the school of the rich, are capable of administering the state and directing the organizational development of socialist society.

Gogol is no vulgarian or workerist. He does not believe that claims about politics can replace up-to-date research or philosophical rigour. But the detail does not swamp the argument; it’s held in place like iron filings by a strong magnet, and it’s likewise beautiful. One important issue is whether a society that dispenses with the logic of money and judges acts by their social

use-value still requires trade-union-style protection of its workers. Gogol's sympathy for problems facing workers – this is no Žižekian smash-and-grab raid on exotic-sounding concepts – means that the discussion is dialectical and nuanced, and, contra rumour, Lenin emerges as the most dialectical and nuanced commentator of all, truly 'polylingual'. In a field littered with many a grotesque conceptual apparatus, where some 'ism' named after a single person is so often meant to solve all, Gogol makes workers' politics fluid again.

Following Dunayevskaya, Gogol praises Lenin for learning from Hegel in 1914, but criticizes him for failing to tell anyone where he had got his new ideas from. This is characteristic of Marxist-Humanist writers: you are never allowed to settle for a hero, there's always a flaw, and you begin to realize that thinking about the problem *yourself* is more important than subscribing to a position.

In a footnote, Gogol describes Marx's relationship to Hegel as one 'that simultaneously expressed indebtedness and sharp critique'. *Toward a Dialectic of Philosophy and Organization* isn't just a useful survey of workers' politics, it is also a manual on how to think: 'indebtedness *and* sharp critique'. (Come winter I want to emblazon that slogan on the back of my leather jacket.) Gogol doesn't find the need to 'get beyond' Dunayevskaya, it's true, but her work is so rich with many voices – including that of Louis Gogol, top medic and member of the *News and Letters* collective, Eugene's father and Dunayevskaya's brother-in-law – and so far unenshrined in any dogmatic 'ism', that this is not really a problem. Her 'I am changing my mind on Lenin' in the correspondence is unimaginable coming from Ted Grant, Tony Cliff or Alex Callinicos... although the relationship of Dunayevskaya's ideas to aspects of the 1960s' revolution beyond civil rights, anti-Vietnam war protest and the women's movement – radical psychiatry, for example, the Situationists, the underground, science fiction, free jazz and psychedelic pop – does suggest an intriguing field of play.

The book is studded with gems, short enough to become Facebook posts, which is how they could well become effective: a three-page demolition of Lukács the Party man; an exposition of Hegel that brings his phrases into a shimmer of quasi-Daoist poetry, like a physicist explaining the precarious state of the liquid crystal, the sensation that someone is telling you *how we work*, the antinomy between mind and matter transcended; recourse to Marx's fabulous letter to Arnold Ruge of September 1843 – the revolutionary task is 'not to give consciousness to the masses, but to help make what was implicit in the masses' practice,

explicit'; Dunayevskaya's capitalized 'NOW STAND UP AND SHOUT PERSONAL AND FREE, PERSONAL AND FREE, PERSONAL AND FREE AS LENIN SHOUTED LEAP, LEAP, LEAP...'; a polemic against John Holloway's contention that Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* can shed light on developments in Latin America (the revolutionary thrust of *Capital* is blunted by seeing only a logic of exchange value and omitting use value); a demolition of Moishe Postone's anti-humanist '*Capital* without people'.

To conclude, I'd like to quote Dunayevskaya from that pamphlet by Eugene Gogol's comrade, rival, faction-fight enemy and political nemesis, Peter Hudis, *Harry McShane and the Scottish Roots of Marxist Humanism*:

I really must get worker-revolutionaries who have not previously thought of philosophy involved in a dialogue on it, if even it is only to say they don't understand the philosophic categories because the manner in which they express their non-understanding is much more understanding than some intellectuals' glibness and it helps me a great deal.

This is an entire programme *in utero*; and if you wish to be of that party, then there'd be no better place to start than with Eugene Gogol's wonderful book.

**Ben Watson**

## Testing, testing

Tom Eyers, *Post-Rationalism: Psychoanalysis, Epistemology, and Marxism in Post-War France*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013. 240 pp., £65.00 hb., 978 1 4418 688 1.

The recent reappraisal of the French theoretical journal *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* (1966–69) marks a major advance in our understanding of the history of continental philosophy. It also provides a unique opportunity for sharpening our sense of the conceptual make-up of that tradition, whose nuances are too often obscured by a mythology of crude, tectonic clashes, as in the opposition of structuralism to phenomenology, for instance; not to mention the distinction between the 'continental' and 'analytic'. Arguably, such schematisms belong in part to the genre of what Joel Isaac has called 'epic history' – that is, a history that portrays knowledge production predominantly in terms of dramatic divisions and paradigm shifts, while overlooking the subtler connections and continuities that characterize the process of thought in the making.

In fact, thought in the making is precisely what the *Cahiers* represent. Founded by students of Louis Althusser in 1966, the journal styled itself as a ‘laboratory of concepts’, a test site for new intellectual assemblages. Its experiments were embedded in a complex combination of Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, guided by a notably ‘analytic’ commitment to conceptual rigour and logical formalization (figures such as Frege and Cantor numbered among its touchstones). In most intellectual histories of French philosophy, the *Cahiers* have been eclipsed by the likes of *Tel Quel* and *Les Temps Modernes*. But it was within these pages that many now famous thinkers negotiated their philosophical self-formation: the journal’s often remarkably young contributors included the likes of Alain Badiou, Jacques-Alain Miller, Luce Irigaray and Jacques Derrida.

Tom Eyers’s new book is one of the first to take the *Cahiers* as its corpus. In this respect it complements *Concept and Form* – the two-volume collection published last year by Verso (to be reviewed by Dominiek Hoens in *RP* 183) – as part of a broader project of assembling and assessing this neglected material. But Eyers also sets out his own specific thesis concerning the philosophical moment embodied by the *Cahiers* – a moment which, as he puts it, articulates ‘the highest, seemingly most abstract point of what has come to be known as French structuralism’. For Eyers, the question of just what structuralism *was* has been too hastily answered. In contrast, Eyers’s own argument complicates the received reasoning that defines structuralism primarily as a diffusion of Saussurean linguistics, or as a reaction against the existentialism of the 1950s. Such partial accounts, argues Eyers, ‘have frequently served to sever the crucial link between “structuralist” thinkers and their predecessors in the philosophy of science’. Consequently, the book contends that ‘structuralism’ – or, at least, the archetypical ‘high’ structuralism documented by the *Cahiers* – can be fruitfully re-described as what Eyers calls ‘post-rationalism’. As he demonstrates in great detail, this iteration of structuralism was constructed in continuous dialogue with earlier epistemologies – in particular, the philosophies of science elaborated by Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem. Such philosophies are prototypically ‘post-rationalist’ in so far as they ‘simultaneously affirm and transcend their basis in Cartesian rationalism’, emphasizing both a rationalist commitment to formalization, and, at the same time, an awareness of the ‘constitutive impurity’ of the objects and subjects of knowledge in their instability and interdependence. This rich, non-monolithic

remodelling of rationalism was what ‘made possible the anti-empiricist, anti-positivist materialism of the *Cahiers* innovators’. And in retrospect, a renewed appreciation of this tradition might even serve to subvert today’s prevailing assumption that philosophy must be beholden to ‘either a scientistic empiricism on the one hand, or an irresponsible relativism on the other’. The lesson we learn throughout Eyers’s book is that thought is always more finely grained than such forced choices lead us to believe.

The bulk of the book consists of close, careful readings of key texts from the *Cahiers*, including such landmark essays as Miller’s ‘Suture’ (1966) and Badiou’s ‘Mark and Lack’ (1969). What emerges from these readings is a sophisticated sense of the ‘theoretical friction’ at work within the supposedly stable structuralist edifice. In this way, Eyers aims to unsettle several misrepresentative myths. Even a cursory account of the intellectual project of the *Cahiers* would be enough to cast doubt on the familiar caricature of continental philosophy as an irrational current of thought, opposed to principles of objectivity and verification. But Eyers’s excavation takes a further turn: within the apparently airtight rationality of high structuralism, he reveals a distinctively post-rationalist dynamism; a ‘founding impurity’ that ‘goes all the way down’. As he asserts,

I reject what has, at least in some readings, been imputed to French theory prior to the emergence of deconstruction: a rigid metaphysics of structure that is impervious to the dynamic incursion of the new... one of the aims of this book is to underline the dynamization of structure that post-rationalist authors performed.

So, against this assumption of static, synchronic ‘rigidity’, Eyers shows us a structuralism always already in internal tension with itself – ‘torn’, from the outset, ‘between the permanence of structure and the necessary contingency of the subject’. According to a common conception of the progression from high structuralism to its ‘post-’, the former represented an ‘arid formalism’, too exhaustively deterministic to allow for any account of dynamism and change; of structural transformation and disruption. Close attention to the *Cahiers* proves particularly instructive in discrediting this narrative. Indeed, as Eyers explains, the journal’s young contributors were precisely driven by a desire to discover the fissures and flaws within the structures they explored – the paradoxical (or, to adopt Miller’s terminology, ‘utopic’) points which would leave those structures prone to ‘instability and interruption’. Thus the post-rationalist project can be defined in terms of its attention to the dynamic dimensions of structure:

‘the ways in which the conditions for the emergence of structure are always and simultaneously the potential conditions for their dissolution’.

In this respect, Eyers’s rubric of ‘post-rationalism’ clears the ground for a new, more nuanced conception of structuralist thought – a structuralism rigorously observant of the cross-currents between such ostensible oppositions as subject and structure, concept and object. Moreover, Eyers reconstructs this ‘recognition of the constitutivity of impurity’ at the level of a *common* logic – a set of homologues or family resemblances that shed fresh light on the ‘logical moves’ made by a range of post-rationalist thinkers, from Bachelard to Derrida. Indeed, the real strength of the book lies in the lucidity and robustness with which it carries out this project of conceptual extraction and reconnection. Not only this, but Eyers also extrapolates further insights from the logic of post-rationalism, which help to subvert certain contemporary orthodoxies. For example, his comparative reading of Canguilhem and Deleuze destabilizes the still-common schema that separates French philosophy into two strands: on the one hand, philosophies of the concept, and on the other, those of life. Eyers’s research is, as such, of far more than merely ‘historical’ import; rather, it serves the exemplary purpose of rendering even our present logics productively ‘impure’.

Nonetheless, it should also be said that Eyers’s exclusive attention to ‘the precisely *theoretical* makeup’ of structuralist theory perhaps necessarily risks neglecting the *ends* of such theory. After all, if the contributors to the *Cahiers* sought to pinpoint the ‘impurity’ of logical structures, they did so, in large part, for political purposes – however abstracted or displaced. As Peter Hallward points out in his introduction to the first volume of *Concept and Form*, the *Cahiers* arose in response to a particular postwar political conjuncture in which ‘it was no longer plausible ... to present social or economic structure as effect rather than cause’. In this context, the journal should be read in relation to its explicitly politicized predecessor the *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes* (1964–68), and therefore, as Hallward puts it, to ‘the more general Althusserian project of a *formation théorique*’, a theoretical training ‘that would secure the science of historical materialism’. In short, each of these journals conceived of conceptual work as, first and foremost, a mechanism for authorizing political practice. Of course, Eyers’s project is itself admirably – if only implicitly – political, in so far as it seeks to recover from the *Cahiers* an alternative to the reigning forms of knowledge production under contemporary capitalism. But it could be argued that

the contemporary import of Eyers’s findings cannot be fully articulated at the level of conceptual logic alone. In this regard, it is surely the case that conceptual reconstruction would have to be complemented by a greater degree of historical contextualization than *Post-Rationalism* provides. This is not to say that Eyers’s project suffers from some sort of contextual deficit that should be redressed – this would be to misunderstand seriously its scope and its stated intent. Instead, it is only to suggest that the revaluation of high structuralism as ‘post-rationalism’ could constitute a key component of a more extensive enterprise, in which Eyers’s richly descriptive account of the ‘precisely theoretical’ would be matched by a far more forcefully normative account of the precisely political. Eyers has restored, with remarkable clarity and comprehensiveness, the crucial details of a bigger picture – one whose continuing reconstruction will further accentuate its political resonance, past and present.

David Winters

## Fear and trembling

Alison Assiter and Margherita Tonon, eds, *Kierkegaard and the Political*, Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle, 2012. vi + 139 pp., £39.99 hb., 978 1 44384 061 3.

The Kierkegaard scholarship industry is one of the marvels of the last twenty years of the history of ideas. Since the early 1990s, Kierkegaard has become one of the best translated, most rigorously documented and frequently cited philosophers. And yet this renaissance has often struggled to gain a footing within philosophy itself. *Kierkegaard and the Political* – in both its successes and its failures – is evidence of this struggle. For while other nineteenth-century philosophers whose political thought has seemed so difficult to appropriate into the broadly left-wing agenda of contemporary scholarship (like Nietzsche and Hegel) have, nonetheless, still been plundered for political insights, Kierkegaardians have found it difficult to participate in this trend. The apologetic, sometimes even embarrassed tone of Assiter and Tonon’s volume bears witness to this. Indeed, much of the volume remains bound to a very preliminary question: is it even possible – let alone desirable – to couple Kierkegaard with the political?

*Kierkegaard and the Political* comprises six essays and a short introduction, which is itself a manifesto for the uneasiness with which Kierkegaardians confront

politics, and political philosophers Kierkegaard. The first words of the volume read:

To address the issue of Kierkegaard and the political appears at first sight as a paradoxical task. The philosopher of inwardness and of irreducible individuality seems to have little to teach us about the sphere of the political: not only was this dimension never explicitly addressed in writings of the Danish philosopher, but also the positions he took with regard to such a domain were always marked by a strong critical attitude ... In fact, the Danish philosopher's emphasis on the irreducible singularity of existence seems to overlook all forms of participation in social and political institutions as a dangerous diversion from the important task of being and becoming oneself.

This gives some sense of the challenge the contributors are burdened with. And it is indeed remarkable that after such an upsurge of interest in Kierkegaard over the preceding decades, we have yet to move beyond the need for such prefatory remarks. In other words, it is remarkable how long it has taken Kierkegaard scholars to face up finally to his conservatism and general disdain for the social. It is to be hoped, therefore, that *Kierkegaard and the Political* – alongside Assiter's own equally confrontational *Kierkegaard, Metaphysics and Political Theory* (2009) – marks a watershed in transforming the standard 'Kierkegaard or the political' into a series of interventions into Kierkegaard and the political.



The problem is, however, that, as I have already intimated, the essays within this volume (with a couple of significant exceptions) do not so much provide constructive interventions into this newly formed territory as apologize for the very act of forming this territory in the first place. David Wood's 'The Singular Universal: One More Time' is exemplary. Wood passes through a number of possible ways of reading Kierkegaard that could potentially draw out the political in his thought, whether by means of Sartrean historical situatedness, Irigarayan ecstatic relationality, Derridean sacrifice, Kearney's prioritization of the possible, or a naturalistic reading strategy. In every case, Wood argues that the task for assembling a political Kierkegaard necessarily involves freeing his texts from their monomaniacal obsession with a single vertical relation in the name of a subject constituted by diverse, horizontal relations.

Wood's essay sets the tone for a volume that is more reflective – and, in this sense, essayistic – than diligently scholarly. Nevertheless, much crucial scholarship is done when it comes to the explication and evaluation of *Two Ages*, a fairly minor work in the Kierkegaardian canon which is here analysed at length by five out of the six essays. It is, in fact, discussed more than all of Kierkegaard's other works combined. *Two Ages* is a critique of the Danish Hegelian J.L. Heiberg's *On the Significance of Philosophy to the Present Age* masquerading as a glowing review of a novel by Heiberg's mother, Thomasine Gyllembourg, *Two Ages*. Heiberg had presented 'the public' of contemporary Copenhagen as a generally beneficent entity, 'an aristocracy of those who do have rights'. Kierkegaard predictably – and in line with his recurrent individualism – attacks the very idea of a 'good public' by means of the categories of levelling, alienation and superficiality. The public is merely the crowd, that which impedes the genesis of the singular individual. Kierkegaard thus opposes the present age dominated by a tyrannical public to a revolutionary age of action and passion.

Put in this way, the argument of *Two Ages* hardly seems promising for a revival of Kierkegaard's fortunes as a political thinker. And yet the essays in *Kierkegaard and the Political* are astute in drawing out the political potential of the text. The two essays most concentrated on *Two Ages* are those by Thomas Wolstenholme and Margherita Tonon. Wolstenholme focuses on a potential problem with taking Kierkegaard's social and political critique too seriously: the explanatory redundancy of political categories. That is, if social and political forms in no way condition autonomous individuals, what is their value? Wolstenholme thus undertakes the difficult task of using *Two Ages* to negotiate a determinative



function for political forms without thereby reneging on the priority of the individual in Kierkegaard's philosophy. Tonon, on the other hand, demonstrates the significance of *Two Ages* by juxtaposing it with Hegel's diagnosis of modernity's malaise in the *Philosophy of Right* (particularly as mediated through Honneth's *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*). Kierkegaard's critique of the 'good public' becomes, on Tonon's account, a direct rejection of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* understood as a means of curing modernity's triple pathology of solitude, vacuity and burden. Central to Tonon's argument is the delimitation of a particularly Kierkegaardian variant of reification, which is to be interpreted in this context as the powerlessness experienced by individuals in the face of objective social formations they have themselves created.

The most creative and exciting reading of *Two Ages* emerges, however, in the essay by Christine Battersby devoted to its feminist implications, 'Kierkegaard, the Phantom of the Public and the Sexual Politics of Crowds'. Battersby situates her interpretation of *Two Ages* in an ongoing discussion of the uses and abuses of Kierkegaard for feminist thought – a discussion that has its origins in her own *The Phenomenal Woman* (1998), but which has since produced a wider body of literature testing the conceptual pervasiveness of Kierkegaard's misogyny. Battersby emphasizes Kierkegaard's deployment of both Gyllembourg's novel and a series of strong female characters drawn from it as further evidence for her thesis from *The Phenomenal Woman* that Kierkegaardian subjectivity provides insight into forms of female lived experience and their subjective structures, even if her repetition of Kierkegaard remains resolutely qualified.

Despite the considerable value of the four essays detailed above, they possess little sense of Kierkegaard as a constructive political philosopher. The emphasis is far more on overcoming prevalent scepticism over the very possibility of deploying Kierkegaard politically. However, there are two essays in *Kierkegaard and the Political* – those by Alison Assiter and Michael O'Neill Burns – that do undertake the more ambitious task of identifying what a Kierkegaardian political philosophy might actually look like. In so doing, they also insert Kierkegaard more robustly into contemporary discussions of the political in European philosophy. Indeed, one of the most striking features of *Kierkegaard and the Political* – and this is evident in the very titles of Assiter's and Burns's essays, both of which make reference to Žižek – is the type of European philosophy with which Kierkegaard is now being coupled. Gone, it seems, is the 'new Kierkegaard' of the previous decade

dominated by Derrida's *The Gift of Death*. Instead, it is Žižek's references to Kierkegaard, particularly his chapter 'Building Blocks for a Materialist Theology' from *The Parallax View*, that are fast becoming standard reference points in the field. Hence, Assiter sets out a typology of Kierkegaardian political subjectivity in dialogue with Žižek's comments on the nature of freedom in revolutionary struggles. For Assiter, Kierkegaard's rejection of autonomy as a political ideal as well as his ontological grounding of (political) passions puts him into a creative relationship with recent radical theory.

The final essay in *Kierkegaard and the Political* by Michael O'Neill Burns is the most ambitious and, as a result, by far the most satisfying. In fact, Burns's essay reveals a more fundamental structural shift underlying the volume. It is not merely the poststructuralist Kierkegaard that has been superseded by a Žižekian one, the Kantian reading of Kierkegaard – oriented around epistemic humility and agnosticism, popularized in the 1990s by Ronald Green – is increasingly being marginalized by a Hegelian Kierkegaard. That is, Burns presents a Kierkegaard writing in the midst of German Idealist debates over the nature of the dialectic and the possibility of immediacy. Through a close reading of *The Concept of Anxiety*, Burns demonstrates the existence of a fractured dialectic in Kierkegaard's writings and how its implications for the political subject contribute to contemporary debates around materialist subjectivity, especially as it is being developed in the work of Adrian Johnston. In short, with Burns's essay



the reader finds herself far beyond bare apologies for merely mentioning politics in Kierkegaard's presence. Instead, we have a foretaste of the kind of experimental attempt at Kierkegaardian political philosophy that the groundwork laid in *Kierkegaard and the Political* might hopefully have made possible.

Daniel Whistler

## Bourgeois norms

André Béteille, *Democracy and Its Institutions*, Oxford University Press India, New Delhi, 2012. 214 pp., £27.50 hb., 978 0 19808 096 1.

Born in 1934 in what is now West Bengal, André Béteille is one of India's most prominent living sociologists (or social anthropologists) and public intellectuals. He is of the same calibre as Amartya Sen but rather less well known in North America and Europe. His first book, *Caste, Class and Power*, was published in 1965, with new editions in 2002 and 2012. It uses fieldwork in a south Indian village to explore how the caste system persisted after independence but had its dominance in certain areas eroded by political and economic change, thus bringing an added level of complexity to social stratification in the country. The distinctive nature of modern India as both a society of castes and communities and a nation of citizens has become a recurrent theme in Béteille's work. But he is also interested in the contradictions of democracy, in particular problems of equality and inequality, antinomies of ideology and institutions, and internal tensions within institutions, both strictly political ones and those which are part of civil society. Béteille is close to Durkheim in the way he sees civil society institutions as the link between the individual citizen and the constitutional democratic state. On the whole, while his perspective is Indian, he has, then, always regarded himself as a sociologist first and an Indologist second, which means that there is always a substantial element of theory in his writing. As a major modern democracy with a number of very impressive achievements since independence, India is, in this respect, presented as a valid starting point for a more general discussion of modern political systems.

Béteille is an unrepentant believer in bourgeois liberal democracy. He often refers to the real sense of idealism present at the birth of the post-colonial Indian state, and his hero seems to be the genuinely admirable B.R. Ambedkar. This is a perfectly legitimate point of

view, but is obviously bound to disappoint those who are more critical of bourgeois democracy and capitalism – whether Marxists or theorists of alternative social groupings in addition to or perhaps superseding formal democratic government. Equally, however, Béteille is a gifted social anthropologist with the capacity to produce an acutely observed descriptive analysis of a society and its institutions, operating within the 'classical' anthropological tradition of Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard. This is the source of his emphasis on empirical fieldwork and his relative lack of political radicalism. It is nevertheless possible to construct a somewhat different balance than that intended by Béteille himself between the delicate social flux suggested by his descriptive analyses and his more rigid pronouncements on the role of the constitution and citizenship in the liberal democratic state. While Béteille tends to want to make the flux 'live up' to more abstract notions, it may be that their organicity in fact remedies some of their limitations.

The first five chapters of *Democracy and Its Institutions* address the political institutions of the legislature and judiciary, homologous open and secular civil society institutions, such as universities, and the overall relationship between civil society and the state. Béteille uses four different pairs of linked binary terms in slightly different ways as tools of analysis here: (1) democratic politics as moving between the two poles of constitutionalism or the rule of law and populism or the rule of numbers; (2) an understanding between government and opposition that they can and will exchange places; (3) a complementary relationship between democratic political institutions and those of civil society where each requires the other; and (4) a mixture of trust and rights as the basis for the proper functioning of any institution. These pairs are well chosen and explored with great subtlety. The balance between populist and constitutional politics, or between rights and trust, can vary between societies or over time in a given society, and Béteille feels that the balance has shifted far too much towards populism and the assertion of rights in modern India. Clearly, cynical appeals to voters' baser instincts and self-serving identity politics are very much a part of Indian democracy. Nonetheless, they can be found elsewhere, and Béteille forgets that legitimate populism is a way of countering bias in favour of the bourgeoisie in liberal democracy. Members of bourgeois institutions often only trust those who exhibit 'normal' bourgeois behaviour, and affirmative action can address centuries of prejudice in a way that individual self-advancement simply cannot do.

Three of the last four chapters examine in detail the gap between the indigenous ‘habits of the heart’ of most Indian people and democratic ideals that mostly have their origins outside India, while the last chapter argues for as much separation between sociology and ideology as is possible. There is an overlap between these two themes, since Bêteille contrasts the empiricism of British social anthropology with the very strongly metaphysical flavour of classical Indian thought. Obviously, there is a real perversion of proper political process by feudal types of behaviour, widespread corruption and at times appalling treatment of women in India today. Yet *Democracy and Its Institutions* ends up idealizing liberal democratic values and almost demonizing ‘backward natives’ in a way that is in fact distinctly ideological. Traditional values can also be positive: they can have a quality of collective bonding that is able to resist or supplement possessive individualism. In a passing remark, Bêteille asserts that a man’s family would be dismayed if he acted as a woman: it is an example of a choice one cannot really have. Clearly, he did not expect his book to be reviewed by a male-to-female transgendered person, or that she would have found her human rights of family, affection and social inclusion, rather than the simple economic rights of the ‘trannie pound’, through precisely the values of kinship, caste and community that Bêteille rejects in Punjabi Sikh Southall in Britain. Of course, this is a diaspora community in a country

with a long established democracy, but the point is not to idealize one set of values rather than another, but to say that it is the fluid and ongoing hybridization of the atavistic and the modern in any society that makes it progressive. Bêteille’s gifts as a social anthropologist would have made him the perfect person to explore this, were it not for the rigidity of his political stance. Nevertheless, his work can still be extremely illuminating about how democracy functions, and there are disjunctions within it that allow it to be deconstructed in a very fruitful way.

Guy Callan–Nardina Kaur

## A different tapestry

Shereen El Feki, *Sex in the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*, Chatto & Windus, London, 2013. 368 pp., £14.99 pb., 978 0 70118 316 5.

Earlier this year Tunisian activist Amina Sboui recounted in an interview with the international feminist organization Femen how she was kidnapped and beaten by her family after posting a topless photo on Facebook with the words ‘Fuck your morals’ and ‘My body belongs to me, and is not a source of anyone’s honour’ written across her body in Arabic. In response, Femen launched a ‘Topless Jihad Day’ protest to show



support, with topless protesters taking to the streets of European capitals with anti-Islamist slogans written across their bodies. A counter-protest, 'Muslimah Pride', was started by some Muslim feminists who were not happy with their relationship with Femen and other Western feminist organizations, which they deemed 'paternalistic and parasitic'. Messages posted on Facebook and Twitter during the protest ranged from the topical – 'Feminism comes in many forms! You bare all, I cover up', 'When you deny me my freedom to cover you oppress me', to the humorous: "If only Femen and Richard Dawkins would come to rescue us from our oppressive men and religion", said no Muslim woman ever! The backlash against Femen's approach was not only confined to the Internet. In May 2013, when three European Femen activists went to Tunisia to engage in a topless protest in front of a courthouse, Tunisian opposition party leader and feminist Maya Jribi was quoted in *Der Spiegel* saying 'Femen, please leave us alone. You risk ruining everything that we have fought for.' The Femen protesters, after being arrested and sentenced to four months in prison, have since had their sentences suspended and been returned to their home countries.

Dealing with women's rights and issues of sexual freedom in the Arab and Muslim world can be an angst-ridden endeavour for many left-wing activists in the West. Such issues should be central no matter where the oppression is occurring, but, at the same time, the Left has to remain conscious of the often Orientalist treatment of women and LGBT issues in the Muslim World, and how this treatment can play into the hands of those who want to exploit it in order to justify neoconservative intervention. In 2010 Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who suffered horrible treatment including genital mutilation as a young girl in Somalia and Kenya, penned a piece for *Time* magazine's '100 Most Influential People in the World' issue about Afghan women's rights activist Malalai Joya: 'I hope in time she comes to see the U.S. and NATO forces in her country as her allies. She must use her notoriety, her demonstrated wit and her resilience to get the troops on her side instead of out of her country.' Joya, who has faced threats from practically all sides in Afghanistan, responded angrily:

*Time* has painted a false picture of me and does not mention anything at all about my struggle against the occupation of Afghanistan by the US and NATO, which is disgusting. In fact, everyone knows that I stand side-by-side with the glorious anti-war movements around the world and have proved time and again that I will never compromise with the US and NATO, who have occupied my country, em-

powered the most bloody enemies of my people and are killing my innocent compatriots in Afghanistan.

This exchange indicates how easily rhetoric about support for women's rights can be twisted into justification for invasion and occupation and, therefore, why confronting these issues is so angst-ridden for the Left. Fortunately, Shereen El Feki's book *Sex in the Citadel* is like a Xanax for this angst. Nowhere in her journalistic account of the position of women and LGBT individuals in various Arab countries do we find any justification for war or paternalistic appeals for the 'white man' to come and rescue these poor oppressed communities. Instead El Feki does something largely unheard of: she allows these people to speak for themselves.

El Feki, the daughter of an Egyptian Muslim father and a Welsh Christian mother, deals with topics ranging from premarital sex to sexual education and prostitution, depicting a panorama of a world far more complex than most English-language readers would be familiar with. The book's research and writing primarily took place in Cairo, and the Egyptian urban middle class is its primary subject. But throughout the book we are presented with voices from other North African countries (Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) and Lebanon. There are brief sections dealing with some gulf states (Qatar and the UAE), although the book provides comparatively little information about the United States' loyal ally, and consistent violator of women's and minority rights, Saudi Arabia. El Feki fully acknowledges the importance of not generalizing a description of one country to others: 'While there are essential similarities in sexual attitudes and behaviours across Arab countries, there are also important differences in how societies are – or are not – tackling these challenges.'

The most intriguing theme that emerges from the section of the book on historical background is the idea that the predominant sexual norms in many of the countries dealt with were primarily defined through the penal codes and viewpoints of French and British colonial regimes. This notion is in stark contrast to the prevailing thought of both Muslim fundamentalists in the region, who view women's and other sexual rights as an imposition of Western values, and those who want to liberate the Muslim world through the introduction of such 'values'. After comparing Flaubert's account of his sexual indulgences in Egypt (apparently one woman's 'cunt corrupted [him] like rolls of velvet') and the Egyptian Iman Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi's perspective on sexual relations in France, El Feki concludes:

What's interesting, in this ebb and flow of history, is how stereotypes changed. The Arab world, once famous in the West for sexual license, envied by some but despised by others, is now widely criticized for sexual intolerance. It's not just western liberals who hold this view. It has become a keynote in some of the 'Islamophobic' discourse of conservatives in America and Europe, the self-proclaimed last stand in the battle between 'Western' values and the depredations of 'radical' Islam, particularly as they relate to the rights of women. And the West, once praised by some in the Arab world for its hard line on same-sex relations, is now seen by many as a radiating source of sexual debauchery from which the region must be shielded.

This analysis is not altogether new. Joseph Massad in his 2007 book *Desiring Arabs* argues, for example, that Western notions of what it means to be gay or lesbian have been forced upon the Arab world and (as cited by El Feki) are 'destroying the social and sexual configuration of desire in the interest of reproducing a world in its own image, one where its sexual categories and desires are safe from being questioned'.

Despite this, El Feki largely uses Western definitions of what it means to be LGBT, and, in fact, most of the LGBT groups operating in the Arab World she spoke with have apparently adopted the same definition. Nevertheless, individuals whose lifestyles may be defined in LGBT terms in the West do not themselves self-identify as such. After meeting Hishram, a middle-class husband and father who happens to have sex with men and declares 'I have a mustache, I'm masculine', El Feki suggests 'he is well aware of what the "gay scene" looks like, at home and abroad – it's just that such labels don't apply. Yes, he leads a double life, but he finds that perfectly normal, no matter which sex you bed; for him, these are useful compartments, not unwanted closets.'

Although much of *Sex in the Citadel* is concerned with middle-class Arabs, like Hishram, some of the most intriguing sections deal with poor individuals engaged in sex work. One section of Tunisia's capital Tunis – Rue Sidi Abdallah Guech – features a sex worker registry system that sounds a bit like Nevada, involving 'bimonthly medical exams' and 'monthly HIV test'. Rue Sidi Abdallah Guech is Tunisia's last remaining legal red light district and some prostitutes fear that with the rise of Tunisia's Islamists, the brothels will soon close down. With high unemployment, it is one of the few opportunities for some women to make money. However, although the role of Islamists is clearly relevant to the future of legal sex work in the Arab world, for many voices in *Sex in the Citadel* Islam is an auxiliary issue. Lamina, a Lebanese student

who realized she was attracted to women while living in Saudi Arabia, finds solace in the Qur'an: 'In the Qur'an, there is a passage about hypocrites. I can simply tell everybody that I'm straight. I can go get married, have kids, have a happy life. But I would be lying to my husband, I would be lying to my children, I would be lying to God.'

In fact, some anecdotes suggest that Islamist parties themselves are not always absolute roadblocks to progress, at least on some specific issues. In the 1980s Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa permitting sex changes 'on the grounds that these procedures are not explicitly forbidden in the Qur'an and that such operations reconcile the disharmony between soul and body and prevent the transgendered person from failing into sinful acts – that is, same-sex relations'. Still, examples like this hardly dispute the role that religious fundamentalism plays in the challenges detailed in *Sex in the Citadel*, and El Feki fully acknowledges the destructive and regressive impact that religious fundamentalism can play in hindering sexual freedoms. The book is filled with examples of religious leaders, Sunni and Shia, who use quotations from the Qur'an and Hadith to justify brutal laws against homosexuality and premarital sex, and sometimes in support of female circumcision.

El Feki is often pessimistic as regards the short-term prospects for any drastic change in the Arab world. At the end of the book she writes:

It took a revolt to shake up politics in Egypt, and even then, change is far from smooth. I am skeptical of any seismic shift in sexual life. Sexual attitudes anywhere in the world are tightly intertwined in myriad threads of past and present. Weaving a different tapestry needs a new pattern, and that will take decades to unfold.

One of the most important phrases in this passage is 'sexual attitudes anywhere in the world'. It has been years since the sexual revolution took place in the United States, yet women and the LGTB community still face an uphill battle in most areas of life, be they related to economics, safety, or even their own bodies and health. These same battles when they are fought, even in different and sometimes more difficult contexts, in other parts of the world should not distract from this fact. But if the Left wants the situation to improve in the Arab and Muslim world, just like anywhere else, we cannot rely on assumptions, projections or dictations, but instead must aid the process through collaboration, understanding and listening.

**Devan Hawkins**