

# Marx after Marx after Marx after Marx

Harry Harootunian, *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015. xiv + 292 pp., £20.67 hb., 978 0 231 17480 0.

The study of Marx in the anglophone academy – established during the boom years of sociological theory in the 1970s, when sociology was de facto a discipline of the Left – withered somewhat in the years of neoliberal triumphalism of the 1990s. Since then, however, it has experienced a lively revival, especially with regard to *Capital* and the critique of political economy more generally. Not only has the indigenous literature flowed (in the journal *Historical Materialism*, for example) but, through translation, hitherto nationally insulated alternative interpretative problematics have come if not exactly to confront one another directly, then at least to occupy the same discursive space: from the ‘social capital’ approach of Tronti’s early Italian workerism and the philosophical value-form analysis of Adorno’s students’ *neue Marx Lektüre* (triangulating the more familiar Althusserian reading in the 1960s), via the ‘regimes of accumulation’ of the French Regulation School and the ‘real subsumption of society to capital’ of Negri’s post-workerism (in the 1970s), to the social-geographic revival of debate on the limits of capital (Harvey and Smith) and Dussel’s ‘dependency’-focused reading of Marx’s *Economic Manuscripts* (in the 1980s), and on to the ‘accumulation by dispossession’ interpretation of neoliberalism – Harvey again (of the last decade).

With the coming together of these literatures, in the context of forcibly deregulating regimes of global capital, debate about Marx’s basic concepts of ‘so-called primitive accumulation’, subsumption (formal and real), commodification and the value-form has been renewed. The more technical work has in part been an effect of the belated publication of Marx’s *Economic Manuscripts* of 1861–67 (in German, 1976–92; in English, the 1861–63 manuscripts only, 1988–94), composed in the interval between the *Grundrisse* and the first published version of *Capital* Volume 1. But there have been more popular diffusions as well. The almost epochal shift in the vocabulary of economic and political journalism, from ‘markets’ to ‘capitalism’, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, has reconnected Marxist political-economic analysis to diagnoses of the present. However, much of the recent work has focused on the new forms

of value created by finance capital (credit default swaps and other kinds of securitization), the technological conditions for the production and realization of financial surpluses (high-frequency trading), and their apparent independence from social and political control – to the neglect of what is known as ‘historical capitalism’ as an analytical framework for the study of the present.

Harry Harootunian’s *Marx After Marx* enters this arena, intent on rectifying the anomaly, with a prestigious pedigree, a long run-up and some accounts to settle – not least a personal one with history itself. The book is dedicated to the memory of those members of the author’s family who perished in the Armenian genocide of 1915–17, ‘victims of the excesses of primitive accumulation inaugurating Turkey’s drive to transform a failing imperial order into capitalist modernity’.

Harootunian is a historian, but not every historian is a Harootunian (as Sartre might have said). More specifically, Harootunian is a US historian of modern Japanese history. But the more conventionally historical side of his writing has long been combined with theoretical and political interests rare among historians; especially over fifty years ago, when he co-edited his first anthology, *West and Non-West: New Perspectives* (1963). Harootunian made his name as a historian critical of the orientalism of Western approaches to Japanese history, with monographs on the growth of political consciousness in Tokugawa, Japan (*Toward Restoration*, 1970) – the first intellectual history of the Meiji Restoration in English – and discourse and ideology in Tokugawa nativism (*Things Seen and Unseen*, 1988). However, it is the collection *Postmodernism in Japan* (edited with Masao Miyoshi, 1989) and his 1997 Welleck lectures, published as *History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice and the Question of Everyday Life* (2000), that best indicate the widening scope of his interventions.

*Postmodernism in Japan* used Japanese intellectual history to problematize the temporal and geopolitical assumptions of the postmodernism debate then raging in the USA. *History’s Disquiet* extended a long-standing critique of the theoretical form

(modernization) and political function (US foreign policy) of the discipline of Area Studies into the period of its globalizing postcolonial culturalization. By this point, a series of overlapping polemical oppositions had become stabilized as characteristic features of Harootunian's work: history of colonialism against modernization theory and postcolonial studies alike; history of capitalism against culturalisms of all sorts; unevenness and multiple temporalities against linear historical time (historicism) and Marxist 'stagism'; the 'resistant' difference and historical concreteness of everyday life against the commodification of life. (*RP* readers will be familiar with many of these themes, from Harootunian's articles and reviews over the last fifteen years.) These are all, at once, theoretical and political categories, the former of which is in each case affirmed. In so far as it is history as the history of capitalism – their identities and differences – that is at stake in each instance, the question of 'the expansion of capitalism' in its geographical, Luxemburgian, non-European sense (rather than its solely quantitative, value-theoretical one) has long provided an underlying unity to this work.

*Marx After Marx* takes up the question of the expansion of capitalism outside of Europe, in polemical opposition to a simplified image of 'Western Marxism', by constructing a non-European Marxist tradition for which 'formal subsumption' is the key to comprehending the unevenness and necessary incompleteness of capitalist development. Indeed, the book might have been, more accurately (if less popularly), entitled *Formal Subsumption: The General Process of Capitalist Development*. For that is very much, single-mindedly, what it is about. It proceeds from a reading of carefully selected (one might say 'selective') passages from Marx's later writings, to serial expositions of works by non-European Marxists that recapitulate the proposed interpretation of Marx, enriching its historical content through its application to their own national contexts. The discussion of time promised by the 'history and time in the expansion of capitalism' of the subtitle is only really taken up in the first chapter (about one-fifth of the book). It does not involve theoretical argumentation so much as a repeated, contrapuntal statement of a position (multiple temporalities articulated by competing synchronizing and resistant non-synchronizing practices) derived from Max Tomba's excellent but nonetheless problematic *Marx's Temporalities* (2013).

We have had *Marx Beyond Marx* (Negri, 1979), *Marxism Beyond Marxism* (Saree Makdisi et al., eds, 1996 – including Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Marx After

Marxism' among its contributions) and *Marxism: With and Beyond Marx* (Amiya Kumar Bagchi and Amita Chatterjee, 2014). Now we have *Marx After Marx*. It can seem crowded on the head of a pin. Yet the nuance (the difference between the 'beyond' and the more prosaic 'after') is significant, nonetheless. For as the formal structure of repetition in the phrase 'Marx after Marx' indicates – suggesting at once a new reading of Marx provoked by the historical circumstances since his death, and a following in the image of Marx, a mimesis of Marx, determined by those circumstances – an orthodoxy is being constructed here. Harootunian spent near on half a century as the dissenting insider in US East Asian Studies, largely because of his Marxism (subjecting 'culture' to the problematic of capitalist development). The inversion of this polarity – transferring his fire from the non-European context back towards Western Marxism – places the detail of his understanding of Marx under closer scrutiny.

The narrative arc of the book's argument (more clearly stated in the Afterword than the Introduction) is as follows. 'Western Marxism owed more to Max Weber's cultural analysis than it was willing to admit, inasmuch [as] it was promoting a unique cultural configuration as a model of imitation.' It thus became the basis for a Eurocentric Marxist version of modernization theory or developmentalism. This fitted neatly into the stageism of modes of production propounded by orthodox historical materialism. After 1989, this falsely universalized culturalism and neglect of the study of production processes was continued in another, more explicit form by the 'new provincialism' of postcolonial studies, which focuses on 'the singularity of culture regions'. Thus,

postcoloniality paradoxically resembled a distant inheritor of the legacy of Western Marxism, insofar as it turned Marxism-derived strategies inward (and away from Marxism) toward contemplating the uniquely irreducible character of specific cultural endowments.

In contrast, Harootunian wants to reinstate a concern for labour and production processes within diverse non-European regions, focusing not on what he takes to be the supposition of the inevitable fate of the 'real' subsumption of labour to capital (the supposedly 'unique cultural configuration' of European capitalism), but rather upon mixed economic forms, both within the envelope of formal subsumption and in combination with it (non-capitalist and 'really' subsumed forms alike). Such a concern, it is argued, highlights 'the everyday encompassing work' as 'the

site where a worldly capitalism was encountered and imprinted on the local, embracing and embodying it yet at the same time being mediated by it'. This everyday is taken to be 'the flashpoint' of workers' struggles against capitalism, which are the consequence of 'the continuous appearance of uneven rhythms'. Marx's text is thus to be 'deprovincialized', by being rid of the privilege accorded to the development of capitalism in England, in *Capital*, with the focus instead on his remarks about non-European societies in the *Grundrisse* and the increasingly celebrated late letters to Vera Zasulich.

This is a provocative and powerful, superficially plausible, yet ultimately highly problematic scenario. In particular, it runs together discrete theoretical and political tendencies into singular simplified models. Let us start with the oversimplified image of the provincialism of Western Marxism. There are three quite different aspects to the way the idea of Western Marxism is constructed here. One is a twist on the interpretation of the well-known Weberianism informing Lukács's account of reification in *History and Class Consciousness*. Another concerns the extension of Marx's concept of subsumption from the wage-form ('formal') and the labour process ('real'), first, to the exchange relation in general (the Frankfurt School) and hence to 'total reification', and second, to the subsumption of 'society' as whole to capital (Negri). (These extensions have a similar totalizing form, but their arguments are quite different; not least because one is value-theoretical while the other is based on the rejection of value theory *tout court*.) The third is the above-mentioned theoretical privilege accorded to the historical model of

the development of capitalism in England, in *Capital*; especially the final part of Volume 1, on 'so-called' primitive (better, 'originary') accumulation.

These three aspects are combined by Harootunian into a new concept of 'Western Marxism': a formal intellectual construct taken to project a single path of capitalist development, involving the evolutionary universalization of commodification, to a point of 'completion' (total subsumption), at which point only, it is alleged that 'Western Marxists' believe, does one have capitalism proper. The image is powerful, perhaps because it is a fantasy construct. Which is not to deny that it may well be out there, structuring the historical unconscious of some contemporary Marxists in the West; although it seems closer to the self-image of capital itself. One would be hard pressed to find a textual instantiation of its combined elements. Indeed, it is peculiar – to put it mildly – to attribute a formative role in 'Western Marxism' to an argument developed during the late 1970s by a *post-Marxist* (Negri), for whom 'subsumption to capital' is *not* 'subsumption to the value-form', and who has no discernible interest in commodification.

What is most distinctive about Harootunian's reading here is that Lukács's (and Frankfurtian) Weberianism is taken to lie not just in the use of the concept of instrumental rationality to generalize the theory of commodity fetishism but, as a result, in a *cultural particularization* of the tendency towards the universalization of the capital relation and hence the commodity form: 'promoting a unique cultural configuration as a model of imitation'. But did Western Marxism (as opposed to capital itself) really do that? Was it not, rather, acutely aware of its difference



from 'the East', by which was understood the Soviet Union (rather than Europe's 'middle' or 'far' east). And just how 'culturally provincial' to Europe are the commodity form and the labour-based process of accumulation of capital, as such, once established on a world-scale? Is there not a fallacy of genesis here? Ironically, given Harootunian's polemics against culturalism, his construction of Western Marxism seems to exhibit a hyper-culturalist reading of both Western Marxism and capitalism itself. This is not to suggest that there are no specifically capitalist cultures; but they are *cultures of abstraction* (abstraction from historically received cultural practices), economic and temporal cultures of pure form, which consequently coexist with a historical multiplicity of other received cultural practices – as Harootunian acknowledges, indeed emphasizes with regard to non-European societies, but which he inconsistently denies to Euro-American capitalist societies.

The source of the problem here is the incoherence of Harootunian's understanding of 'real subsumption', whereby he retroactively but inconsistently uses a late Negrian conception. Its consequence is a lack of coherence in his conception of capitalism. At the level of his general argument about the difference between European and non-European capitalist societies, Harootunian associates real subsumption (of which formal subsumption is an acknowledged condition) with the 'completion' of capitalism. He thus rejects the general idea of a transition or movement from formal to real subsumption in the development of capitalism, on the grounds that this would put all societies that encounter capitalism onto a similar path to 'completed' capitalism, destroying the intrinsic 'unevenness' of development. But this notion of 'completion' is a peculiar one, made up of two different (and incompatible) conceptions from Marx and Negri, respectively.

Harootunian's idea of 'the completion of capitalism' conflates Marx's account of what makes a capitalist society capitalist (a mode of production in which the commodification of labour-power is sufficiently both extensive and intensive to enable generalized commodity production to become the dominant economic form) with a Frankfurtian/Negrian conception of the subsumption of *all social relations* to capital, and hence what has been called 'pure' or 'absolute' capitalism (cf. Balibar above, p. 20 n7). He thus effectively dissociates 'real subsumption' from the role it plays in Marx's text, focused on the labour process (which Harootunian claims he wants to recover, against Western Marxism, as

the focal point of analysis), by totalizing it in the direction of post-Marxism. This leads, reactively, to a more-or-less exclusive fixation on formal subsumption as 'the general form of every capitalist process of production' (Marx), which, at a general-theoretical level, involves denying real subsumption (and hence genuinely 'capitalist' status) to 'unevenly developing' non-European societies. And this despite the fact that this overextended usage of 'real subsumption' inconsistently cohabits in *Marx After Marx* with Marx's own more restricted (albeit for Marx capitalism-defining) usage, when particular non-European societies are discussed: China, Japan, India, Peru, West Africa, in particular. In these cases, Harootunian draws upon Marx's notion of hybrid subsumption to accommodate a mix of formal and real subsumptions – although this conflicts with his own extended usage of 'real subsumption' to refer to a phantasmatically 'completed' capitalism.

Ironically, given the shape of Harootunian's career, part of the problem here seems to stem from a residual 'historian's' antipathy to theoretical concepts: a sense that, as he puts it on the opening page of the Introduction, with reference to Western Marxism, 'value has trumped history'. But if this might be said of some Western Marxists (Adorno), it cannot be said of Marx himself, for whom value was clearly a historical form, albeit a paradoxically dehistoricizing one. Value has not 'trumped' history, in some discursive game; it has *transformed* it and continues to do so in actuality, in non-European capitalist societies as well as in 'Western' ones. Despite Harootunian's acute sensitivity to and extensive knowledge of the social effects of the capitalist transformation of non-capitalist societies, there is a lurking disavowal of the depth – the social-ontological force – of the actuality of the capital relation within those societies today. (This is evident in the engaging and detailed criticisms of Banaji in chapter 5, for example.) It leads to an exclusive political investment in the resistant 'everyday encompassing work' that marks 'the continuing persistence of historical temporal forms ... from earlier modes in new historical environments'.

Harootunian is right that the economic function of these forms within the present gives the lie to the idea that they are 'merely remnants', but to make them the *only* social forms of resistance to capitalism in those societies is to reproduce the problematic of romantic anti-capitalism nonetheless. For it excludes a constitutive role within opposition to capitalist practices of social forms and practices (and forms of subjectivity) produced by capitalism itself.

The textual basis for Harootunian's interpretation lies in privileging the *Grundrisse* over *Capital* (Marx the 'historian' over Marx the 'theorist' of the value-form) and reading *Capital's* theoretical concepts as expressions of the particularities of the development of capitalism in England. However, the theoretical advances made in *Capital* can in no way be reduced to its historical grounding in the case of the development of capitalism in England. In fact, this historicist reduction of general-theoretical concepts is in direct conflict with Harootunian's own criticisms of historicism.

Critical reference to historicism as a falsely linear and homogeneous conception of historical time has become a familiar trope of left-academic discourse over the last two decades, largely as a result of the still-growing influence of Benjamin's writings. However, it often has a citational or positional function, rather than an analytical or theoretical one. And it is frequently accompanied by a failure to reflect on the historical meaning of the present in a manner necessary to break with the historicist time-consciousness of academic discourse itself. Harootunian's multiple polemics against Western Marxists and postcolonial theorists ground his discourse in a clearly defined academic present. Yet there is an odd lack of any sense of the world-historical present, in its post-1989 and post-2008 determinations of globally financialized capital and its crises. Polemically, Harootunian is conjunctural, but the materials across which he deploys his arguments are conventionally historical, in the sense of belonging to the past: the historical space of the 'expansion of capitalism' from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Within this space, *Marx After Marx* weaves together a complex series of regional comparisons, subsumed under the banner of formal subsumption. However, this focus on formal subsumption (hence the wage-form) also raises some important unasked questions about our wider present, which would give Harootunian's non-European historical materials more immediate political significance, for all capitalist societies. Such as 'What is happening to the wage-form in capitalist societies today, with regard to the invention of zero-hours contracts and the aggressive capitalist use of new technologies in service industries (such as deliveries and taxis) to legally redefine labour as self-employment?' Whatever one's interpretation of those matters, it cannot be denied that we are entering a new period of struggle over the legal form of the sale of labour-power, at the border of Marx's concepts of formal and real

subsumption. Harootunian's recovery of the concept of formal subsumption for the present speaks directly (if unknowingly) to this context.

Left techno-fantasists (journalistic and otherwise) may try to cut the knot of the present with their imperatives to 'accelerate!' or their simple declarations of 'postcapitalism', but *Marx After Marx* reminds us that capitalism is an intractable global phenomenon, articulating a multiplicity of mixed and contradictory historical-economic forms within its reproductive cycles. Neglect of the complexity, geographical dispersion and cultural variety of these forms consigns anti-capitalist politics to effective irrelevance.

Peter Osborne

## Doubly so

Jonna Bornemark and Nicholas Smith, eds, *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*, Södertörn Philosophical Studies 18, Södertörn University Press, Huddinge, 2016. 297 pp., £15.99 pb 978 9 18784 338 9.

At stake in this volume is the question of whether the phenomenological analysis of pregnancy belongs only to 'regional phenomenology' and can be accommodated by existing phenomenological methods and concepts, or whether it ought to be considered as 'transcendentally constitutive' and hence provocative of a more radical transformation of phenomenology's methodological and conceptual core. Indeed, depending upon how one defines 'phenomenology' in the first place, and what kinds of claims one wants to make in its name, we might well ask whether a 'phenomenology of pregnancy' is possible at all.

The most renowned attempt at a phenomenological account of pregnancy is that offered by Iris Marion Young in her 1984 essay 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', in which she contends that the phenomenology of pregnancy radically undermines the traditional philosophical understanding of the self as a strictly bounded, self-contained unit. This challenge to 'a conception of subjectivity as self-contained, autonomous and rational structure', the editors explain, is a unifying theme among all the essays contained in this volume. However, the argument that emerges in Young's essay is somewhat unclear, and the ambiguity similarly permeates this collection: is the claim that pregnancy warrants more phenomenological attention due to its

uniqueness as a situation or mode of embodiment, or is it that pregnancy can be taken as an exemplary site of experience which reveals the intercorporeal enmeshment and unboundedness of embodied intersubjectivity more generally, pregnant or not?

In some of the chapters it is the latter argument which predominates; that is, the significance of the phenomenology of pregnancy derives from its capacity to illuminate the nature of consciousness, embodiment and intersubjectivity per se. For example, Alice Pugliese claims that the experience of pregnancy allows a different idea of consciousness to 'appear in an eminent way' – an idea of consciousness based on the assumption that 'even healthy and normal subjects harbour in themselves instances which are not immediate expressions of their will and decisions'. The example of pregnancy, she contends, 'does not represent an "extraordinary case"'. Rather, its epistemological importance depends on the fact that 'it allows a general, ordinary structure of consciousness to emerge' which can best be explicated through a phenomenology of drives. April Flakne similarly proposes in her chapter that we treat pregnant intersubjectivity as an 'extreme' experience that has something to teach us more generally about intercorporeality and the 'embodied relations to others that are experienced constantly, though less dramatically, in everyday life'.

Yet, is pregnant embodiment really just a heightened or extreme version of 'intercorporeal affectivity' as a general condition? Does this kind of claim really do justice to the specificity of the structure of pregnancy whereby a foetus is living inside an adult body – a structure, moreover, which constitutes the very condition of possibility for intercorporeality between natal subjects? As Nicholas Smith suggests in his opening chapter, the 'double embodiment' of pregnancy leads us into territory quite alien to phenomenology traditionally conceived, even in the 'generative' variant explored by Husserl in his later writings. For Husserl, the perspective of generative phenomenology is premised upon a recognition of 'birth and death as essential occurrences for the constitution of the world', taking us beyond the egological first-person perspective which, as Smith explains, 'cannot make sense of its own birth, and thus has to rely on information provided by others'. But when birth and death are treated as the twin poles of the generative sphere, we lose sight of the specific situation that is *pregnancy*, which requires us to attend to the relation between the natal and the prenatal, and indeed the nature of prenatal existence itself. For

instance, Smith asks, though birth has been regarded as a condition of possibility for intentionality, is there not a kind of intentionality operative within foetal or intrauterine life? 'The foetus', he claims, 'is active, initiates action, and does not only respond ... in short, it must have its own form of intentionality that is not merely mediated through the mother'. He is drawing here upon biological research but also refers to a 1935 text in which Husserl writes of foetal kinaesthesia:

the child in the womb already has kinaesthesia and kinaesthetically moves its 'things' – already a primordiality at an originary level developing itself ... the newly born ... already has its acquisition of experience from its existence in the mother's womb ... it is already an I of higher habitualities, but without self-reflection, without developed temporality.

The implication here is that if we are to take the structure of pregnancy seriously as a unique mode of double or multiple embodiment, as a period of gestation as well as a lived experience of the pregnant woman, we would have to rethink and broaden some of the fundamental concepts within phenomenology, including intentionality and experience itself. That is, if the foetus is understood to 'experience' gestation during pregnancy, this is something quite different to the way a pregnant woman experiences pregnancy, and exceeds the technical phenomenological concept of experience pertaining to the creative role of subjectivity or intersubjectivity in constituting an objective world. As Jonna Bornemark argues in her chapter, bringing foetal life into the remit of phenomenology necessitates an expanded notion of experience that encompasses the pre- or asubjective level, and moreover a move beyond phenomenology's commitment to the first-person perspective as the only legitimate methodological standpoint. After all, the only way we can 'know' anything about how 'experience' is structured within uterine life is to draw upon 'third-person' empirical and theoretical knowledge from within the natural sciences.

But to what extent is this valid within the terms of phenomenology, at least as it has traditionally been formulated? For those wedded to the phenomenological procedure of 'bracketing' such knowledge, such a move will effectively constitute an abandonment of phenomenology altogether. This would mean that a phenomenology of pregnancy is indeed impossible, or at least it could only be possible if undertaken strictly from the perspective of the pregnant subject, refraining from exploring those aspects of pregnancy that exceed the pregnant subject's lived experience.

But even if we want to treat pregnancy strictly as a mode of subjective lived embodiment, the very experience of pregnant embodiment *as* pregnant does seem to entail an ineluctable element of theoretical or 'natural' knowledge. A first-person phenomenological account of pregnancy like Young's can describe an experience of feeling heavy and developing a 'round, hard middle', for example, but doesn't one experience the rounding and hardening of the belly as an experience of pregnant embodiment precisely because one has a preconceived theoretical knowledge of what pregnancy is? That is, would the pregnant person 'know' that the bodily effects she was experiencing were due to the existence and development of a foetus within her uterus without a basic theoretical understanding of human biology and reproduction, or the confirmatory knowledge provided by pregnancy tests and ultrasound screening?

If there is one thing this volume demonstrates, in my view, it is the impossibility of a self-sufficient phenomenology of pregnancy. Although this is not explicitly stated by the editors, they do seem to acknowledge as much in their brief introduction, when they write that 'the attempt to understand this evasive phenomenon excludes neither other philosophical approaches nor related disciplines such as psychoanalysis, cognitive science, literature and art, neurobiology and developmental psychology; to the contrary, all of these contribute decisive perspectives for the uncovering of the enigma of pregnancy and are put into dialogue with each other in this volume'. However, once we accept the need for phenomenology to supplement itself with other disciplinary perspectives and procedures, serious methodological questions arise which the volume does not really get to grips with. The discipline besides phenomenology that receives the most attention in the volume is psychoanalysis, but without much by way of editorial analysis of the ways in which the different chapters relate to one another, the interdisciplinary 'dialogue' between phenomenology and psychoanalysis is undeveloped.

For instance, whilst Graigne Lucie's analysis of the 'maternal' and 'maternity' in the work of Julia Kristeva is illuminating, sophisticated and provocative, it is unclear what this contributes towards a *phenomenology* of pregnancy, which, after all, is the title of the volume. Towards the end of the chapter, Lucie points to the limitations of psychoanalytic theory, namely that it has been too quick to interpret descriptions of pregnant embodiment in terms of ego investment or a return to primary narcissism,

failing not only to mark 'how the infant is simply implicated in maternity's transformation of the instinctual-reflective or semiotic-symbolic axis', but, moreover, to 'acknowledge the singularity of each maternity'. It seems that an opening for phenomenological analysis could be emerging here, but the relation between 'phenomenal descriptions' and the speculative psychoanalytic account of ego-formation, narcissism and auto-eroticism is not spelled out in any detail, which is also the case within the other two psychoanalytic chapters in the volume by Joan Raphael-Leff and Erik Bryngelsson. As such, whilst these chapters are interesting in their own right, they do not take us much further in understanding the relationship between the phenomenological, the theoretical and the speculative.

These issues of interdisciplinarity and method are raised by Stella Sandford in her chapter early on in the volume, where she argues that methodological imprecision has long been a problem within feminist phenomenology. Going back to the landmark 1984 essay by Young, in which she presents her first-person phenomenological description of pregnant embodiment as a confirmation of Kristeva's theoretical postulate of the 'split subject', Sandford contends that the theoretical and phenomenological modes cannot be simply blended together in this manner, given that the phenomenological specificity of Young's first-person account should supposedly be 'the result of having bracketed any theoretical presuppositions concerning subjectivity'. Sandford also questions the use that Young makes of extracts from literature and diary entries (primarily by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*) to complement or demonstrate her phenomenological claims. This kind of mixing of first-person and third-person accounts has become very common within feminist phenomenology, but it raises a challenging set of methodological questions. For instance, 'What is the relationship between third-person accounts and the interpreting phenomenologist?' 'What are the criteria for the selection of sources?' And, further, 'is the phenomenologist obliged to take account of third-person data that *conflicts with* their first-person phenomenology'?

Such questions and issues need to be more adequately addressed if we want to be clear about what it is we are doing when we are doing phenomenology, and, moreover, if we are not unwittingly to import aspects of the phenomenological tradition we would wish to leave behind. Further, as feminist phenomenologists attend to such critical questions, I would also urge a closer interrogation of our attachments

and relations to the phenomenological canon. At various points in the volume, the suggestion is that feminist phenomenology of pregnancy will radically transform phenomenology as we know it; yet in some of the chapters the relationship between feminist philosophy and traditional androcentric phenomenology is presented in a rather more congenial and mutually supportive manner. For example, in chapters pertaining to canonical male thinkers, including Levinas, Sartre and Bataille, the androcentrism of such thinkers is acknowledged – as evident in Levinas's formulation of fecundity in terms of paternity, for example – but there is nevertheless a common agreement that their basic phenomenological models can help us analyse pregnancy, and in turn that taking pregnancy into account can help us improve and fine-tune those models. A somewhat harmonious rapprochement between feminist and androcentric phenomenology thus emerges: if only those canonical philosophers had paid proper attention to pregnancy, their accounts would have been more complete and convincing. But does feminist philosophy really need

to continue orbiting around the same male philosophers in this way? Is feminist philosophy best served by conceptual frameworks which never had any anchoring or investment in female experience? Moreover, it is important that traditional, heteronormative models of social relations during pregnancy are more thoroughly problematized, and that experiences of terminated, lost, impossible and unconventional pregnancies are included in discussions of this kind – otherwise there is a real danger that we will simply cement phenomenology as a conservative mode of philosophy, or replicate those normative models of pregnancy that have played such a key role in the oppression of women and perpetuation of patriarchal thought. But this ought not to dampen enthusiasm or be taken as a deterrent. The creativity, richness and vitality of many of the essays in the volume indicate that the phenomenology of pregnancy certainly has the capacity to tackle these critical issues and continue working towards delivering on its transformative promise.

**Victoria Browne**

## Take that, Frankfurtists

Anita Chari, *A Political Economy of the Senses: Neoliberalism, Reification, Critique*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015. 284 pp., £67.00 hb., £22.00 pb., 978 0 23117 388 9 hb., 978 0 23117 389 6 pb.

According to Anita Chari's compelling and impressive new book, neoliberalism requires a 'reconstruction' of Georg Lukács's concept of reification: first, because certain elements of Lukács's pioneering essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' do not adequately describe the structures of reification in contemporary capitalism; but second, because Lukács's concept is the one that best enables us to grapple with the present-day forms of capitalist domination. Whereas the alienated workers of industrial capitalism were passive and disengaged, the subjects of contemporary neoliberalism are actively involved in their alienation. Stylistic choices, communicative networks, affective engagements with others, the expression and fulfilment of personal desires all contribute directly to the information economy, the construction and consolidation of which has been facilitated by the spread of social media. Such once-peripheral elements of the consumer economy have become (in Maurizio Lazzarato's words) 'directly productive'. In these ways, reified subjectivity, insists

Chari, is no longer a supplementary effect of the production process but 'an immediate site of capital accumulation'. The most important element of Chari's reconstruction of the concept of reification, then, involves the degree to which the activity and engagement of neoliberal subjects are not at odds with their alienation but its very machinery.

Students of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* may wonder where the notion of the 'passivity' of Lukács's industrial proletariat comes from. When Lukács describes reification as a 'phantom objectivity' – that is, 'an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people' – the 'passivity' of reified subjectivity is not overt but always obscured by an illusion of activity. What, then, is so different about the 'entrepreneurial' activism of neoliberalism? And when Lukács famously describes the journalist's 'lack of convictions' and 'prostitution' of his experiences and beliefs as exemplary of 'capitalist reification', it is difficult to

see a substantial difference with the ways in which neoliberalism mobilizes and exploits the interiority of its subjects.

Nevertheless, Chari's claim of a distinct neoliberal form of reification only goes to support the important larger case made in her book: the indispensability of Lukács's concept for understanding the present. Even at the cost of an incomplete reading of Lukács's essay this premiss distinguishes Chari's book, especially among prominent recent accounts of neoliberalism. What comes over especially clearly is the quality of neoliberalism as an ideology. As Foucault's indispensable 1978–79 lectures make clear, neoliberalism is a mode of 'governmentality' predicated on an extension of market logic to the domain of the self. Foucault's *Homo oeconomicus* is no longer simply 'a partner of exchange', as for Adam Smith, but an 'entrepreneur of himself'. Chari gently registers her differences with accounts of neoliberalism that have taken insufficient notice of the way this structural relationship to subjectivity works ideologically.



By contrast with such accounts, Chari's analysis presents us with a clear horizon to the neoliberal order, a sense of its ideological reach and limits. It is not simply that subjects are 'distracted' from politics by consumption, nor that contemporary politics are 'modelled' on consumption; rather, the productive energies of subjects are increasingly 'capture[d] and co-opt[ed]' by neoliberal conditions of labour. The great resonance of the term 'immaterial labor', for Chari, is in describing the degree to which 'more and more features of social life become productive for capital'.

An instructive comparison might be drawn with the way Wendy Brown bewails neoliberalism

for 'transforming the distinctly *political* character, meaning and operation of democracy's constituent elements into *economic* ones' in *Undoing the Demos* (2015). Here 'democracy' and 'liberalism' lose their ideological inflection and become, instead, the normative basis for a critique of neoliberalism tinged with nostalgia. Brown's struggle to avoid the nostalgic mode is not helped by the anecdotes that punctuate her narrative about online dating agencies, or schoolteachers compelled by new 'benchmarks' to cheat in order to improve students' exam results, or universities' replacement of faculty advising (aimed at developing 'well-educated and well-rounded graduates') with scheduling algorithms that treat courses as consumer goods. To favour 'economization' over an always reversible concept like reification is to resort to what Theodor Adorno, drawing on Lukács, would lambast as a 'subjective concept', unmediated by the object.

Importantly, the backdrop to Chari's proposed 'reconstruction' of the concept of reification is not primarily Lukács but the second and third generations of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, represented by Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth respectively. Both figures, but particularly Honneth, come in for strong criticism in Chari's second chapter, subtitled 'Third Generation Critical Theory and the Fetish of Intersubjectivity'. Not only do Habermas and Honneth fail to grapple with the shifts in the structure of capitalism that were brilliantly anticipated by their Frankfurt School predecessors, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer; their failure is actually implicated in those shifts. Chari is generous to Honneth's 2006 co-authored (with Martin Hartmann) essay 'Paradoxes of Capitalism', acknowledging what she calls its 'nuanced attention to the fetishization of normativity in neoliberalism'; but she is disparaging of Honneth's own reconstruction of the concept of reification in his widely criticized Tanner lectures in 2005 (see Nina Power's review in *RP* 154). In a remarkable phrase (which she associates with Hartmann and Honneth's text but attributes to Kathi Weeks), Chari talks of the 'surplus of normativity' that appears with the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject. Third-generation Frankfurtists such as Honneth and Seyla Benhabib have been concerned to construct a 'normative standpoint' from which to criticize society. But the crisis of neoliberalism, points out Chari, is not a normative 'deficit' but a normative 'surplus', as capitalist production 'increasingly relies on mobilizing the capacities of individuals in creating new arenas

for capital accumulation'. For Chari, to reconceive reification as a drama of 'intersubjectivity' – as in Honneth's idea of reification as failure of recognition – is to strip the concept of its critical bite. With his reformulation Honneth transforms the most complex, inexhaustible and still unfathomed critical discovery of Western Marxism, its greatest conceptual weapon against the infinite mutability of capitalist ideology, into a kind of failure of manners, a lack of 'empathy'; in other words, a communitarian theme of neoliberal ideology.

Another important element that structures Chari's book is her hope of offering an alternative to two divergent traditions of political critique that, individually, are incapable of grasping the singularity of the present. The distinction is made in Chari's opening pages between theorists of 'radical democracy' and political economists. The former include Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, William Connolly and Jacques Rancière; the latter include neo-Marxists such as David Harvey and Moishe Postone (who is one of Chari's former academic advisors at the University of Chicago). Chari's 'political economy of the senses', outlined in the third part of the book, will be a 'synthesis' of these two tendencies. The problem with radical democracy is that it perpetuates an 'autonomous' conception of politics that is too little attentive to the imbrication of politics with the economy. The problem with political economy is that it is oblivious to the 'experiential dimensions of political movements'. Chari's synthesis owes a great deal to Marx's early writings, particularly the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, where Marx identifies 'true democracy' as (in Chari's words) a 'boundless potentiality', in contradistinction to the 'rigidification' of the political that takes place in the institution. She doesn't mention the enigmatic fragment from the 1844 Manuscripts entitled 'Private Property and Communism', perhaps the most powerful statement on the place of art in Marx's theory of communism, where Marx imagines communism as 'the complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes'. Marx's fragment is all the more powerful (and enigmatic) as a statement on aesthetics because the word 'art' barely appears there. Just as, for Marx, politics (meaning the political state) 'disappears in a true democracy', so in Marx's aesthetic theory there is no art as such – because 'these senses and attributes have become *human*, subjectively as well as objectively'.

And so, in Part Three of her book, Chari's answer to the problem of political economy's positivism, on

the one hand, and radical democracy's utopianism, on the other, will be found in a 'political economy of the senses'; or, put more briefly, in art. Inevitably one feels one has trodden this ground before. But the transition is contrived elegantly, via a detailed navigation through Adorno's shifting treatment of the concept of reification in the preceding chapter. Each of Adorno's three major works in which reification is central falls down, for Chari, in a way that art does not. Thus *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-authored with Horkheimer (1947), discusses 'social reification' but is unable to extract the concept from a timeless, ahistorical model of instrumentality. *Negative Dialectics* (1966) discusses 'philosophical reification', in the form of identity thinking, but never adequately distinguishes it from the objective world. *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) discusses 'aesthetic reification' as simultaneously ideological and emancipatory, but the potentiality of thereby effecting a 'radical subtraction' from the social order remains obscure. In each case, the power that is attributed to the concept of reification is purely 'negative', the category of praxis all but 'invisible'.



By comparison, Chari takes the contemporary artworks she discusses in the sixth chapter as works of theory that are free of theory's 'excessive cognitivism', forms of materialist critique whose materialism is 'formal' as much as theoretical. It is difficult to do justice to Chari's discussions of these works, which include pieces by 'Claire Fontaine' (the *nom de guerre* of two otherwise anonymous French artists), the New York-based Argentine video artist Mika Rotenberg, the partnership of Oliver Ressler and Zanny

Begg from Austria and Australia respectively, and the American community and installation artist Jason Lazarus. One or two examples must suffice. Ressler and Begg's *The Bull Laid Bear*, a video work from 2012, features the former bank regulator and white-collar criminologist William K. Black talking to camera about the bailout of big banks by the Irish government in 2008. His filmed monologue, in which he ridicules the idea of 'too big to fail' and points up various logical and legal irregularities in the actions of the Irish government ('the dumbest governmental reaction to a banking crisis in the history of the world'), is combined with animated images that frame the monologue as a bar scene in which Black appears as a customer, alongside an animated fellow customer who periodically turns away from the speaker towards the viewer wearing expressions of complicity, mock-outrage and boredom. The multiple framing, which features a jazz music soundtrack, a succession of bears dressed and behaving like out-of-control off-duty bankers, and contributions by other pundits, interrupts any reading of the work as simply pedagogical; at the same time, it's impossible simply to abrogate the pedagogical power of Black's insights. In fact, one might say that the message of the piece is both identical and non-identical to Black's monologue. A difference is opened up within Black's discourse itself, one that neither separates the work from the monologue nor permits its identification with it. The relation has an 'experiential' dimension that 'cognitive' theoretical discourses (including Chari's, presumably) are incapable of grasping.

The same kind of claim might be made of Jason Lazarus's gallery installation *Phase 1/Live Archive* (2013), an engagement with the Occupy movement in which the artist, working with community members and visitors to the exhibition, reconstructs protest signs that were created and displayed during Occupy. Again, the installation risks inviting a reading of sentimental identification or, worse, appropriation, but for the presence of an amateur pianist in an adjacent gallery room, imperfectly practising Chopin's pathetic composition *Nocturne in F Minor*. Each work inflects and reframes the possible emotions or dissatisfactions aroused by the other. Again, Chari encourages us to view these works as in complete sympathy with the aims of Occupy while being, to the same degree, nonequivalent to them.

Chari's project is brought to an appropriate conclusion in her final chapter, on Occupy Wall Street, 'one of the most theoretical movements in historical

memory', she reminds us, alluding to the involvement of theorists and political analysts in the earliest stages of the movement and the run of celebrity academic visitors to Zuccotti Park. 'For once', she tells us, 'the owl of Minerva was flying at dawn.' This claim, presented in isolation in the context of a brief review, may seem overblown, but Chari's argument, structured around the claims of both radical democracy and political economy, provides a convincing rationale for the idea that Occupy actually achieved something like 'an experientially oriented critique of political economy – a political economy of the senses'. Elements of the movement's operating principles,



such as the General Assemblies, evoke the claims of radical democracy, while longer-term projects, such as the 'Strike Debt' initiative to buy back and forgive the debt of ordinary citizens at the same discounted prices at which such debts are sold on to financial institutions, show an extraordinary practical and critical engagement with political economy. As Chari says herself in her final paragraph, the contemporary answer to the challenge of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach is not to abandon theory but to 'materialize critique'. Her discussion of Occupy exemplifies perhaps the most refreshing quality of her book: its willingness to frame its own ambitions in the loftiest terms, even when this brings her up against the grandest of forebears. Indeed, if theoretical discourse is in any case debarred from 'true democracy', or the political economy of the senses, why do anything less?

**Timothy Bewes**

# By numbers

Nathan Coombs, *History and Event: From Marxism to Contemporary French Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2015. 224 pp., £70.00 hb., 978 074869 899 8.

Is a science of history possible? This question, which has been out of fashion for some while, is addressed anew in Nathan Coombs's first book. The book can be considered, in effect, a reaction to the postmodern and poststructuralist disarticulation of 'history' from 'event', and to the ensuing elimination of the desirability or even the very possibility of a science of history. 'Is not the lasting message of poststructuralist critiques of grand narratives', he asks, that the science of history is ineluctably 'wedded to a totalizing hubris we long ago learned to be wary of'? Should we not break free from any idea of a science of history, from its intrinsic historicism, and devote our philosophical efforts to contingent and unpredictable events?

Coombs refuses this dichotomy. Rather than the stark opposition between history and event that followed the criticism of Hegelian and Marxist historicism, he proposes the (rationalist) idea that an articulation of history and event is possible. The opening claim of *History and Event* is that a science of history is not simply the opposite of the poststructuralist philosophies of the event, but rather something else: 'Its essence lies in its ability to rationally articulate events with longer, drawn out processes ... A precondition of a science of history, in other words, is the possibility of conceptualizing history and event not as a stark binary but as a complementary pair.'

However, *History and Event* is not a theoretical study of the conditions of possibility of a science of history. Instead, it presents the reader with two 'moments' that are held to be decisive for its possibilities and problems: 'Marxism' and 'French Theory'. Nonetheless, the subtitle of the book is misleading. The book is divided into three parts, and neither starts with Marxism nor ends with French Theory: the first part tackles Hegel, Marx and Lenin; the second part, Althusser, Badiou and Meillassoux; the third part is devoted to 'complexity theory', presented as a solution to (and the impression is a dialectical sublation of) the questions raised in the preceding parts. As such, the book is a sort of hybrid: neither pure history of philosophy, nor pure theoretical elaboration, but a critical and immanent investigation of the ways in which first Marxism and then 'French Theory' have conceptualized the central terms of

a science of history – in particular, its notion of 'change'.

The untimely aspect of Coombs's book is the centrality to it of Althusser's writings from the 1960s. Althusser's significance here is his peculiar historical position *trait d'union* between orthodox Marxism, with its emphasis on the gradual and teleological development of history, and the attention to discontinuities and ruptures typical of more recent philosophy. Were it not for some problems that will be addressed below, Coombs's project could even be defined as 'neo-Althusserian', at least in the sense that it explicitly attempts to recuperate Althusser's original project of recasting a science of history, purified of any historicist bias. Althusser may appear to be the subject of only one chapter, but it is evident that Coombs owes much to him in his reading of Hegel, Marx and Lenin. In fact, the objective of the whole first part of the book can be regarded as a testing (as well as a relaunching and enriching) of the critique of Hegel's historicism and the insistence on Marx's anti-historicism. It investigates: the intrinsic historicism in Hegel's *Science of Logic* (namely, the confusion of logical and chronological, with particular reference to the concepts of quantity and quality); the 'logic' of Marx's *Capital*; and, finally, Lenin's enduring debt to Engels's dialectical materialism (in contrast to suggestions that Lenin was an innovator made, for example, by Dunayevskaya, Anderson and Negri). An interesting, but obscured, trace of Coombs's debt to Althusser may be seen in his chapter on Marx, where he convincingly demonstrates a thesis of the 'late' Althusser, but without mentioning him. Coombs shows how the historically contingent separation of workers from means of production is a key element in Marx's analysis of the genesis of capital, which, consequently, is not compatible with the logico-chronological development of the categories of Hegel's *Science of Logic*.

The general conclusion of the first part of *History and Event* is hardly new. Coombs argues that the dialectics of orthodox Marxism (derived more from Engels than from Marx) is ultimately vitiated by the 'idea of quantity-quality leaps [which] comes attached to the teleological structure of Hegel's dialectics', leaving it unable to think of discontinuities in

a satisfactory way. Within its framework, historical change can only be conceptualized as a gradual and teleologically oriented process.

In Coombs's transition to part two of *History and Event*, from 'Marxism' to 'French Theory', he justifies his 'jump' from Lenin to Althusser with the claim that between them there are only 'minor modifications' to the paradigm of orthodox Marxism. This is not only bold, but false. Gramsci, for one, must be considered more than a minor theoretical figure. The main argument of the second part is that Althusser simultaneously represents the watershed in the history of Marxism, and the beginning of a 'speculative' turn, a 'Platonic' inflection that detaches the science of history from the control of empirical verification. Badiou and Meillassoux are read within this trajectory, as the (teleo)logical development of the problems of the 'high' Althusserianism of the 1960s.

To everyone who is acquainted with the history of Althusserianism, this argument is nothing new. It is also well known that Althusser's epistemology was harshly criticized, especially in the anglophone world, for his Spinozism and refusal of external empirical verification, and Coombs repeats this criticism by invoking the authority of the positivist concept of 'verification', but without further investigation. Despite its centrality, Coombs's treatment of Althusser is disappointing, and particularly where the relationship between history and event is concerned. He pays great attention to the problems inherent in the concept of 'epistemological break' and to the ensuing difficulties to connect the science of history with class struggle, namely with 'real' history outside the domain of science. However, little to no attention is paid to Althusser's articulation of the 'necessity of contingency' (a category that is explicitly presented in *Reading Capital*) and the problem of the 'historical event', which was posited by Althusser as one of the key problems of a science of history (again, in *Reading Capital*). It is unfortunate that Coombs overlooks all this, relying almost exclusively on relatively old secondary literature, especially in light of his declared project of bringing together 'necessity' and 'contingency' in a new science of history.

Coombs devotes himself to a stringent analysis of Badiou's *Being and Event*. He argues that Badiou's conspicuous judgements on historical events (for instance, on the Arab Spring) is not a late characteristic of his philosophy, but finds its grounds in his metaontology. Coombs's judgement on Badiou is that his philosophy represents a 'self referential

rationalism that cannot transcend the arbitrariness of its construction', and cannot in any serious way 'be considered a materialism'. Coombs's chapter on Meillassoux follows the same path. Meillassoux (although he is not a Marxist and is uninterested in any science of history) is seen as the zenith of the Platonist tendency at work both in Althusser and in Badiou. The interesting move made by Coombs here is that he challenges the reception of Meillassoux's 'speculative materialism' as a philosophical realism, bringing its political implications to the fore. However, the way in which Coombs addresses Meillassoux brings him closer to Derrida than to Althusser. By taking into account works other than *After Finitude* (in particular, *L'inexistence divine*), Coombs notes that for Meillassoux, like Derrida, negating historicist metaphysics goes hand in hand with ontological speculation about the contingent event. The main issue here is whether Meillassoux can really be seen together with Althusser (and Badiou), given that, as Coombs admits, Meillassoux's project is explicitly rooted in a refusal of the Marxist 'historical symbol' (that is, the Marxist project). Coombs is certainly right to stress that Meillassoux's insistence on contingency implies a rejection of Hegelian teleology and that this is something that he shares with Althusser and Badiou. However, this does not seem enough to justify the construction of a lineage in which Meillassoux is considered an heir to Althusser.

In any case, the outcome of this Althusserian legacy, for Coombs, is that it rightly insisted on discontinuity and contingency, but failed to avoid a rationalist-authoritative trap. In the third and last part of the book, Coombs proposes his own solution for the constitution of a science of history in 'complexity theory', particularly its concept of 'emergence', which, he argues, would guarantee a sort of 'correct repetition' of the Althusserian project of the 1960s. Coombs is well aware that the concept of emergence lends itself to interpretations that tend to derive from it a total unpredictability of the 'event', ruling out any possibility of scientific explanation. So he distinguishes between two versions of emergence, 'weak' and 'strong'. While 'strong emergence' has become a synonym of mere indetermination, 'weak emergence' 'satisfies the key demand that is placed on the concept of emergence – thinking the apparent underivability of emergent phenomena as a result of non-linear and context-dependent micro-level interaction – yet does so by still holding out the possibility of scientific explanation'. Following the work of De Landa and Bedau, Coombs argues that

the distinction of weak and strong emergence allows for an 'empirical control'. According to Coombs, the concept of weak emergence is more in keeping with the real practice of scientists and does not lend itself to the metaphysical generalization of the indeterministic kind. In sum, it is possible to derive change, but only in a 'non trivial way' – that is, via computer simulation.

What can this model of weak emergence offer a science of history? More to the point, what can it offer politics? The last section of the book provides answers to these questions, which revolve around what Coombs calls a 'politics of simulation', which

amounts to a new technocratic dream. In fact, the question to ask is: what conception of political practice is involved here? Coombs does not provide an answer. The emancipatory force of this politics is placed under the caution of Marx's phrase, which states that men make their own history, 'but not as they please'. However, it is hard to conceive that Marx would have agreed to a conception of political practice like that implicitly endorsed by Coombs, which de facto reduces it to the application of a knowledge 'from above', not produced in the living practice of the class struggle, but in the abstraction of its simulation.

Coombs seems to be aware of the difficulties of his position, so much so that at one point he asks 'who would run such models?' Furthermore, would not they inevitably confer 'a certain authority to those who operate them?' The problems with such a 'politics of simulation' are rendered even more unsettling by the fact that Coombs admits: 'in order to avoid processes of reflexivity undermining the model's predictions, the results of simulation may need to be masked from the individuals and groups being modelled, raising the spectre of manipulation'. These are serious problems, especially in light of the criticism levelled by Coombs himself against Althusser, Badiou and Meillassoux, namely the conferral of an uncontrollable authority to science and philosophy. However, whilst recognizing that these problems are real, Coombs argues that 'anyone with a computer and a theoretically informed imagination' can operate these simulations, and that this can bring the 'politics of simulations' back down to earth from the 'Platonic heights assumed by Althusserian theory'. These answers are, to



would consist of applying computer-based simulations in order to elaborate political strategies: 'Modulating simulations experimentally ... can serve to disentangle general constraining principles governing human interactions (necessity) from the inflections provided by specific social structures (contingency)'; 'in a complex, epistemologically opaque and globalized world, agent-based modelling and simulation may help us know the limits and the potential of political practice'.

This proposition is, to say the least, problematic. It seems that we are confronted here with what

be frank, totally unsatisfying. The issue demands a much more theoretically cogent treatment. Coombs excuses himself from this on the basis of practical considerations. 'There are no easy answers to these questions', argues Coombs, 'and I will not squander the limited number of words I have left attempting to provide them.' Obviously, a practical justification cannot make up for the lack of a convincing theoretical argument. We have long since learnt to be wary of Marx's excuse for not writing a dialectic.

**Stefano Pippa**

# Stocks and shares

Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, Verso, London and New York, 2016. 496 pp., £65.00 hb., £20.00 pb., 978 1 784 78132 3 hb., 978 1 78478 129 3 pb.

Andreas Malm's *Fossil Capital* constitutes a major and important revision of Marxist theory, in that it elaborates for the first time the essential role played by fossil fuels in the establishment and maintenance of all capitalist economic and political regimes: capitalism *tout court*. Malm establishes both why fossil fuel production was necessary for the flourishing of capitalism, and why capitalism is not only dependent on fossil fuels, but must always install fossil fuel use in every crevice of the global economy.

Previously Marxism had seen the creation of value largely in (human) labour power; Malm makes it clear that labour power from the first has been, in capitalism, inseparable from the implementation of fossil-fuel power in machinery (initially the steam engine). Human labour is inseparable from fossil-fuel power, not only historically, but economically, in the deep logic of capitalism: the use of fossil fuels has been necessary to the particular form of exploitation and economic growth, and crisis, that capitalism has developed.

Fredric Jameson's famous quip that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism here finds its explanation: the end of the world, in the form of global warming, is the direct result of capitalism's necessary implementation of fossil fuels. Capitalism and total dependence on fossil fuels are one and the same, as are, ultimately, capitalism and the end of the world. Conversely, to defeat capitalism, to go to the next, egalitarian stage of economic organization, would therefore necessarily also mean passing out of dependence on fossil fuels, and into a full implementation of renewables.

Basing his larger argument on solid and exhaustive historical research, Malm argues that, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, water power provided cheaper and more easily harnessed energy for manufacturers than did coal and the steam engine. Why, then, did steam prevail over water power? To a certain extent it was for the same reason that renewables today are more difficult to implement: they are intermittent. The sun goes down, the wind doesn't blow. In the eighteenth century, as today, this limitation can be overcome, but what's most important is that intermittence violates the logic of capitalist production itself. As Malm puts it,

Only the stock [i.e. stockpiled energy resources] can be conjured up as a *power in motion internal to capital itself*, setting it free from flowing nature and, indeed, from everyone else, in a sort of thermodynamic autoeroticism.

'Internal to capitalism itself': in other words, capitalism needs stockpiled energy resources, always at the ready, just as it needs stockpiled labour, always at the ready as well, never dawdling, never tied to the 'natural' rhythms of daily life. Capitalism can only function in a kind of total autonomy, converting everything to its own internal logic of quantification and abstraction. Thus capitalism needs centralization; not the locale by the river where water power can be tapped, but the city in which a factory can be easily linked to always-at-the-ready labour and transportation. Not part-time workers who stop by from their jobs on local farms or pastures, but workers dedicated to (or condemned to) intensive, nonstop work in factories. From flow to stock; from 'naturally' occurring power resources (water in streams) to those that can be stockpiled, themselves the result of the mediation of human labour (coal mining).

Echoing Heidegger on technology, Malm writes:

[Growth] is a set of relations just as much as a process, whose limitless expansion *advances by ordering humans and the rest of nature in abstract space and time* because that is where most surplus-value can be produced.

However, Malm's critique of the 'standing reserve', unlike Heidegger's, shows how the reserve is integral to capitalism; the 'world picture' is not simply a kind of inexplicable losing of the way, but a specific economic and political development that can and must be resisted, if the world is to be saved from the ravages of climate change.

The debt to Heidegger here is matched with another to Henri Lefebvre; the notion of an abstract space, clearly derived from Lefebvre, can now be shown to result not just from the general logic of capitalism, as Lefebvre would have it, but specifically from the logic of the capitalist implementation of fossil fuel. Coal and, later, oil have produced a homogeneous space, one of transport, labour and capital flow ('globalization'). Out of this space has come the

fragmentation of city life and the wearing away of local cultures into more general 'non-space', as Marc Augé would call it.

A crucial point in all this is Malm's critique of the notion of the 'anthropocene'. Paul Crutzen's idea of a geological epoch in which climate change and mass extinction are triggered, for the first time in the earth's history, by a single animal species – *Homo sapiens* – has become fashionable in recent years. Malm refutes this theory, or at least many of its supporters (such as Dipesh Chakrabarty), who would claim that climate change is the result of the actions of a single species, above and beyond specific cultural, gender or political distinctions. Malm's point is that, because climate change, fossil fuel use and capitalism are inseparable, one cannot assign responsibility for cataclysmic change to an ahistorical and apolitical 'humanity' in general. Indeed the 'carbon footprint' of many people in the developing world is so small that their responsibility for climate change is negligible.

The ever greater quantities of fossil fuels demanded by capitalism – a trend that Malm shows increasing in future years, despite climate change protocols – indicate that the 'end of the world' scenario cited by Jameson will continue to be our future, until capitalism is somehow stopped in its tracks. It is capitalism that is behind climate change, not a falsely universalized humanity. Countering climate change is a tall order indeed, but the alternative, as Malm shows, citing recent research, would literally mean the end of humanity as we know it, if not species extinction (our own and many others') pure and simple.

Clearly an anomaly here is Soviet communism, which presumably did offer an (undesirable) alternative to capitalism, but relied upon the same fossil fuels so integral to capitalism. Malm does not dwell on this anomaly (although he does mention it), and perhaps one could argue that communism as we know it never was able to extricate itself fully from capitalism, preferring instead only a model of state-directed bureaucratic corporatism. What, then, is to be done?

After quite rightly reviewing the current dilemma – climate crisis leading to an unlivable planet (at least for humans and many other species) within the next fifty years unless something is done *now* – Malm faces the problem that capitalist resistance to the 'flow' is no different now from what it was two hundred years ago:

Ready to sacrifice neither spatial mobility and temporal uniformity nor the anarchy of competition,

it [capitalism] rather entered upon the construction of a fossil economy; trying to get out of that structure today, the fire alarm ringing, we seem to face doors locked with the same keys.

Malm, however, is able to offer only one solution: a kind of vast overarching planning that would enforce a return to the 'flow', a radical reduction in levels of consumption, and a wholesale rejection of the 'stock'. Although he doesn't use the words, one is struck by the implication that the only thing that can save us from the 'end of the world' is a technocratic model for the enforcement of sustainability, based on the 'flow', and directed from above:

The capture of [the] forces [of the 'res communes' of water, light and air] appears technically viable on condition of planning and coordination on a level unknown today, sweeping industries, nations, several continents under the wings of Irwell commissioners for the twenty-first century.

The Irwell commission, as Malm explains, in 1832 hoped to regulate the use of a 'commons' – the Irwell reservoirs – by various mill owners. It was a 'sort of riparian government, halfway between municipal authority and corporate bureaucracy, with the right to tax the occupiers, provide for their energy needs', and so on. Unfortunately, the Irwell plan went nowhere in Parliament in 1832, and it is not clear how this kind of top-down management of the 'flow' would succeed today. Malm implicitly, and rightly, provides a rather stark choice: either a contemporary Irwell plan, under the aegis of the state, or planetary wipeout; not much word, though, on how to get there from here. One can't blame Malm – this is the problem of the century, if not the millennium, and he has defined it well; nobody else has a clue either.

All this seems a bit paradoxical, since the 'flow' is inherently local, autonomous, in tune with the heterogeneous movements of nature, at odds with state mega-planning, whereas the 'stock' is, well, stockpiled and warehoused under a more centralizing control (of a given corporation, etc.). Renewables today, however, require much more coordination and centralization than they did two hundred years ago; the nationwide electricity grid needs to be modernized, mechanisms for selling back locally produced electricity to larger electric companies need to be implemented, and so on. It's almost as if there is no escaping, if not capitalism, at least the larger mechanisms of technical control and governmental management that grew up with it. The relentless processes of abstraction that arose with the quantification of fossil-fuel inputs in

and through capitalism will remain with us, it seems, forever, even if they may be somehow coordinated with the more benign inputs of renewables.

Nevertheless, Malm lacks, in my opinion, a sophisticated model of consumption to go with his very sophisticated model of fossil-fuelled production. Presumably if a Malm-inspired technocracy were to regulate energy production and consumption many individual consumers would be obliged to, well, consume less. One can imagine how this 'planned economic recession' would be received. But why do people in the First World consume so much in the first place? Are they simply bewitched by capitalism? How can they be weaned from their brand of consumption ('consumerism')? One would like to think that the low-energy-consuming citizens of the developing world could serve as models of virtuous restraint, but one sees, throughout the world, that when resources become available just about everyone avails him- or herself of the resources on offer. Capitalist theorists call this 'development'. Malm needs to ask, then, why consumption mania is not so much just a symptom of First World decadence, and instead an indicator of 'progress' worldwide.

I would argue for this reason that Malm needs a more developed theory of (personal, societal) consumption to go along with his convincing and thoroughly researched study of energetic expenditure and power (political, economic and energetic). Does fossil-fuel culture have an appeal beyond its purely economic seductiveness for the capitalist? Could the pleasures of consumption be tied to a low-carbon lifestyle? Could there be another pleasure in consuming, aside from just buying, 'using' and dumping more stuff, another kind of consumption, another expenditure of energy? Could we reorient renewables and see them as part of a larger practice of desire? Could areas as diverse as sexuality and religion, modes of expenditure of energies not directly tied to fossil fuels and their attendant abstraction and quantification, provide areas of pleasure more powerful than those provided by the capitalist-fostered fossil fuel high?

Future investigations will no doubt address these problems, and Malm's *Fossil Capital* will remain a singularly important work, pointing the way for future work in economics, politics, theories of time, space and energy. For the first time, thanks to Malm, we see how fossil-fuel productivity and (over)consumption are not incidental to capitalism, but rather integral to it; from now on one cannot think the one without the other.

**Allan Stoekl**

## First we take Europe

Slavoj Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbours*, Allen Lane, London, 2016. 128 pp., £9.99 pb., 978 0 24127 884 0.

Ian McEwan once said of his friend Christopher Hitchens that 'if Hitchens didn't exist, we wouldn't be able to invent him.' The same sentiment holds for Slavoj Žižek: we wouldn't be able to invent a Marxist philosopher such as Žižek for the simple fact that his political *modus operandi* is to consistently break with our assumptions about what we perceive to be self-evident leftist (or the ideological constellation of the dominant liberal-left) dogmas or truths.

Ever since the publication of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989, Žižek's theoretical-political interventions have sought to slaughter the sacred ideological cows of the 'Western' Left (from leftist academics to activists and political parties). From his continuous criticism of liberal political correctness and multicultural tolerance, the all too pervasive rise of identity politics among leftist activists, to his theoretical disagreements with theorists of discourse analysis, and the need to reorient the shattered Left to the Communist Idea (something which Žižek and Badiou have been championing for years), Žižek's political commentary has always intervened critically in the ideological discourse of the Left in order to pinpoint its limitations and failures. It is within this interventionist framework that we should read Žižek's most recent and most controversial political book to date, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror, and Other Troubles with the Neighbours*.

*Against the Double Blackmail* is short, perhaps too short for what it attempts to accomplish. The book is an expansion of a series of articles, written in the immediate wake of the refugee crisis in the autumn of 2015, which sparked a strong backlash on social media, where leftists were quick to dismiss Žižek as a racist, a fascist, a Eurocentric right-winger, and so on. Most of the vitriolic reactions against Žižek are effectively nothing but knee-jerk reactions: from hyperbolic, emotional resentment to quotes taken out of context, misattributions and, in some extreme cases, flat-out lies. The publication of this book therefore serves as an opportunity for Žižek to develop and rearticulate his position.

Žižek identifies two modes of what he calls 'ideological blackmail, which make us irreparably guilty'

in reference to the thousands of refugees risking their lives to come to Europe. The first belongs to 'left liberals, expressing their outrage at how Europe is allowing thousands to drown in the Mediterranean', who 'state that Europe should show solidarity, should open its doors widely'; the second belongs to 'anti-immigrant populists, [who] claim that we should protect our way of life, pull up the drawbridge and let Africans or Arabs solve their own problems'. For Žižek 'both solutions are bad, but which is worse? To paraphrase Stalin, they are both worse.'

Žižek's rejection of the ideology which frames the refugee crisis in moral language follows Hegel's criticism of the Beautiful Soul, 'which feels superior to the corrupted world while secretly participating in it: they need this corrupted world as the only terrain where they can exert their moral superiority'. These beautiful souls are those on the Left (both mainstream and not) who advocate that Europe ought to open its borders and allow all the refugees to enter. According to Žižek this will never happen (and he claims that even those who advocate for open borders *know* it will never truly happen) since it would trigger a massive popular anti-refugee uprising. Those who advocate this, therefore, merely do so out of moral self-importance.

Žižek's criticism of the dominant 'left-liberal' tendency can be effectively summed up by Oscar Wilde's remark that 'their remedies are part of the disease'. For Žižek, then:

With regard to the refugees, our proper aim should be to try and reconstruct global society on such a basis that desperate refugees will no longer be forced to wander around. Utopian as it may appear, this large-scale solution is the only realist one, and the display of altruistic virtues ultimately prevents the carrying out of this aim. The more we treat refugees as objects of humanitarian help, and allow the situation which compelled them to leave their countries to prevail, the more they come to Europe, until tensions reach boiling point, not only for the refugees' countries of origin but here as well. So, confronted with this double blackmail, we are back at the great Leninist question: what is to be done?

What is to be done for Žižek is to first take a step back and assess the current geopolitical global situation. Rather than engage in the spectacle of public moral outrage at the ongoing refugee crisis, Žižek wants us to pause and think. The crisis, he claims, 'offers to Europe a unique chance to redefine itself'. This is because 'every crisis is in itself the instigation of a new beginning, every failure of short-term pragmatic

measures (for example, of the financial reorganisation of the European Union) a blessing in disguise, an opportunity to rethink our very foundations.' He proposes that we need a 'critical engagement with the entire European tradition', where 'one should repeat the question, "What is Europe?," or rather, "What does it mean for us to be Europeans?," and in doing so reformulate a new vision. The task is a difficult one.' Žižek's own proposal is to resuscitate 'the emancipatory core of the idea of Europe'. It is this attempt at reformulation of the European tradition that sparks such controversy and anger from those on the Left who think Žižek advocates a Eurocentric position.



Consistent with his interventionism, Žižek argues that the contemporary Left must be ready to break with its ideological taboos in order to revitalize its own critical political project. The taboos he identifies include: (i) breaking with equating the 'European emancipatory legacy' with imperialism, colonialism and racism; (ii) the reliance upon the inner self-narrative of our lived experiences as constitutive of our external politics; (iii) the notion that the insistence on 'a way of life' is inherently proto-fascist; (iv) the tendency that sees any criticism of Islam as 'Islamophobia'; and finally (v) the equation of any politicized form of religion as mere fanaticism. Žižek's wager is that not only are these points of contention ideological, in the sense that they obfuscate and distort how we on the Left react to and think about our current predicament, but that these taboos are easily accommodated by global capitalism. Žižek's endeavour is to undermine the very ideological presuppositions of a toothless, ineffectual Left which has cosied up to the dominant liberal ideological framework of contemporary liberal-democratic capitalism (identity politics, multicultural tolerance, political correctness, etc.).

In calling for the Western Left to break all of these taboos, Žižek strives to awaken it from its liberal

ideological slumber. For example, while acknowledging the colonialism and imperialism that European countries have propagated, and continue to propagate, around the world, he points out that global contemporary capitalism easily incorporates all the different cultures, religions and traditions within its very logic. What's more, today global capitalism seems to function better if it adopts the authoritative politics of non-European countries like China, Singapore, and so on:

The cruel irony of anti-Eurocentrism is that, on behalf of anti-colonialism, one criticizes the West at the very historical moment when global capitalism no longer needs Western values in order to function smoothly... In short, critics of Eurocentrism are rejecting Western cultural values at the very moment when, critically reinterpreted, many of them – egalitarianism, fundamental human rights, the welfare state, to name a few – can serve as a weapon against capitalist globalization.

As contemporary leftists we should be able to be critical towards Europe's colonialism *as well as* take care that our political positions do not go hand in hand with the dominant ideology of Western liberal-democratic capitalism. It is curious how many critics of Žižek seem to miss this point. It is easy to dismiss Žižek's interventions as nothing but controversial claims intended merely to provoke, and too easy and too lazy to suggest that Žižek has shifted to the right or that he is nothing but a Eurocentric, Islamophobic, racist; such caricatures of Žižek fail to engage with his arguments in any substantial way.

Žižek also makes the point that we must strive to understand the underlying political economy of the crisis, rather than simply engage in humanitarian moralization. He maintains that

it is not enough to do (what we consider to be) the best for the refugees, receive them with open hands, show sympathy and generosity to the utmost of our ability. The very fact that such displays of our generosity make us feel good should make us suspicious: are we not doing this to forget what is required?

So what *is* required of us? Rather than perpetuate the liberal multicultural ideology of divergent and different cultures coexisting within the liberal democratic capitalist framework, Žižek wants us to demand and reclaim the struggle for universal emancipation.

Not just any conception of universality will do here. As Žižek is well aware from Hegel, there is

a difference between a conception of universalism which simply abstracts a general commonality from its particular instantiations (what Hegel calls the 'abstract universal') and a conception of universalism that incorporates and internalizes its particulars (Hegel's 'concrete universal'). The first axiom of any emancipatory project today ought to function as a concrete universal: it ought to connect all different – particular – struggles for emancipation as *one and the same struggle*. Žižek is adamant about this political-theoretical point, concluding that 'maybe such a global solidarity is a utopia. But if we don't engage in it, then we are really lost. And we will deserve to be lost.' As Žižek asserts time and again in this book, the only global, hegemonic form of oppression and exploitation is the economic exploitation of capitalism; therefore our task is to recognize the structural manner in which class struggle overdetermines all other social and political antagonisms. This is not to suggest that class struggle is the *essential* struggle. For Žižek 'class struggle is here the "concrete universality" in the strict Hegelian sense. In relating to its otherness (other antagonisms), it relates to itself, which is to say that it (over-)determines the way it relates to other struggles.'

Never one to patronizingly fetishize the refugees by treating them as a single, homogenous, morally good entity, Žižek's intervention, rather than participating in public moral outrage at all the refugees risking their lives to enter Western countries, is fundamentally a provocation: a provocation meant to shock us out of our preconceived and assumed ideological premisses, one that will continue to be misread (if read at all), misunderstood and probably dismissed outright by those on the Left so content with attacking him as a Eurocentric fascist and an 'Islamophobic' racist. If the idea of communism has any relevance for the twenty-first century then its minimal relevance is that it addresses our common or shared interests, interests which call out for a global will to fight. Everything from the struggle against police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA, to the fight against ISIS, the rise of the populist, anti-immigrant Far Right in European countries, the end (and failure) of the populist Left in Latin America, the ongoing conflict in Syria and the thousands of refugees fleeing their countries in need of a better life, to the obscenity that is Donald Trump, demands that the Left resuscitate such a global political vision.

**Borna Radnik**

# 1822 and all that

Mark Dorrian, *Writing on the Image: Architecture, the City and the Politics of Representation*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2015. 288 pp., £64.00 hb., 978 1 78453 038 9.

The subtitle of this collection of essays, 'Architecture, the City and the Politics of Representation', presents a quartet of keywords that resonate, for evident reasons, with the preoccupations of an Ulster-born architect and critic growing up in the twilight of an imperial, fragmenting nation-state. Raised in Belfast, Mark Dorrian has been a long-time denizen of Scotland, from whose capital he has witnessed the current crisis of the fiction called the 'United Kingdom'. As the reader of *Writing on the Image* will discover, Dorrian is a partisan of 'situational practice', and, understandably, the book's opening essay is informed by a deep knowledge of the topography and history of his home town.

'The King in the City: The Iconology of George IV in Edinburgh, 1822' revisits the visual and literary traces of the Hanoverian monarch's progress through the burgh, famously stage-managed by Sir Walter Scott. King George's pageant has acquired canonical status as a charter specimen of 'the invention of tradition', a minor academic industry inaugurated by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. The pomp and ceremony of the royal visit was an episode in the aftermath of the defeat of the Jacobite rebellion, after which Scotland became the full junior partner in Britain's imperial expansion, and took a share of the spoils. (The profitable partnership built on this foundation – which enlisted Highland regiments in its sanguinary business – is no more, because the Empire is no more.) The philosopher of money George Caffentzis has argued, in his work on David Hume and finance, that the Enlightenment intellectuals of the Scottish lowlands built for their English overlords a theory of civilization to rationalize colonial plunder and enclosures, and for themselves a grand capital to match their urbanity. Edinburgh was, and proclaimed itself, barbarism's other precisely because it had wild tribes on the doorstep, no sooner massacred than romanced. To be sure, much of the tartan, Burns Night hoo-ha attending 'Scottishness' is a nineteenth-century confection, but it is far from simply that, notwithstanding the caustic debunkings of Hugh Trevor-Roper. The poet and instrumentalist MacGillivray belongs to a younger generation intent on a radical but clear-eyed re-enchantment of Scotland's past

which aims to counter Trevor-Roper's Whiggish legacy.

No doubt with an eye to Britain's continuing brand leadership in the pageantry business, Dorrian's sleuthing in the archive uncovered a 'specific structure of spectatorship' back in 1822. What Walter Scott appears to have orchestrated is a combination of tableau, tourist trail and panorama, hierarchically organized, in which 'the king observed the city, and the city watched the king, watching it'. Dorrian raises the political stakes of this analysis by quoting a passage from Adam Smith, found in a letter from one of Scott's correspondents, implying that republicanism – and *a fortiori* horizontal forms of governance in general – overlooks the sympathy 'naturally' extended to persons of distinction, a 'scopic drive' that hierarchical social systems satisfy.

The essay ends at this point but the reader is left wondering how the eighteenth-century theory of human sympathy might speak to the question of spectacle in the Debordian sense. Since the themes of verticality, spectacle and power are persistent motifs, this is hardly a trivial question. Anthropological linguistics suggests an evolutionary connection between the physical experience of gravity and the asymmetries of the human anatomy in establishing the meaning of 'up' and 'down', 'front' and 'back'. Transculturally, 'up' and 'front' tend to be positively valued relative to 'down' and 'back', since upright, confronting encounters are taken as the norm.

However, the uncoupling of language from its primordial face-to-face matrix – which the invention of writing first set in train – is now being extended by *Homo faber* in complex ways via modernity's new array of mediating and imaging apparatus. The implications of these developments are the focus of several of the essays, in particular 'Adventures on the Vertical', 'The Aerial Image', and 'On Google Earth', a cartographic offspring of the search engine that Dorrian calls 'a kind of planetary collective unconscious'. Google has become one of those 'imperiously established frameworks' in the face of which Dorrian, together with co-founder Adrian Hawker, established Metis, a research-oriented atelier for art, architecture and urbanism. In an illuminating foreword, Paul Carter interprets *Writing on the Image*

as a reflexive project in the spirit of Metis, aimed at 'extending the lexicon of scopic equipment, showing how buildings, processions, scenography and even public art are scopes, or instruments for enhanced seeing'. The essays traverse two centuries of vantage points, from the hills of Hanoverian Edinburgh to Chicago's Victorian ferris wheel, and on to the phallos/needle of Stalin's Palace of Culture, and the London Eye. In a substantive afterword to *Writing on the Image*, which acts as part exegesis, part elaboration of Dorrian's text, Ella Chmielewska, a long-time colleague and interlocutor, dialogically engages with Dorrian's writing as a form of inquiry, as a pedagogical instrument and as a performative gesture that opens up a place for thought.

The new digital technics currently transforming modes both of writing and image-making have attracted Dorrian's scrupulous attention. The chapter entitled 'Transcoded Indexicality', deploying Charles Peirce's theory of signs, explores the relations of image and trust in the context of photography without photons, in the sense of a technology no longer depending on the fall of light onto a sensitive medium. The question of verification and the authenticity of photographic images is, of course, far from a new one. Indeed it goes all the way back to the birth of the medium. Actually, for the pioneers of photography the doctoring of negatives was a routine matter. And for a variety of reasons: sometimes to create an image that could be publishable as a book plate, by means of pastings and touch-ups; sometimes aesthetic, since 'light-writing' was seen as a kind of

first draft; sometimes practical, having to do with the technical state of the craft. Muybridge and Watkins, in making their landscape photographs, would often cobble together two separate negatives of sky and foreground, each with different exposures, because wet plate technology using collodion on glass produced overexposed and bleached skies.

These manipulations and technical fudgings were, one might say, 'innocent' artefacts of the mid-Victorian limitations of plate sensitivity and shutter technology. Yet photography's relation to 'the real' remains a profoundly vexed question. The role of photography in the history of propaganda, though at times ludicrous, raises complex and serious questions, as Dorrian shows in his analysis of Colin Powell's notorious presentation of the purported evidence from aerial photography of an Iraqi chemical weapons complex. On the other hand, the reason why the new ubiquity of the phone-camera – facilitating photography from below, subveillance as it were – is proving awkward for the powerful is because there is something to the idea of the camera as a truth machine. It is worth recalling the late Allan Sekula's remark that the 'old myth that photographs tell the truth has succumbed to the new myth that they don't'.

Dorrian's meditations on the vertical prompted in this reviewer a reverie on the barely tapped possibilities of counter-mapping in the zones of sacrifice created by nuclear states. Since Alamogordo these are concentrated in colonial and 'aboriginal' spaces – Oceania, Algeria, Kazakhstan, Woomera, Rajasthan,



Nevada and the intermontane desert of the western USA. No surprise, therefore, that the British missile fleet is based not in England but on the Celtic fringe – far from the Home Counties, though a mere 25 miles from downtown Glasgow and about 40 miles from half the population of Scotland. In assessing the dangers in the year 2000 of a major accident at Faslane, the UK Ministry of Defence concluded that the resulting ‘societal contamination’ meant that ‘the risks are close to the tolerability criterion level’. Close to, but not beyond it, apparently.

In the world of nuclear physics Enrico Fermi was recognized by his peers as being equally gifted as an experimentalist and as a theoretician. Dorrian is that *rara avis*, Fermi’s equivalent in the world of architecture. Witness his theoretical use of Greimas’s semiotic square – previously deployed as a heuristic by Rosalind Krauss and Fredric Jameson – this time to interrogate architecture’s claim to be art, with a view to salvaging the discipline from various forms of closure, indeed to break free from disciplinary bonds altogether. The power of many of the images explored by Dorrian, to the extent that there is such a power, is a function of the powerlessness – the constantly manufactured and reinforced powerlessness – of those other forms of life, that other texture of social relations, which, through the long course of human history, has been capable of speaking back to the image. The state and the image have *always* gone together. What is perhaps the oldest monument we have of ancient Egyptian state-formation – the stele of King Djet from Abydos – has on it three signs: two of them, the snake and the falcon, are totemic labels of the king’s name and divinity, but the third, already, is an image of his image-apparatus – a representation of an elaborate, patterned, gigantic palace facade. In the most ancient Egyptian calendars, the erection of statues is an event as important to the state’s record of time as the date and height of the year’s Nile flood.

The essays in *Writing on the Image* provoke the question: what does the trajectory from the Edinburgh of the 1822 pageant to the Dome and the Eye and the Shard suggest? That which is new about the society of the spectacle cannot possibly be the importance power places on visual bombardment of its subjects, or the new array of scopic platforms; what is new is the thinned and standardized social texture into which the images are launched, and then consumed. What is new is the isolated and marketized ‘individual’ whose parody of freedom leaves us with fewer and fewer counter-languages – anti-imageries – with which to speak back to our

condition. It is, in other words, the ‘colonization of everyday life’ that makes spectacle a social, not a technical, reality.

Reading through these scintillating essays, I often heard echoes of the dialectics and the voice of the renegade American critic Kenneth Burke. I am certain he would have recognized Dorrian’s writing as an exemplary case of *Homo scribens* at full stretch, in the sense intended by Burke, I believe, when he summarized the capacity of our species – the ‘human constitution’ – in a typically wry inventory: ‘the symbol-using animal, inventor of the negative, separated by instruments of its own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy, and rotten with perfection’.

Iain A. Boal

## Unsocial media

Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2016. 336 pp., £72.94 hb., £20.00 pb., 978 0 81669 890 5 hb., 978 0 81669 891 2 pb.

For most of the history of philosophy the technical object has been deemed unworthy of philosophical inquiry. It was not until the proliferation of technical objects in the form of machines during the Industrial Revolution that a more systematic theoretical approach to technology first emerged, one that was developed in the first half of the twentieth century by French and German philosophical thought on technics. Both Gilbert Simondon and Martin Heidegger, despite their numerous conceptual differences, agreed that classical metaphysical concepts were incapable of grasping either the mode of existence of the technical object or the experience of being in a world shaped by these objects. Each in their own way understood technics as a challenge to philosophy and worked towards reconciling the pre-metaphysical thinking of the Pre-Socratics with the invention of technical concepts after the end of metaphysics. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the nature of the technical object has undergone a fundamental transformation that demands to be addressed again. How are we to understand the strange existence of objects in the digital epoch?

It is at this historical juncture that Yuk Hui’s *On the Existence of Digital Objects* positions itself. Educated in computer science as well as continental philosophy, Hui ventures to think the strange objecthood

of the digital through a range of different disciplines. According to Hui, philosophy of information, computer science, engineering and digital philosophy all fail to sufficiently inquire into the thinghood and existential status digital objects. Such an inquiry is mandatory, he argues, since our experience of interacting with digital objects is irreducible to technical explanations in terms of information or the digital.

For Hui digital objects are 'objects that take shape on a screen or hide in the back end of a computer program, composed of data and metadata regulated by structures of schemas'. In their genesis, which he studies in terms of mark-up languages from GSML up to the semantic web, digital objects inherited and incorporated metaphysical remainders as both explanatory principles and operational schemes, while simultaneously rendering these metaphysical notions obsolete: 'It is technologies that, based on the principle of hylomorphism, shatter the concept of substance and hylomorphism itself and begin a new epoch of metaphysics.'

This new epoch of metaphysics is, according to Hui, a materialist theory of relations, capable of studying objects in the digital realm. As well as aligning with the surge of relational ontologies, a focus on relations is imperative from the perspective of current technical development in the era of relations and networks. Hui constructs this theory via Hume's distinction between internal and external relations, focusing on the latter because here the relation is taken to be external to the relata and thus cannot be absorbed into the metaphysical scheme of substance and predicate. Relations are conceptualized as fundamentally technical in that they are 'materialized and translated into contacts', for which Hui uses the term *interobjectivity*. It is at this point, when interobjectivity is conceptualized as 'a reality as well as a constantly motivated (improved) medium that can resolve the incompatibility between different systems (including human and technical systems)', that Hui's political agenda emerges. Replacing intersubjectivity with interobjectivity, understood as the 'grammar of relations between objects, which gives us both *Geschichte* and *Geschichtlichkeit*', Hui's philosophy is a project of convergence, resolution and mediation.

What is ultimately at stake for Hui is the question of how to think the digital object in terms of a dynamics of change and restructuration. The problem addressed is the following: while interobjectivity expresses itself and can be studied inside a technical system, that same system as a system of forms does not possess the dynamisms of recurrent

causality. It is recurrent causality, as the mechanism of self-conditioning, that is ultimately necessary for effectuating a convergence – individuation in the Simondonian sense – able to overcome the bifurcation and subsequent alienation of related terms inside such a system. Hui thus ends up arguing for a return to the notion of technical milieu over system, in order to first identify and then put into play the recurrent causality necessary to effect a convergence between forms (materialized relations) and the life which carries them.

Hui's project is remarkable for a conceptual engagement with twentieth-century philosophies of technology (Simondon, Heidegger, Husserl, Stiegler, Ellul) that pushes these theories further by confronting them with questions of the digital raised by, among others, non-philosophical and practice-oriented thinkers (Berners-Lee, Barry Smith, Floridi). But in explicating his methodology, Hui utilizes philosophical concepts without adequately addressing their differences or the problems that motivated their respective authors.

For example, the terms of convergence are what Gaston Bachelard and Gilbert Simondon called different orders of magnitude (Mary Tiles explicates orders of magnitude via the example of blood, which in the macroscopic order is considered a red liquid, while in the microscopic order it appears as red and white corpuscles, which themselves constitute objects of further scientific inquiry). Although Hui sees Bachelard's and Simondon's respective positions as compatible, nevertheless Bachelard wrote about the challenge of *integrating* different orders of magnitude, while for Simondon different orders are produced *by* their relation and thus cannot be said to pre-exist it. A similar problem arises in relation to Hui's reference to the Kantian antinomy: since Kant sought to show the *illegitimacy* of both judgements in an antinomy that results from reason's mistaking of appearances for things in themselves, it is hardly possible to speak, as Hui does, of resolving or integrating two orders of magnitude in this way.

What, then, does Hui mean when he speaks of converging two orders of magnitude, beyond the vague claim 'to produce a system of thoughts that bridges different orders of magnitude through developing a theory of relations'? One of the many convergences undertaken by Hui is a reconciliation between what Simondon differentiates as individuation and individualization. Rather than opposing individuation to individualization, Hui proposes to think of them as two orders of magnitude, in order to

pave the way for a conceptualization of the individuation of technical objects: 'If we want to address the human-world-machine relation, then some thoughts on the individuation of digital objects have to be posed both philosophically and politically.'

But Simondon never spoke of the individuation of *technical objects* because the genesis of technical being (from element to individual and finally ensemble) has to be viewed, according to Simondon, as part of a larger process of individuation between the human and the world. Importantly, for Simondon technicity only temporarily resides in the technical object, which, as the first 'detachable object', functions as mediator between the human and the world. To speak, as Hui does, of the individuation of the technical object, rather than of the individualization of technical being inside the larger process of individuation between human and world, is therefore shortsighted and fails to identify the relevant elements engaged in the process of individuation. In addition, the problem of individuation is ultimately a problem of life for Simondon, leading him to pose the question of whether a 'true' individuation can even exist apart from life, a point unproblematised by Hui.

Hui also seeks to reconcile the two respective concepts of relation he finds in Hume and Heidegger, the problem of ontological difference in Heidegger, Simondon and Husserl on the problem of logic, and Simondon and Heidegger in regard to both their different understandings of detachment. This focus on mediation and reconciliation seems honourable in its attempt to mend differences between bifurcating terms in a world that more often than not threatens to break apart under the weight of difference. The thinking involved in this mending operation is, however, enabled by reductions and exclusions of some of the central concerns that motivated their respective authors. It was Bachelard himself, Hui notes, who so lucidly pointed out the constitutive exclusions of different orders of magnitude, raising the question of what can and should be neglected in any order of magnitude. Consequently, rather than furnishing a quasi-universal point of view in order to integrate orders of magnitude including their constitutive exclusions, it is the very question of constitutive exclusion itself that needs to be posed to Hui's project.

What, then, are some of the constitutive exclusions of Hui's project and what are the implications of these? First, the reconciliation between individualization and individuation must be understood as

the product of a reduced order of complexity. Only by leaving the problem of both relation and difference between the two terms largely unaddressed can Hui render the terms compatible for their reconciliation. It is questionable, however, whether anything can be gained by inquiring from within so general a perspective. Second, the conceptual work on the specificity of orders of magnitude as different from contrasting or opposing terms remains unaddressed, thereby failing to conceptually and methodologically inquire into the specificity of convergence over other forms of unification, systematization or even totalization. Third, by focusing so intensely on convergence and reconciliation Hui underestimates the coefficient of relating and mending, since only what is or becomes different can be reconciled in a relational ontology. Relating therefore also necessarily carries with it the violence of cutting apart. Finally, while Hui's project develops exciting and insightful approaches to thinking the existence of the digital object, a political stance that critically engages with and goes beyond the initial Simondonian call for reconvergence is still missing.

Franziska Aigner

## Disappearing act

Roberto Esposito, *Categories of the Impolitical*, trans. Connal Parsley, Fordham University Press, New York, 2015. 280 pp., £103.00 hb., £26.99 pb., 978 0 823 26420 9 hb., 978 0 823 26421 6 pb.

Roberto Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi, Fordham University Press, New York, 2015. 256 pp., £87.00 hb., £24.99 pb., 978 0 823 26761 3 hb., 978 0 823 26762 0 pb.

Although Roberto Esposito has been publishing in Italian since the mid-1970s, it is only with the translations of his work into English over the last decade (and especially since 2012) that he has come to be seen as a figure central to European and American philosophical debates on the political, biopolitics and community. Of the two books reviewed here, *Categories of the Impolitical* was first published in Italian in 1988 and republished in a new version in 1999, whereas the sequel, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, was originally published only a few years ago. There are hardly any explicit references to the first volume in the second and no clear lines

drawn between them. The reader is left connecting the dots between the two; the authorial intention of bringing them together lurking somewhere in the conversations constructed among other philosophers.

The concurrent translations of these two volumes reflect a possible desire on the part of Esposito to situate his present work in its longer history, but also the growing interest among scholars not familiar with his earlier work and its relation to debates



in Italian philosophy. Yet while the second volume feels topical, the first has only dated. The issues covered were very much part of the Left's critical appropriation of Carl Schmitt, rehearsed in debates concerning political theology from the early 1990s, and its contemporary value now lies predominantly in providing an introduction for readers of Esposito's other works. Esposito mobilizes an impressive mastery of the Western philosophical canon to blast away ideas of depoliticization and neutralization, heavily debated during that period, and rightly argues that 'Depoliticization is the political form within which the autonomy of the economic is established.' To counter this he proposes a notion of the impolitical: 'the political, as seen from its outermost limit'. This definition betrays a fascination with Schmitt's idea of the exceptional as the moment of truth, as well as more poetic, Benjamin-esque strands of political theorizing. The impolitical 'is the extreme outcome, the "ulterior" outcome, in the strong sense of the word, reached by a political critique of depoliticization'. The concept remains largely negative and under-described, however, and the description gives way to an investigation of an

exhausted modernity lacking operative concepts of representation and politics.

This is done through a narration of a succession of thinkers – Romano Guardini, Carl Schmitt, Eric Voegelin, Hannah Arendt, Hermann Broch, Elias Canetti, Simone Weil, Georges Bataille, Alexandre Kojève, Ernst Jünger and Karl Jaspers – into a conversation between those looking for something outside of both depoliticization (false emptiness) and political theology (false fullness). Not only does the author himself seem to disappear from the text at this point but so too does the political project. In contrast to political theologies that attempt to locate the purpose of the political outside of politics itself, the impolitical seeks to recognize the political as omnipresent in the form of conflict. Although the book 'begins where Schmitt's discourse ends', I suspect it nonetheless ends in the same place, with an empty notion of conflict: it remains unclear whom the impolitical serves and to what purpose.

An interesting contrast could be made with Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, which was originally published between the two versions of the impolitical book, as well as the work of Antonio Negri. All three have kept an ongoing, though not extensive, reference to each other's work and all three derive great contemporary resources from the reconstruction, even epochalization, of past debates. Unlike Agamben and Negri, with whom he also seem to share a left project of sorts, Esposito stays mostly clear of immediate and programmatic statements and of concrete political conclusions to his readings. If Negri and Agamben in their various ways become great diagnosticians of our times, Esposito mutes his own voice and position in favour of bringing forth the conversations of other philosophers, which are so beautifully written and convincingly reconstructed that often one doesn't even notice his absence.

This withdrawal is staged again in *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, as we get another reading of a longer and somewhat more diverse canon. Unlike the first volume, however, contemporary politics intervenes through two interjected – although not integrated – passages on economic theology.

The first chapter, 'Machination', narrates a political theology of the last century through the reconstruction of a dialogue between Heidegger, Schmitt, Bataille, Erik Peterson, Jacob Taubes and Jan Assmann (as well as Hegel, Weber and Ernst Kantorowitz). Despite their differences, all thinkers except Assmann are regarded as stuck within the

horizon of political theology, 'the machine that holds us hostage'. As Assmann, the Egyptologist, is located outside this horizon, one would have liked more on whether this is a purely Judeo-Christian political theology trap, as well as the inclusion of post- or pre-colonial thinkers. But Esposito is himself stuck within the Western philosophy machine.

The second chapter, 'The Dispositif of the Person', explains how the concept of the person is determined by the political theology machine, not least in the connections made in liberal thought – of Locke, Kant and Hegel but also contemporary utilitarian thinkers such as Peter Singer and Hugo Tristram Engelhard – between personhood and ownership, or person and usefulness. This comes down to a quite profound indictment of most political thinking, and one wonders if Esposito couldn't have included much traditional Marxist thinking in this narrative as well.

This highly charged chapter leads to the third and final one, 'The Place of Thought', which is a resistance story, starting from outside the canon and the West with Averroes (Ibn Rashd), who is quickly found interesting as a result of this inclusion. Giordani Bruno, Spinoza and Schelling open up a preliminary, critical glimpse of the political-theological semantics of the person. However, the breakthrough comes with Nietzsche. The first explicit, diehard attempt to rock the machine of political theology, forcing it off its hinges, came from him.

Nietzsche realized that the power of the political-theological machine lay in its everyday use, in the

language we use to describe our world, and our resistance to that world. Nietzsche's way out is the genealogical approach, where, rather 'than a single element at the origin, there is a plurality of origins competing to occupy the primary place'. This is not a bad description of the deconstructive move of Esposito himself, as well as of Bergson and Deleuze: the insistence that the last being make an 'identification of the economic consequence of the political-theological dispositive, already implicit in the oikonomic matrix of the category of the person.'

This leads to the final passages on debt and the biopolitical dimensions of indebtedness, reminiscent of Benjamin's 'Capitalism as Religion', Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory* or the late writings of Robert Kurz. Modern capitalism is theological through and through and any proper resistance must start by genealogically exploring and exploding that connection to allow for what StrikeDebt in their *Operations Manual* or Negri and Hardt in their *Declaration* explain as the rejection of economic indebtedness, in order to rediscover all that we owe each other as individuals, friends, lovers, community, planet and so on: a positive biopolitics through the rediscovery of the true meaning of owing each other. The deconstructive force of Esposito's thinking is not matched by the constructive power of his alternative suggestions, though, and one is left wondering what it means for all the rest of us and what difference it all makes.

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