REVIEWS

What will be


If the intellectual horizon of these formidable books is constituted by the concept of modernity, what they offer is not merely the usual accounts of ‘the experience of modernity in...’ (Bengal or Japan, in these cases), but a set of complex and detailed reflections on the politics and culture of historical spatio-temporalization. The issue of ‘development’ – as a key, but ideological, configuration of the time of capital on an inter- or trans-national scale – is central to each. Thus empire also looms large, although, since India was colonized and Japan became a colonial power, in different ways. Chakrabarty and Harootunian are cultural historians with theoretical intent: their historical interventions are marked by philosophical self-reflection, with regard to both their chosen fields and the politics of contemporary theory more generally.

Marxism is their shared intellectual background: in particular, those traditions dovetailing with forms of cultural nationalism and religious revival that emerged, on the one hand, from colonial and dependent-capitalist perspectives in India and, on the other, from the experiences of war-driven industrialization and urbanization in inter- and postwar Japan. In *Overcome by Modernity*, for example, Harootunian shows in some detail the drift in thought between modernist cultural Marxists and ‘modernist anti-Moderns’ between the wars. Chakrabarty and Harootunian are thus not only familiar with the traditions of Western (sic) Marxism from Gramsci to Jameson, but maintain a critical relationship to it, via other more peripheralized traditions.

The figure of Althusser is crucial: his now infamous structuralist critique of a Hegelian-inspired historicism prevalent within the international Communist movement – grounded, in his view, in an essentialist notion of totality and endowed with teleological narrative form – has influenced both writers. Via a generalization of Perry Anderson’s conjuncturalist account of modernism in Europe, and with a little help from the likes of Walter Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre, Harootunian remains on a transnationalized Althusserian terrain. The concept of overdetermination is fundamental to the theoretical edifice of *Overcome by Modernity*. In *Provincializing Europe*, however, Chakrabarty takes the criticism of historicism further and arguably looks, if not to abandon Marxism’s theoretical terrain, and what he terms ‘a politics of despair’, then at the very least severely to relativize and problematize it, revealing its ‘provincialism’. Chakrabarty takes flight from Marxism’s own teleological narratives – that is, its ‘developmentalism’ (a sign of Empire) – into the hands of a culturalist Heidegger’s questions of ‘belonging’, whilst presenting his thoughts as a dialogue between the two traditions. Althusser therefore also provides the occasion to note a substantive difference in approach between the books with regard to thinking the politics of historical time and its historiography. The concept of historical ‘conjuncture’ used by Harootunian and the postcolonial concept of ‘difference’ mobilized by Chakrabarty mark the limits of historicist (and imperial) narratives of the temporality of capital, but they do so in different ways. Harootunian advances a critical, cultural Marxist perspective on the temporal experience of modernity; Chakrabarty, for his part, engages with the cultural and political limitations of such a perspective.

Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* emerges from his long association with the increasingly influential South Asian Subaltern Studies group of historians and critics, whose most well-known members have included Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Gayatri Spivak and Gyanendra Pandey. They are avid critical readers, not only of the British radical tradition of ‘history from below’, but of Foucault, Barthes, Derrida and now Heidegger, among others. Their work is characterized by an intense engagement with the philosophy of history, reconceived from the standpoint of the cultural politics of historiographical form and its colonial/imperial content.

From this point of view, the practice of history emerged in India as a colonial project of juridico-political administration and state consolidation, tracing
genealogies, lineages and traditions all the better to recodify them along the lines of ‘the rule of property’. In this sense, history has a clear disciplinary ‘civilizing’ character. This is perhaps most apparent in the historical treatment of peasant insurgency, assiduously tracked and documented by the state for which, in Ranajit Guha’s words (from his Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, 1983), ‘causality was harnessed to counterinsurgency and the sense of history converted into an element of administrative concern’. The point of departure of such a ‘subalternist’ perspective, its key political concern, was that such a disavowal of peasant political subjectivity (both historically and historiographically), however modified, subsequently characterized both the nationalist and communist movements as well. The peasantry and other mainly rural intermediate not-quite-class formations, including so-called ‘pre-political’ banditry, and their varied forms of consciousness were denied political agency or ‘maturity’. That is, they were ‘subalternized’: placed in the past for their lack of futurity as their very presence was traced (that is, narrativized out of history, only to be re-presented as ‘people without history’). The work of spectralization indeed. Hence the foregrounding of a textually attentive ethics of ‘responsibility’ in the work of Gayatri Spivak.

Guha and Spivak engage with the European philosophical history of this paradigm in Kant, Hegel (most notoriously) and Marx, mainly at a political level. And in Provincializing Europe Chakrabarty also criticizes the developmentalism of both Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson along such lines. But if Spivak’s subalternist-Marxist critique of Marx in her recent A Critique of Postcolonial Reason reveals the latter’s developmentalism through a critique of his hesitant ‘civilizational’ use of the idea of ‘the Asiatic mode of production’, Chakrabarty targets not only Marxist narratives of transition to capitalism (including such ideas as ‘incomplete’ and ‘uneven’ development) but also the related ‘economic’ heart of Marx’s Capital: the theory of value and the social logic of abstraction. This is where he follows and exceeds – with a fundamental postcolonial twist – Althusser’s critical gesture. The idea is to show that ‘abstraction’, like Hegel’s ‘spirit’ – whose history is the history of freedom – has determinate cultural-political content that encodes the experience (and, arguably, the misrecognition) of the history of capitalism in Europe as an emancipatory imperative.

Such history, as posed by the logic of capital, says Chakrabarty, is the modern history of ‘Enlightenment universals’: universals that are fundamentally constitutive of the modern world, of thought, and of futures that ‘will be’. This he refers to as History 1. However, albeit dominant, this is only one of the ‘many modes of being’ in the world, of the many modes of inhabiting a fundamentally heterogeneous present containing a plurality of “[f]utures that already are there, the futurity that humans cannot avoid aligning themselves with…” This he calls History 2. The function of Chakrabarty’s concept of ‘difference’ thus becomes clear in his non-historicist history. It seeks to reconnect the ‘local’ (the affective experiences of ‘dwelling’ and ‘belonging’) to universality in a relation of disjunction: [These experiences] are what make it impossible to sum up a present through any totalizing principle. They make the “now” constantly fragmentary, but the fragments are not additive; they do not suggest a totality or a whole. The constant and open-ended modification of the future that “will be” by the futures that “are” parallels the ongoing modification of History 1 by History 2s…

Chakrabarty analyzes many examples of dwelling and belonging. This constitutes the Heideggerian part of Provincializing Europe. But to return to Marx, and summarize a long and complex argument: one of his suggestions for recovering ‘difference’, a sort of culturalist kernel within the logic of abstraction in Marx’s Capital, is to read concrete labour (History 2) – a labour that ‘belongs’ and ‘dwells’, stubbornly refusing de-differentiation – against the developmentalist grain of the logic of abstract labour (History 1).

In Overcome by Modernity Harootunian also de-narrativizes and de-links the spatial connections of the ‘imperialist chain’ that would explain the emergence of Japanese fascism as the product of the ‘exceptional’ character of its experience of capitalist modernity. His book ferociously criticizes such notions as ‘alternative modernity’ and ‘uneven development’ because, in the guise of radical criticism, they sustain the normative myths of a ‘model’ modernity or an ‘even’ development. Compositionally, Harootunian eschews narrative in favour of long thematic probes, detailing the philosophical and literary debates responding to Japan’s rapid industrialization, urbanization and massification with thoughts of empire, communalism and authenticity, desire (anxious fantasies of new subjectivities – like the urban ‘modern girl’ and the ‘Marxist boy’, as well as forms of rural and military self-reliance) and revolution.

A study of interwar modernism in Japan, Overcome by Modernity does not provide an account of the rise of fascism as such, but of one of its cultural and
ideological conditions: a strong modernist anti-modern intellectual formation. This is one reason why the word ‘fascism’ does not occur in the book’s title. Another may be that Harootunian insists that in so far as modernism expresses a crisis of both political and historical representation (de-narrativization and re-spatialization were, Harootunian reminds us, modernist tropes), in a context whose horizon was defined by war, conservative and ethnically absolutist critiques of modernity are not intrinsically exceptional or specifically national. They have occurred not only in Japan (and India, Chakrabarty might add), but also throughout Europe (and not only in Germany, Italy or Spain) and the Americas. This idea is crucial to the overall theoretical argument. For one of the key points Harootunian makes is that there is only uneven capitalist development. This means that the capitalist world cannot be spatially divided according to nations that develop either evenly or unevenly, because this would imply the existence of an embodied and locatable model ‘true time’ (an idea of European nations held in some forms of dependency theory). Uneven development is a matter of rates and speeds, but within and across each nation, rather than just between them. Japanese modernity is thus an ‘inflection of a larger global process’, a ‘co-eval modernity’, its modernisms, both revolutionary and conservative, the product of ‘the jarring co-existence of several pasts and the present in the now of everydayness, often in a relation of unevenness’. The experience of uneven everyday-ness was a crucial motif, via Heidegger, in Japanese anti-modern modernism in search of cultural authenticity and political exceptionalism. Whilst engaging with the contours of this thought, Harootunian, in Benjaminian mode, is critical of such notions of authenticity, which attempt to subordinate everydayness to authenticity. From Harootunian’s point of view, one might say that the discourse of exceptionalism is itself a powerful form of reactionary modernism.

How does Harootunian put the idea of ‘conjuncture’ to work in Overcome by Modernity? By limiting, de-naturalizing and re-politicizing the normative effects of the rhetorics of ‘development’ which Harootunian himself at times maintains (he speaks of ‘late developers’, for example) such that possible futures emerge from (i) a present in which overlapping historical temporalities are gathered, and (ii) political and ideological conflict. As the Japanese example makes clear, the ‘enlightenment universals’ of Chakrabarty’s History 1 will not necessarily ‘be’ because a mobilized alliance of History 2s might subordinate it to militarism, empire, and the ‘communal body’. The concept of conjuncture thus relocates difference and Chakrabarty’s History 2 alongside a dethroned History 1, in a complex and uncertain field of political possibility.

From the point of view of Provincializing Europe, however, Harootunian’s work would seem to re-present an urban and Fordist-centred conception of modernity which may re-subalternize and ignore, for example, rural labourers (including peasants) who belong neither to a persistent ‘agrarian political order … with its semi-aristocratic ruling class (in Japan marked by the entrenchment of the emperor, the court, and those oligarchs who could claim the right domainal credentials)’, nor to an urban-centred ‘emergent industrial capitalist system with its incipient labour movement’. It is not that those so displaced necessarily represent an alternative, privileged subject of history; it is rather that the temporalization involved in the overdetermined conjuncture thus fashioned risks narrativizing them out of consideration as mere representatives of the past. Harootunian’s response might be to insist, in turn, on the sensibility to difference that the idea of conjuncture entails, and the political relation of forces that establishes what ‘will be’.

John Kraniauskas
Which future for Fanon?


In previous works, David Macey has begun to sketch out a sort of *histoire fleuve* of Francophone intellectuals. An episodic meditation on the notoriously private Lacan revealed interesting debts and connections that questioned the myth of self-creation of that most oracular figure. A less successful and rather more stylistically conventional biography of Foucault drew a picture of an almost Anglicized intellectual – neither the careerist of Eribon's institutional history, nor the shamanic sexual athlete of James Miller's scandalous semi-fiction – who cut a curiously stolid figure by the side of his protean textual reinventions. Now Macey has turned to an even more difficult subject: the short life of the highly influential yet enigmatic writer, psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon. He has produced another whopping doorstop of a book, 500-plus pages of text and 100-plus of notes, and one cannot but admire the assiduousness and stamina of the author in producing such a painstaking, detailed and compendious account.

The narrative proceeds in a quite unproblematic way detailing Fanon’s early life in Martinique, with the sudden shock of war, both in its impact on colonial Martinique and subsequently with Fanon’s service in the European theatre, generating that consciousness of racism and the nature of the colonial that propelled Fanon into writing the extraordinary mémoire/meditation, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Macey sees Fanon proceeding to establish his psychiatric career, first and briefly in France and later in the colonial situation, in the asylum at Blida, just outside Algiers. This involvement gradually transforms into a commitment to the Algerian revolution, at first moral and practical, and then in virtually a professional capacity: Fanon becomes a spokesperson for the GPRD (the Provisional Government in exile) and does the rounds of conferences as Africa is traversed by the growing hurricane of decolonization. Finally, under virtual sentence of death from a diagnosis of leukaemia, Fanon writes his last work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, which posthumously establishes his reputation as a theoretician of violent anti-colonial struggle. It was to make his name synonymous with the ‘Third Worldism’ that provided a sort of horizon for much of the 1960s. He was just thirty-six when he died.

Macey eschews any sort of experiment with the biographical form, and at one level the book is highly accomplished, telling ‘the life’, sketching ‘the context’, and commenting on ‘the work’; although one must add the familiar complaint about editing. (Holden Roberto, a shadowy figure within the Angolan liberation struggle whom Macey considers Fanon to have unwisely befriended with arguably calamitous consequences, becomes Roberto Holden throughout, even in the index; just before chastising the postcolonial theorists for having the Nazis in wartime Martinique, Macey has us ‘over seventy years after his [Fanon's] death’, putting us in 2031; ego-ideal and ideal-ego are not interchangeable terms, and so on.) But the topic Fanon is a bit more difficult than this, for several reasons, some of which are to do with Macey’s own not-so-hidden agenda.

Macey has a revisionist project, to rescue Fanon from his admirers and appropriators, as well as from those who would seek to forget him – that is, to re-emplace him in the multiply forgotten history of the Algerian revolution. Macey has a great number of antagonists: those who forget Fanon’s Martinican origins (unnamed); postcolonial theorists (conveniently grouped under the name Homi Bhabha), who are in league with those who would Lacanize Fanon’s only partially developed psychology; romantic 1960s revolutionaries who misidentified themselves with the austere Algerian comrade, and who mistook their own situation for the grim colonial violence that poisoned Algeria; the Algerian state itself, which has forgotten Fanon, and its own founding hopes; and, finally, France, which cannot deal with the legacy of the Algerian war (for so long unrecognized even as the bloody war it was) and refuses to acknowledge the racism that corrodes its claims to embody the state of Enlightenment citizenship. Macey also has scores to settle with Fanon himself, who comes in for peculiarly anachronistic criticisms, which seem to be settling Macey’s current debts on Fanon’s account. (A particularly egregious case is the discussion of Fanon’s commentary on the place of the veil in Algerian society.)

Bringing these enemies to book requires a great number of excurses, which, pendant from the main line of biographical narrative, bloat the text and obscure the figure of Fanon, who vanishes for several pages at a time. But because the life has its particular exigencies, the polemic of the text is often only handled in rudimentary fashion. Trying to accomplish a
number of quite different intellectual tasks in the form of a biographical narrative leaves each insufficiently addressed, or confused by extraneous material.

So, postcolonial theory, accused of many sins, is painted with very broad strokes: text-centredness seems particularly heinous, as if those long debates on text—hors texte had never happened; as if Bhabha had never discussed bureaucratic or military forms of power, seeing discourse embedded in practice. And to identify the postcolonial with EngLit, to see the extraordinary field of ‘border thinking’ as developed by writers as different as Couze Venn, Alberto Moreira, Gloria Anzaldúa, Walter Mignolo, Edouard Glissant, Abdelkebir Khattibi, all indebted to readings of Fanon, as a parochial variant on Leavisism is unpardonably myopic. Similarly, the castigation of self-aggrandizing 1960s radicals for misunderstanding Fanon equally misses out those who, elsewhere in Latin America, saw Fanon’s theorization of a Left national populism as entirely consonant with their own revolutionary agenda. These were active militants, whose lives too were given in the struggle to make Third Worldism more than a slogan for dilettantes. To outline the extraordinary history of the decade of decolonization, and its reverberations across the whole range of committed intelligentsias requires more than a few shots at the Black Panthers. In both cases, Macey is too rushed and narrowly polemical.

Perhaps we can see the weakness of Macey’s ambitious project just here, in a hurried drive to amass the biographical, or, better, historical material, with a concomitant failure to discuss Fanon’s work at length, or evenly, with the polemical intent often outstripping exegesis. In the discussion of Black Skin, White Masks, Macey is good on the particular contradictions of the French Antilles (oddly, and perhaps unwittingly, coming close to some of Bhabha’s discussions in The Location of Culture) and Fanon’s critical engagement with négritude. Keen to de-Lacanize Fanon, he points up the little-commented contribution of Germaine Guex’s thinking about abandonment to Fanon’s reading of a particular novel. Yet Fanon will happily use Jung, Adler, as well as Lacan’s mirror stage. His text is eclectic, and if it shows any consistent philosophical bias it is towards a Hegelian dialectic of recognition, a Hegelianism which permeates Sartre and Lacan. Considering The Wretched of the Earth Macey points out the debt to the Sartre of Critique of Dialectical Reason, discusses the seeming fetish of violence and the importance allotted to the peasantry, and sees the frantic composition of this last book as a mark of its author’s race against time. Yet the discussion does not go on to talk about the conception of nationalism, and transnational solidarity, both of which were, with the valorization of violence, the crucial ideas that forged Fanon’s importance. The singularity of Fanon’s willed belonging to a nation whose language he at first hardly knew is still quite startling, suggesting quite novel ways of thinking ethnicity/nationality/cosmopolitanism. (We never do find out when Fanon learned Arabic, if he ever did.)

It is in the account of the Algerian war that history unbalances both biography and intellectual discussion. This perhaps is not Macey’s fault. The amnesia about the Algerian war is so pervasive that a thumbnail version is required for all but specialist students. But Macey gets bogged down in a meticulous yet incomplete narrative of the war in Algeria and the response of the French state and public that completely overshadows his eponymous subject. Under the rubble one can see that, in fact, our knowledge of Fanon’s relation to the revolution is permeated by ignorance. We just do not know what influence he had, what positions he took, what arguments he had and what importance he held for the leadership(s) of the revolution. The history of the war actually serves as a strange substitute for the part of the life that cannot be told, as in many ways Macey’s account of the battles in France cover for a dearth of material about Fanon’s reactions to the experience.

For, in some sense, given that Fanon did not develop a novel psychology (although Macey, ever seeking sticks to beat Lacan and the Lacanians, gives the psychiatric papers more importance that they might deserve), or generate an institutional legacy (buried under encomiums, Fanon has all but evaporated within Algeria), all that is left of Fanon is the writing, the work, which in its own more or less explicitly autobiographical way gives meaning to the life. The life mediated through the categories of biography, which always tends towards the heroic, might provide an extraordinary picture of a sort of revolutionary life which, like that of Che, is quite unimaginable now (and the reasons for that would be well worth exploring). It might reinvigorate a sense of what it may have been to be exemplary, to be a model for a committed intellectual (and does Macey’s project not surreptitiously reinstate this sort of hagiography?). But what ‘is living’ in Fanon’s legacy are precisely those fertile texts, flawed and yet so impressive, that serve as nutrients for a further re-engagement with the heritage of colonialism, and the endless recomposition of power and subalternity. This postcolonial Fanon – textual and more – has a future.

Philip Derbyshire
Hail to the revolutionary critique!


*Dreamworld and Catastrophe* sets out to map the ‘collective dream’ of the twentieth century, the construction of mass utopia, a dream defined by Susan Buck-Morss as ‘the mass-democratic myth of industrial modernity – the belief that the industrial reshaping of the world is capable of bringing about the good society by providing material happiness for the masses.’ The book, written in part as a result of Buck-Morss’s close collaboration with a group of Moscow philosophers (principally Valerii Podoroga, Mikhail Ryklin and Elena Petrovskaia) as a visitor at the Institute of Philosophy of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, compares the forms of mass utopia of East and West and charts the author’s attempts, post ’89, to engage her Russian colleagues in explorations of the possibility of political intervention in the spaces opened up by the death throes of the Stalinist project.

Buck-Morss’s main point is that the commonalities of the Cold War enemies suggest that ‘socialism failed in this century because it mimicked capitalism too faithfully’. In identifying this common ground, she declares herself explicitly against both, and moves to refute the ‘standard’ post-Cold War ‘wisdom that capitalism is desirable and inevitable, the normal arrangement of social life’. Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of the work is Buck-Morss’s refusal of that all-too-familiar ‘war on totality’ which has come to pass as the philosophical banality of our time, a war on totality which fails to extend its ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ to that metanarrative of the victor which has left over one billion people earning a dollar a day or less. Buck-Morss intends that ‘the evaluation of the twentieth century should not be left in the hands of the victors’. After decades of ‘little stories’ from the pens of the ‘fake-eclectics’ (to quote Debord) of Paris, this is a step forward. It is not, though, enough.

Buck-Morss’s text, as she admits, is written in fragments. It does not, therefore, cohere. Its argument is always partial, not quite sustained. It contains much that is useful as an indictment of the authoritarian projects of the twentieth century, but too often it holds back, lets its arguments fall away, as if in the act of prosecution she feels somehow complicit with those she would seek still to oppose.

The opening chapter, tackling ‘Mass Sovereignty and the Image of the Enemy’, draws on a reading of Carl Schmitt to examine the ‘wild zone of power’ of liberal democracies, the ‘supralegal, or perhaps prelegal form of legitimacy, precisely the wild zone of arbitrary, violent power that lies at its very core’. Pushing to its limit-point Schmitt’s contention that ‘the act of identifying the enemy is the act of sovereignty’, Buck-Morss argues that defining the enemy is ‘the act that brings the collective into being’. If the interests of the people are reflected in the sovereign agent, they cannot be defined as a legitimating collectivity until they have something – an ‘enemy’ – against which they can be defined. Thus, the sovereign defines the collective upon which it legitimates itself.

It follows that the sovereign’s legitimate claim to the monopoly of violence cannot be granted by the people, that this power is not and can never be democratic. The claim to the monopoly of violence is itself the act of legitimation upon which the existence of the people depends, not vice versa…. Democratic sovereignty is able to claim as legitimate the nondemocratic exercise of violent power.

Buck-Morss’s reading of Schmitt brings out what remains hidden in the liberal reading which has become the norm – namely that liberal democracy survives on the basis of its monopoly of the right to force, to ‘protect not law, but the monopoly of the right to establish law’, that ‘wild zone’ of violence for which Schmitt was a driven and articulate advocate. However, the question of the ‘legitimacy’ of force is a diversion. What the state has at its heart is the monopoly of ‘irrational force’ (from the production-line execution of clearly innocent death row inmates in the USA to the targeting of joyriders and petty criminals in shoot-to-kill operations purportedly aimed at Republicans in the Six Counties). It has a monopoly of the space of violent response per se. Nevertheless, in reading Schmitt as an advocate of the suspension of the norms of bourgeois democracy as a means to its own defence, Buck-Morss helps retrieve the revolutionary critique of ‘democracy’ from all those who have come to fetishize the concept without concerning themselves as to the content.

Where the argument comes unstuck is in Buck-Morss’s examination of the clash between Soviet and Western regimes as a conflict between ‘absolute enemies’. The absolute enemy is ‘symbolic of absolute
evil, against which no mercy is possible’. We are
told that the ‘most striking difference between these
two modern political visions (capitalism and com-
munism) is the dimension that dominates their visual
landscapes, determining the nature and positioning
of the enemy and the terrain on which war is waged.
For nation-states, that dimension is SPACE; for class
warfare, the dimension is TIME.’ Undoubtedly this is
correct. Remember that Buck-Morss’s premiss is that
East and West shared the ‘dreamworld’ of modernity;
that there was a common ground between two systems
purportedly in fundamental opposition. However, she
also suggests that

The Cold War enemies were deployed on an onto-
logical divide…. This boundary was defensive not
only in a military sense, but in the conceptual sense
that it prevented contamination from the imaginary
perceptions held by the absolute ‘other’. The bound-
ary had a different meaning for each side…. For
the political imaginary of nation states, it cordoned
off socialism…. For the political imaginary of class
warfare, the physical boundary was understood as
providing a temporal bulwark.

Buck-Morss’s ambiguity towards Stalinism under-
mines the best of her work. She appears to hold that
the Bolsheviks played a repressive role on their native
terrain, but a progressive role internationally. Occasion-
ally, though, we are presented with Bolshevism as
the only real option available to Russian workers and
peasants. The ambiguity sabotages the book’s intent.

In a chapter that examines the variety of ‘utopian
discourses’ articulated in the early stages of the Russian
Revolution, Buck-Morss considers in particular detail
the artistic avant-garde, and the efforts by artists such
as Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin to embrace
and celebrate the revolution. She notes the Bolshevics’
hostility to the plurality of artistic expression opened
up by the events of 1917 and observes

All art that was not going in the direction of the
party was historically ‘backward’, bourgeois rather
than proletarian and hence counterrevolutionary.
Once artists accepted the cosmological time of the
political vanguard, it followed that to continue to
be revolutionary in a cultural sense meant glorify-
ing the successes of the party and covering over its
failures.

From this she argues that,

In acquiescing to the vanguard’s cosmological
conception of revolutionary time, the avant garde
abandoned the lived temporality of interruption, es-
trangement, arrest – that is, they abandoned the phe-
nomenological experience of avant-garde practice.

Buck-Morss contends that in the suppression of the
‘utopian surplus’ of the avant-garde, the Bolsheviks
destroyed the best hopes of the revolutionary period, by
divorcing the project for revolutionary change from the
audacity and imagination of a Malevich or, as another
example, the architectural fantasist Anton Lavinskii.
But is the lesson, then, to choose art over politics or
to seek to aestheticize the political? Isn’t the point to seek to develop a means by which the ‘openness’ of the revolutionary project – the plurality of voices of the revolution – can be preserved institutionally? This is not to suggest that we have no lessons to learn from the Soviet avant-garde, far from it. Just that those who sought to realize Buck-Morss’s ‘utopian presence in the present’ politically are most obviously absent from her book. Moreover, Buck-Morss is herself ambiguous about the ‘Taylorization of the Soviet workplace and the role of elements of the avant-garde in cheerleading this. This was, she tells us, ‘a passionately emotional affair involving team spirit, daily drama, and heroic achievement’. More heroic still were those who refused to submit to the creation of ‘Machine-culture, Soviet style’. In 1920, Lenin had argued that Soviet newspapers should devote less space to politics and more to production. A year later, Trotsky had enthused about the ‘militarization of labour … as the indispensable basic method for the organization of our labour forces’.

In ‘The Bolshevik Myth’ (1925), the anarchist communist Alexander Berkman had observed, in the days leading up to the Kronstadt uprising: ‘The strikes continue; labour disorders have again taken place in Moscow. A wave of discontent is sweeping the country. Peasant uprisings are reported from Tambov, Siberia, the Ukrainia and Caucasus.’ As Buck-Morss observes, ‘Lenin thought he could import capitalist forms of labour without their exploitative content. But capitalist form is its content.’ So why enthuse over the ‘utopian quality’ of Soviet machine culture or the engagement of an element of the supposedly prescient avant-garde in its celebration? That ambiguity again.

_Catastrophe and Dreamworld_ sets itself the task of ‘working through the rubble in order to rescue the utopian hopes that modernity engendered’. In many ways it succeeds. Buck-Morss’s writings on anaesthetics as a ‘numbing of the senses’ cognitive capacity that destroys the human organism’s power to respond politically even when self-preservation is at stake is a stunning development of Adorno and Horkheimer’s indictment of the destructive capacity of capitalist technology. Her retrieval of the socialist ecology which is the essence of the work of Soviet architects such as Ginzburg and Melnikov provides a glimpse of the alternative possibilities that could be observed in the Soviet Union even in 1929. What’s missing though is any grasp of what was really lost in the betrayal of the hopes of 1917. When Buck-Morss writes that ‘for the proletariat of the Soviet Union industrialization was still a dreamworld, when, for workers in capitalist countries, it was already a lived catastrophe’, she misses the point. It was a lived catastrophe for the Soviet proletariat too; a catastrophe they resisted despite the repression of independent working-class organization and despite the ideological onslaught of the state. What Bolshevism shared with Western capital was not just concepts of technology, of industry, of science, but a rejection of the possibility of working-class autonomy. The masses were conceived by both Lenin and Henry Ford as armies of production. As such, East and West were not ‘absolute enemies’; rather they shared, for all their differences in the arena of international politics, another ‘absolute enemy’ – an independent working class. As a result, the Communist Parties became convinced defenders of bourgeois rule in the West, and the West kept its side of the bargain by turning a blind eye to the suppression of workers’ uprisings in East Germany and Hungary.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe once wrote that the only way to retrieve a concept of the political adequate to the possibility of change was to engage with the ‘revolutionary critique’ of Marxism (an empty promise on his part). _Catastrophe and Dreamworld_ goes some way towards such a critique. At a time when the attitude of most former Leftist academics mirrors that of Samuel Pepys towards republicanism (as a boy he had enthusiastically celebrated the execution of Charles I, but spent most of his adult life hoping to avoid anyone who ‘would have remembered the words I said the day the king was beheaded’), Buck-Morss’s efforts to salvage the revolutionary critique of capitalism deserve both celebration and critical engagement.

Nick Stone

_Fretful speech_  


_The Words of Selves_ represents a continuation of the concerns of Denise Riley’s earlier work, _Am I That Name? The Category of ‘Women’ in History_, which examined the potential of a feminist politics prepared to entertain the contingency of social being. Both books deal with the nature of interpellation, as a form of capture from which there is no escape, and a scene of subjectification that is continually doomed to failure. Whereas _Am I That Name?_ unfolds such provisionality of identity as a measure of women’s duration in history, _The Words of Selves_ dramatizes...
and limply inadequate to the task it has set itself’. Her this everyday linguistic fact, must remain ahistorical theoretically conceived self, if it stays indifferent to for the soundest ‘historical-linguistic reasons’, ‘the hand the instabilities of the personal ‘I’ are suffered answerable to its in-your-face ironies. If on the one its terms, and the subject of theory, who is made crossings between a personal ‘I’, often exaggerated, political terms.

of what this linguistic potential might mean in wider de-dramatizing move that leads to an understanding self-description – its ‘attitudinising’ – as ultimately a that the reader has to accept her theatricalization of innermost core’. It is a paradox in Riley’s argument tiality of the lyric form, as Adorno knew, in which this formation hints at the social and historical poten cial category maintenance. The centrality of language to ‘collisions and shatterings of identity’ as through their formation of historical (and political) identities which come about, Riley argues, as much through the ‘affective syntax’ tracks not just a local instance of a moment of identification or struggle for recognition, but the formation of historical (and political) identities per se, which come about, Riley argues, as much through the ‘collisions and shatterings of identity’ as through their categorial maintenance. The centrality of language to this formation hints at the social and historical potentiality of the lyric form, as Adorno knew, in which ‘language mediates lyric poetry and society in their innermost core’. It is a paradox in Riley’s argument that the reader has to accept her theatricalization of self-description – its ‘attitudinising’ – as ultimately a de-dramatizing move that leads to an understanding of what this linguistic potential might mean in wider political terms.

From the outset, then, Riley makes unexpected crossings between a personal ‘I’, often exaggerated, playfully self-regarding, or awkwardly recoin its terms, and the subject of theory, who is made answerable to its in-your-face ironies. If on the one hand the instabilities of the personal ‘I’ are suffered for the soundest ‘historical-linguistic reasons’, ‘the theoretically conceived self, if it stays indifferent to this everyday linguistic fact, must remain ahistorical and limply inadequate to the task it has set itself’. Her approach can prove irritating, embarrassing even, for a reader unwilling to accept the rhetorical wager. As the chapter on the Narcissus myth suggests however – at the same time as performing a critical joke (using Riley’s own ‘doggerel’ poem on Narcissus as the vehicle of analysis) – there is a sustained and serious process of reflection here and it is worth the reader’s patience. Indeed this poetic rewriting of the narcissistic scene against its psychoanalytical variant – in which Narcissus dies not through vanity but through the horror of selfknowledge, linked moebius-strip-like with his passionate double, Echo – is a condensed repetition of the book’s central theme: the affective drama of interpellation, the ‘affliction of the ear’ that the narcissus was said to cure.

Riley’s engagement with Althusser’s account of subjectification is a valuable contribution to a recent debate that includes the work of Judith Butler and Wendy Brown. What interests her is its temporal paradox, acted out in what Althusser described as his ‘little theatre’ of interpellation: the fact that the hailing constitutes a subject who is somehow always already in place. Guilt, she suggests, has an analogous temporal structure, understood here not as a pathology but as a reflex within the machinations of interpellative language, as in part linguistic. It is provoked or anticipated not just in the instance of aggressive interpellation, which demands consent or refusal, but also in a more banal disquiet that results from ‘feeling loved in interpellation’ – that is, in recognition. Emerging here is the affective syntax of the imposter – ‘broadly fluent in deceitful seduction’ – which marks Althusser’s autobiographical writing no less than his theory. On the one hand, guilt suggests a megalomania, of a subject who ‘arrogates to himself responsibility to itself’ in the ‘drive towards inhabiting’ a category; on the other, its disquiet can be generalized and de-dramatized in ‘the broad level of language’ as common and unexceptional. It is in this paradoxical space – in an always already provisional drama of interpellation – that the ethics of a politics of identity can be thought.

Like Butler and Brown, Riley explores the contradic tion of social identities that have become wedded to the injury that constitutes them; an attachment, as Butler puts it, which is the precondition for the re-signification of the name. If Riley is interested to maintain the ‘programmatic hope’ of a politics of identity that can forge new forms of solidarity beyond such iterative resignification, hers is an account that mercifully avoids the language of melancholy and mourning, and its psychoanalytical theatre; nor is
it caught up in the quid pro quo of a liberal state. Her argument is at once more abstract and, at times, pragmatic; picking up on the Foucauldian discursive terrain but travelling via Deleuze.

Riley’s version of reverse signification is the rhetorical practice of irony. In her last chapter she offers a brief history of the trope from Socrates and the Romantic legacy of Schlegel, through to Kierkegaard, to Deleuze in the simulacrum, and her own reworking of the Ovidian Narcissus myth. The figure of Echo is retrieved, as an iterability that initiates the unease of the ironic arising ‘spontaneously within an injury which has been compelled into an intensity of self-contemplation’. As an active nonidentity, irony is essential to the ‘political and ethical vigour of language’; moreover, in its contingency it is ‘alert to history’ – its effectivity historically determined, and capable of producing agency in its reflexive revealing of the historical formation of a category. Irony is a ‘grand if subterranean “heterology”’, Riley suggests, drawing on Rancière’s work. Its disassembling of the self has its parallel in, indeed is essential to, a wider political ‘process of disidentification or declassification’ (Rancière) if the collapse of an emancipatory politics of the other (a collapse which has given rise to racisms and ethnic nationalisms) is to be countered. Riley ends with the prospect of an anti-identificatory politics of emancipation, a solidarity born out of difference. The prospect, she notes, has itself a performative dimension: ‘the business of subjectivisation is wilful and somewhat fantastical in its anticipations. Like wish-fulfilment, it speaks its futurity, but it speaks it through the magical device of christening its own actuality.’ The temporality of linguistic hope, perhaps. It left me wondering how fruitful a politics of identity remains, understood in its more hypostatized sense, as a starting point.

Words of Selves is a rich and intense read. It succeeds in making a case for the everyday uncertainty of the self – the navigations of becoming, and the ‘constitutional failure to fully be’ – as a condition suggesting no lack of politicization, but rather as enabling political thought and language. Central to its argument is the de-dramatizing and democratic potential of language itself, replete with other voices, such that the ‘I’ vanishes ‘as a faint rustle within a broad murmur among anonymous voices’. Language, in this sense, is rendered objective, as Adorno wrote of lyric poetry, at its most grounded in society. Deleuze’s Logic of Sense suggests an affective intensity ‘which comes back to itself through others’. For Riley this is what it means to speak of the ‘unconscious’ of language; to what extent this can be realized as a political unconscious seems altogether a more difficult question.

Carol Watts

Minority culture


Within mainstream political philosophy, the debate about multiculturalism has largely been a family dispute within liberalism. Liberal multiculturalists have argued that the cultural deprivation experienced by minorities should be addressed by special treatment. More traditional liberals have argued that this offends against liberal equality and state neutrality. By and large, the multiculturalists have had the better of this debate. They argued effectively that special treatment for cultural minorities does not mean that they enjoy differential rights; it is rather a way of securing equal rights in the face of cultural oppression and marginalization. The ideal of state neutrality is illusory: every modern state works though a certain history and tradition, and usually a common language. Far from being neutral, the modern state is complicit in the oppression of minority cultures.

The aim of Kymlicka and Norman’s collection is to expand the debate. They recognize that the liberal multiculturalist has to deal not merely with liberal traditionalists, but also with the newly revived republican tradition which emphasizes not the rights of the person, but the responsibilities of the citizen. Republicans – and also some liberals – have argued that a liberal and democratic polity requires a politically aware, critical and active citizenship, and a public sphere within which matters of common concern are debated and resolved. The project of liberal multiculturalism seems to license the fragmentation of social life into a proliferating number of mutually incomprehensible groups, whose members have little commitment to the larger political order. It displaces the framework of symbols and traditions through which public debate takes place. It erodes civic virtue and public life. The challenge to the liberal multiculturalist is to show that recognition of the claims of cultural minorities does not threaten the social and cultural conditions of a liberal political order.
The editors’ introduction provides an excellent survey of the current state of play within Anglophone political philosophy. There are, however, several issues which could well have received more discussion. One of these concerns the concept of culture. The editors are well aware of the importance of culture for the identity of the individual; indeed, Kymlicka is almost solely responsible for the widespread acceptance of this idea within liberal philosophy. What they do not sufficiently emphasize, however, is the political role of culture. If there is a defensible basis to the practice by which cultural minorities were expected – and sometimes forced – to assimilate to a dominant culture, it lies in the claim that citizens need to find a significant aspect of their identity in the language, history and institutional life of the society to which they belong if they are to have the commitment required of full members of that society. It is the idea that national identity is the basic of public life and civic virtue. Now it may well be that there are good reasons to reject this claim, and it obviously has problems in the contemporary world. However, it needs to be addressed much more directly than it is by Kymlicka and Norman, or, for that matter, by their contributors.

A related issue concerns the level of activity and commitment required of citizens – what Kymlicka and Norman call the ‘normative standards of citizenship’. What they do not mention is that these standards depend very much on one’s expectations of the state. Neo-liberals, for example, envisage a diminished role for the state, and have correspondingly diminished expectations of the activity and commitment required of citizens. On the other hand, social-democratic policies require a much stronger practice of citizenship. Government strategies need to be criticized and informed, and citizens must accept a higher degree of expenditure on the part of the state and even interference in their lives. So the ‘normative standards of citizenship’ are more demanding for social democrats than for neo-liberals. This means that preservation or creation of the cultural conditions of citizenship should be of more concern to those on the Left than those on the Right. Readers of Radical Philosophy may find themselves uncomfortably aligned with conservatives on this issue.

A final issue concerns the kind of political structure within which the rights of cultural minorities might be properly recognized. Kymlicka and Norman propose three alternatives to the model of assimilation: federalism, consociationalism and integration. Federalism is only possible where the minority has a significant territorial basis (as with some indigenous groups and national minorities). Even then, it is not a complete solution: the new state will almost always contain cultural minorities of its own. The two other avenues are more promising. By ‘consociationalism’, the editors mean self-government without a territorial basis, and by ‘integration’ a form of cultural inclusion which provides recognition of the culture of a minority group. But the words are almost all we are given. We are not told anything about the institutional forms through which non-territorial self-government might work and what areas it might involve (policing? law? education?). Nor are we given much to allay the suspicion that integration is merely a nice word for assimilation. To be sure, there are hints, both in the introduction and in some of the contributions, but there is no focused discussion.

The editors’ introduction provides more on the tension between cultural rights and citizenship than do their contributors. These remain largely within the liberal framework: they are concerned to work out what is due to cultural minorities in the name of liberal equality, rather than to investigate the trade-offs which will be necessary if some appropriate form of common life is to be maintained or created. For example, Denise Réaume argues for the intrinsic value of one’s own language, and then finds herself unable
satisfactorily to explain why this does not translate into language rights for all of the enormous number of distinct language communities in modern societies. Pierre Coulombe’s overlapping essay does better in this respect in so far as he discusses the role of public debate in a democracy. But he conceives language policy as a matter to be publicly discussed; he does not discuss the way in which the conditions of public debate place limits on the number of languages that can receive official recognition.

Coulombe raises an important issue in passing, which is discussed more fully in Jeremy Waldron’s strongly argued contribution. There is, to say the least, a tension between the claim that certain aspects of one’s culture are rights and the negotiation and compromise that are required in public debate. If the members of minority cultures (or majority cultures for that matter) are to participate fully in the democratic process, they cannot hold too many aspects of their identity to be immune to criticism and change. This impinges on the issue, discussed by Ayelet Shachar and Sawitri Saharso, of the ways in which many cultures are highly oppressive, especially but not only of women. The respect which cultural minorities should be given in a liberal and democratic society does not preclude criticism and in certain case interference with their practices. Indeed, failure to do this is often a sign that they are not taken seriously. In this area, as others, the discussion of cultural rights would be improved by more systematic recognition of the conflictual nature of cultures. Tariq Modood’s contribution is exemplary in this respect (though I wish sociologists and cultural theorists would stop misusing the term ‘essentialism’). In culturally diverse societies, cultures cannot hold themselves immune from the processes of criticism (often self-criticism) and transformation. Nor should they.

Some of the essays display a certain political unreality. For example, after a careful dissection of the conflicting demands of public education and cultural minorities, Jeff Spinner-Halev argues that suitable compromise would be a system of dual schooling, in which students move from public to parochial school for different classes. Quite apart from the practical problems, this ignores the fact that the key single reason for parent dissatisfaction with the public system is not that it does not pay due attention to specific cultural needs, but that it fails to provide a reasonable basic education. In the current climate in which schools are woefully underfunded, to devote scarce resources to catering for cultural separatists would further the decline of the public system.

There are other essays, by Eamonn Callan (on discrimination and education), Jane Mansbridge and Melissa Williams (on group representation – both drawing on the African-American experience), Jacob Levy and John Borrows (on indigenous rights), and Graham Smith and Rainer Bauböck (on federalism). All of these raise issues of importance (though Smith’s discussion on the post-Soviet situation seems to have strayed in from a different collection). For me, Levy’s argument for the claim that incorporation into common law is the most appropriate form of recognition of indigenous law was especially challenging, and needs to be taken seriously by those of us who have argued for some form of separate recognition.

In summary: this is a high-quality collection. However, it does not satisfy the expectations raised by its title.

Ross Poole

The asthmatic muse


Marcel Proust was rich. When his mother died in his thirty-fifth year he inherited something like £3 million in today’s money, affording a monthly income of £10,000. He managed to squander a good part of this in misguided speculations. Despite his high-bourgeois status, he was preoccupied with social climbing via flirtations with aristocratic hostesses, and with the (in)discreet tittle-tattle which oiled the wheels of all that.

As well as being hypochondriac, Proust was very sickly, mainly with asthma. His father thought this was psychosomatic, and Proust did entertain the thought that his mother might be encouraging his obsession with his health in order to keep him in subjection. After her death he almost stopped going out, indeed getting out of bed. Unable to sleep at night or to breathe in the daytime, he adopted a lifelong pattern of going to bed at sunrise; visitors were expected to call at 10.00 p.m. Of course, it was noisy during the day so, famously, he had his bedroom lined with cork. He got into the habit of alternating stimulants and depressants. This lifestyle afforded plenty of opportunity to ponder the minutiae of his own condition, supplying the content of innumerable letters and inspiring the elaborate and delicate introspection of À la recherche du temps perdu.
My Marxism has always been sufficiently vulgar to gag at the significance Proust accords to leisure-class socialites and their petty passions. I’m still faintly horrified by Fredric Jameson’s suggestion, in Marxism and Form (1971), that the leisured drawing rooms of À la recherche reflect, albeit in a distorted way, the utopian possibility of a world in which alienated labour will be no more. My main interests in Proust’s life centre upon what it discloses about the contemporary organization of literary culture, and of sexuality.

These days a writer probably has a job and an agent, and seeks to cultivate literary and media milieux where opportunities for work may occur. For Proust, as for Henry James, Wilde and many other turn-of-the-century writers up to World War II, a successful writing career was linked to being ‘in Society’ – among ‘our betters’, in Somerset Maugham’s sarcastic appellation. The impression that Society was situated at the peak of the nation’s authority and sensibility was fostered through the attentions of the new mass media. Social and literary success alike depended on tireless placing of puffs in newspapers; the concomitant drawback was vulnerability to scandal. Here lies the substance of Proust’s life and works.

The effect of scandal was to police the processes of marriage through which lineage and the control of property were secured, so adultery was the great fixation. Male homosexuality (like aestheticism) figured mainly as a stick with which the hard-working and earnest middle classes might beat an (allegedly) effeminate aristocracy.

William Carter generally follows the biographer’s convention that a topic is dealt with at the chronological point at which the documental evidence presents itself. So we are past page 600 and Proust has lived for forty-five of his fifty-one years when we get substantial information about his adult sexuality. It is reported that he helped to finance a male brothel so he could watch other people having sex in unconventional modes and select for himself the prostitute he wanted. (There’s more, but I won’t give it away.)

Carter’s reluctance to speculate allows the inference that Proust had been largely celibate. But you don’t suddenly decide to set up a brothel. Proust made candid advances to other boys at his school; since then, for twenty-five years, he had been drawing to himself promising upper-class young men, protégés whom he shepherded into the best salons. At the same time, his lavish tipping of waiters, chauffeurs, valets, servants, secretaries and telegraph boys was notorious. When Alfred Agostinelli (secretary, chauffeur and model for Albertine) left him, Proust tried to buy him back with a Rolls-Royce and an aeroplane.

Proust became infatuated with young women too, but no one suggested that he might marry or take any of them as his mistress. His self-image was androgynous (not bisexual); he was identifying with these girls, rather than desiring them. He specially liked couples where he could court both the man and the woman.

What makes Proust’s sexual engagements hard to trace is his systematic obscuring of them. He denied repeatedly and urgently that his relations with this or that young man were sexual. We may observe his assumption that lying was the natural and proper move in such circumstances when he declared that he had refuted stories about André Gide (stories which he knew to be substantially true), and when he denied ever having had any reason to suppose that Robert de Montesquieu, the model for Baron Charlus in À la recherche, was homosexual. It seems doubtful that such repudiations were believed; the important thing was that they should be made.

Proust’s dispute with Gide about how homosexuals should be represented is interesting. Gide wanted to celebrate a classical tradition of handsome, heroic comradeship. Proust replied that this was self-exculpating, and that many homosexuals were in fact effeminate, neurotic and pathetic. And, anyway, desire has little to do with beauty. Proust believed that in Baron Charlus he had portrayed a type not seen in literature before: a man who was actually a woman. Gide replied that Proust had confused the homosexual and the invert. (There is no sign of Proust reading or hearing about Havelock Ellis or Freud.)

William Carter’s biography is full, responsible and readable. His discussion of the impact of national and international events is valuable. He is good on real-life anticipations of the novels. He does make some attempts to link Proust’s androgyny, somatic sensitivity and love of literary art to a gay sensibility; but fortunately they are quite half-hearted. If the effect is rather low-key, routine and repetitive, that’s how Proust lived.

Alan Sinfield