

# There is no science of language

Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2006. vii + 240 pp., €113.00 hb., 9 00414 751 9.

Marxism, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle concedes in this clever, incisive and witty book, has made few sustained contributions to the philosophy of language. Despite Voloshinov's celebrated treatise, Marxism's contributions to aesthetics or to the sociology of culture, for example, have been much more developed than its thinking about language. For one kind of Marxist, this would not be surprising or even deplorable. There is always something more urgent to do, and, in any event, it is not self-evident that there can or should be a specifically Marxist approach to the study of language.

Lecercle thinks this view unfortunate. In conceding the terrain to linguistics or to various non-Marxist philosophies of language, he argues, Marxists miss a chance to displace the dominance of the dominant ideology. The Althusserian framework implied by that phrase is operative and acknowledged throughout, but Lecercle is no ventriloquist. His book offers an independent-minded challenge to some prevalent conceptions of language, and offers the outline of an alternative research programme. It is an important study of an unjustly neglected topic, and I hope that it will be widely read. Lecercle's critique is sharp, often persuasive, and of real significance. His own proposals are seductive and practicable. However, for reasons I shall come on to, I think some central features of his approach mistaken.

Lecercle begins, after a short preamble, with a critique of linguistics. The latter is represented largely by one figure: Chomsky. Saussure and the tradition leading to Milner make an occasional appearance, but Chomsky is the central target. Lecercle concentrates on an encyclopaedia article published in 1987 in which Chomsky attempted to give a summary statement of his thinking. As Lecercle acknowledges, this procedure falls some way short of an exhaustive refutation of Chomsky's current positions, but that is not really his object. He does not expect to convert Chomskyans, but to free Marxists from their possible influence. This must content us as a reason for the rather drastic limitation placed on the range of material considered by this 'critique of linguistics'.

Here and elsewhere there is much work germane to Lecercle's case already going on within linguistics, but this work is not always considered by him. As an instance one might cite Noel Burton-Roberts's article 'Where and What is Phonology?' in his collection, edited with Philip Carr, on *Phonological Knowledge*. That essay offers a powerfully specific criticism of the division between Language and languages in Chomskyan theory, and it is more carefully related to Chomsky's own texts than the one provided by Lecercle. Lecercle's criticisms centre on Chomsky's radical separation between Language and languages, where the former is a biological and innate capacity to develop linguistic competence, testified to by the deep structures of grammar shared by all languages, and the latter ('E-languages' or external languages or 'natural' languages, as Chomsky sometimes calls them) are the particular ways in which those deep structures are realized in individual languages.

Lecercle has a number of cogent objections here. He points out that many of the supposed universals detected by Chomsky are not really universals of grammar, but rather (if at all) of perception. The key thesis examined by Lecercle is that language is a 'mental organ'. There is not supposed to be any idealism here: this mental organ is biological. Nevertheless, Lecercle argues, the idea of a 'mental organ' remains 'metaphorical'. He makes the point simply: 'language – unlike sight – possesses no single organ. It uses bodily organs like the ear and larynx, but these are not specialist organs like the eye: the ear does not only detect articulate sounds and things other than words pass via the larynx.' As it happens, this last assertion may be a bit too simple, because the larynx is an organ specialized for vocal gestures. But the point stands: language as a putative 'mental organ' cannot be the object of a science, because it is not yet directly available for study. At best, Lecercle suggests, 'it is currently the object of the science of language, pending the day when the advances in biology will render superfluous indirect description of the language faculty via grammatical structures which, whatever level they are envisaged at, can only be

surface phenomena, effects of the material constitution of the mind/brain'. This leads to the conclusion that Chomsky's linguistics depends a good deal on some at least debatable philosophical presuppositions, and that any claim which could be made on its behalf to scientificity is tenuous. Here Lecercle is uncovering a point which does indeed bear on linguistics as such, and not merely on its Chomskyan strand, and this is why the fact that his critique addresses only a rather limited range of works is in a sense unimportant. Linguistics is not a science. Yet it is not philosophically grounded either. Instead it possesses what Lecercle accurately characterizes, again drawing on Althusser, as a 'spontaneous philosophy' which we find 'in the opening pages of linguistics treatises, where the author feels obliged to run through some generalities on language before proceeding to serious matters'.

It is at this point, therefore, that Lecercle turns to a critique of the philosophy of language, a subject which he elects to treat, perhaps surprisingly, through an account of Habermas. The account offers itself as thinking both 'with' and 'against' Habermas, but the point of doing this never really becomes clear, because Lecercle is 'with' Habermas in so far as elements of a Marxian project still reside in the latter's work, and 'against' him in so far as he has abandoned Marx. True, Habermas is claimed to have been a – perhaps the – 'major philosopher' of a particular historical conjuncture (1975–95), but this conjuncture is in any event argued to be at an end because of recent developments in US and UK constitutional law and foreign policy. Moreover, the philosophy of language at work in Habermas is regarded by Lecercle himself as essentially derivative from Anglo-American pragmatics. In these circumstances it might have been better, given the vast ambitions of the project, to save space by going straight to the organ-grinders. I shall so go myself.

More interesting than Lecercle's rather unsurprising critique of Habermas are the six 'principles' of a different philosophy of language that Lecercle arrives at by inverting the 'ideology of language as communication' which he finds underlying the tradition he contests. That ideology emphasizes the immanence, functionality, transparency, ideality, systematicity and synchrony of language. Lecercle, therefore, will insist on its non-immanence, dysfunctionality, opacity, materiality, partial systematicity and historicity. Lecercle knows that such an inversion remains within the framework inverted. This is simply a first set of slogans which the whole second half of the book is to develop into a more elaborated manifesto. What we are given does not quite

amount to a philosophy of language, Marxist or otherwise, but does represent a valuable re-examination of some important Marxist sources on language.

Lecercle offers intelligent re-examinations of interventions in the field by Marxist leaders, especially Lenin and Stalin; at length, of Voloshinov's work; of an intriguing article by Pasolini and its relation to Gramsci's approach to language; and of elements in the work of Deleuze and Guattari which he argues can be said to have a significant affinity with a Marxist approach to language. Possibly the most important of these discussions for understanding Lecercle's proposed research programme in the philosophy of language is his account of a short article which Lenin wrote on the subject of political slogans. It is here that Lecercle spells out his (Althusserian) theory of the 'conjuncture', which is really at the heart of the book's positive content. He argues that, for Lenin, a slogan was a kind of performative utterance. It exercised power by identifying the moment of a conjuncture, by naming the political task corresponding to that moment, and by 'condens[ing] and embody[ing] the concrete analysis of the concrete situation'. Leaving aside for a moment the questions of exactly what kind of power this is, and whether slogans are really performative utterances, Lecercle extrapolates from this a series of implications for a Marxist philosophy of language. They foreshadow Althusser's view of the relation between 'truth' and 'correctness'. In this view truth is dependent on correctness, where the correctness of a slogan means its adaptedness or relevance to a conjuncture – an evaluation which precisely inverts that given in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where truth is always more comprehensive than correctness. An utterance, for Lecercle, 'is not the description of a state of affairs within the conjuncture, but an *intervention* in the conjuncture'. This, in fact, is the idea of the relation between truth and correctness operating throughout the book, so that the sign of Habermas being 'a major philosopher' is that he recognizes that the conjuncture of 1975–95 is now over.

Put like this, the idea looks, philosophically, crude. Lecercle himself concedes that the idea that Lenin could be a scientist, even a scientist of politics, is, to say the least, 'out of conjuncture'. Indeed, there is an uneasy, mock-heroic relationship to old Althusserianism, and even older Marxism–Leninism, throughout. Right at the end of the book, Lecercle writes that current political manipulations of language 'should convince us of the fact that the class enemy (it is not without a certain nostalgic pleasure that I use this old-fashioned phrase) is acutely aware of the importance

of the question of language'. His parenthesis exactly symptomatizes, perhaps, the conjuncture in which he is himself caught. The phrase 'class enemy' has dwindled to a lovable piece of heritage culture. It is a stuffed predator. Lecercle's parenthesis is its wall mounting: the teeth are permanently bared, but only in order to entertain the paying visitors.

From this blunt starting point, however, Lecercle develops a much more elaborated programme, especially through his recourse to Voloshinov. Especially welcome is Lecercle's refusal of the marginalization of semantics in the construction of linguistics as a science and his questioning of the perfectibility of the separation between connotation and denotation. These are derived from Voloshinov, as is Lecercle's interest in intonation. Once more, he slightly overstates the extent to which his interests have in fact been exiled from linguistics. It is factually (whether or not it is conjuncturally) incorrect, at least as far as linguists go, to state that 'Voloshinov is ... one of the few linguists or philosophers to take an interest in the phenomenon of intonation, which is largely neglected and yet whose contribution to the meaning of an utterance is of the first importance'. One thinks of researchers whose work has by no means remained confined to a small marginal area, but which has brought about

significant theoretical debates: Dwight Bolinger, Janet Pierrehumbert, D. Robert Ladd. What is more, in some of this work many of Lecercle's demands are already being met. It would have been very interesting to know what Lecercle would have made, for example, of Ann Wennerstrom's book, *The Music of Everyday Speech: Prosody and Discourse Analysis*, because there Wennerstrom argues that the empirical study of intonation has consequences for syntax and semantics for which the philosophical pragmatics of Austin, Searle or Grice cannot fully account.

Nevertheless, this is a huge field, and fairness prompts me to record that Lecercle's book, in turn, introduces me to some important contributions with which I had been unfamiliar. And through the ever-proliferating lists of theses, principles, maxims and slogans in this work one does begin to glimpse the outlines of a genuinely different research programme in the study of language. It would indeed be desirable to displace the assumption, so powerfully prevalent in so much study of language, that language, in the default situation, *works*. That assumption is an evaluation masquerading as a description. It would be exhilarating to force the incoherence of the concept of 'paralanguage' – a concept which often appears to do little more than prop up linguistics' blind zeal for its own scientificity – to the centre of attention. It is deeply welcome to find Lecercle insisting that any philosophy of language which has nothing to say about literary uses of language has simply failed to consider some of the most interesting empirical material. Here he offers a tonic against the resentful campaigns in favour of averageness and typicality which have recently dominated, for example, most linguistic approaches to prosody (by which I mean here not 'versification' but the phonology of suprasegmentals in any kind of utterance or text whatever). In these respects it is very much to be wished that Lecercle's book will unblock an interest in language which has, strangely, been perhaps more decisively shut down among literary critics and literary historians (and especially in anglophone countries) than anywhere else in the human sciences.

Nevertheless, there are some problems with Lecercle's own programme. In the first place, the book is not a philosophy of language. It is a *catalogue raisonné* of desiderata. This is in certain ways a strength, but leaves much to be done. One large area of opacity concerns the function of the concepts of the 'social' and 'social practice'. These are continually insisted



upon as fundamental to what language is, but there is little discussion of them. It would be jejune to insist that Lecerle ought to define 'the social', but an account of the weight the concept is supposed to carry is more than usually demanded here. This can be illustrated by considering some of the unsupported claims which Lecerle makes. 'There is a linguistic equivalent of the class struggle.' This is not at all self-evident. Indeed because this claim offers an *analogy*, it seems, if anything, idealist. There is the class struggle, and then there is a linguistic equivalent of it. Lecerle's own later arguments would appear to suggest, instead, that the class struggle happens in words, just as it also happens in teeth, arms, legs and automatic weapons. In any event, whether it is correct or not, the claim is an empirical one which needs empirical support. 'A natural language is also a cultural stock, a conception of the world.' Once again, the last assertion here seems far from evident. If it were true, one should be able to state what conception of the world French is; if one cannot, then one needs to ask with just what force one may appeal to the idea that a natural language is a conception of the world. At moments like these a dogmatic appeal to insufficiently elaborated concepts of society and culture is used to cut a knot. The justified refusal of the general principle of immanence has led to a dogmatic assertion of a particular external theory. I think Lecerle must be right to insist that, for example, it cannot be true that the historical development of languages has nothing whatever to do with social and cultural history. Yet we have to face the strong likelihood that we will simply never be able to give a socio-historical explanation of structural shifts in 'natural' languages. Here Lecerle appears to have his own scientism, one which does not seem able to tolerate the possibility that some truths might simply happen to have been irrecoverably lost.

In the second place, and still more fundamentally, the underlying ontology present in Lecerle's study blocks, in the end, the escape for which he wishes. This is because of his enthusiasm for the evacuation of the category of the subject. 'Absent' in Deleuze and Guattari, ideology itself in Althusser, the subject is expelled to nothingness thus by Voloshinov, and in italics: '*experience exists even for the person undergoing it only in the material of signs*'. This is what Blake would have called A Lie. To know this, we need only reflect on the experiences of having toothache, bowling unplayable leg-spin, or knowing the difference between subtle rubato and rhetorical grandstanding in a performance of Chopin's *Revolutionary Etude*. These are all experiences, and they all involve kinds

of knowledge, but the knowledge they involve does not exist exclusively in the material of signs. Nor is there anything 'materialist' about Voloshinov's view. It is, in fact, the essence of idealism. Consciousness is first (silently) equated with self-consciousness and then self-consciousness is identified with signification. Marx reminded us that History fights no battles. In the same way, Language never speaks. Only living individuals do that. Lecerle's hostility to what he calls 'methodological individualism' as good as erases living individual men and women from his account. In this his view is fully in accord with its Althusserian starting point – one need only recall the famous analysis in which, with agonizing but unnecessary fatalism, Althusser collapses into each other the categories of the individual and the subject.

In my view the condition of the possibility of all the sorts of unblockings which Lecerle wants to see is precisely the *abandonment* of any pan-linguistic theory of consciousness. Only if language is not everything can it be anything. Here an important resource (not discussed by Lecerle) is provided by Horst Ruthrof's study, *The Body in Language*.

Because it is too easy simply to find fault with another's intensely worked effort, and in admiring emulation of the rousing lists of theses, declarations, proposals and slogans which his book contains, I conclude with some counter-theses of my own, not for a philosophy of language, but for a critique of paralinguage.

The study of language can never be made perfectly descriptive. It is incurably and auspiciously infected with evaluation. Meaning can never be grounded in relations among meaningless elements. It is, instead, grounded in those experiences of pain, desire, hunger and so on which it is impossible for me to doubt, however much I might like to. No one can tell me what language is, where it starts or where it stops. This does not mean that language is everything or has no outside. If it has no outside it can have no inside. Therefore language is one of those concepts which is both impossible to define and (at least so far, but perhaps not in principle) impossible to do without. There is no science of language any more than there is a science of society or a science of the beautiful. Language can be made into the object of a science, only by having its tongue cut out. Over the bleeding stump is held the word 'quasiparalinguistic'. Critique of paralinguage inhabits and destroys the false and rich partition between language and life.

**Simon Jarvis**

# Written in pain

Henri Alleg, *The Question*, trans. John Calder, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, foreword by Ellen Ray and introduction by James D. Le Sueur, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2006. xliv + 102 pp., £9.99 pb., 0 80325 960 3.

At the end of Camus's novel *The Plague* (1947), the epidemic that broke out in Oran has been brought under control. As he listens to the screams of joy and laughter ringing through the city, Rieux, the doctor who did so much to fight the plague, is in a pessimistic mood. He knows that the plague bacillus does not die and can survive dormant for years in cellars and other dark places; one day, it will reawaken its rats and send them out to die in a happy city. The plague will return.

*The Plague*, ostensibly a chronicle of the 'curious events' that took place in Oran, 'at first sight, an ordinary town, nothing more than a French *préfecture* on the Algerian coast', is of course an allegory of the German occupation of France and, more generally, of fascism and Nazism. During the Algerian war, semantically related metaphors were used to describe torture: torture was a form of gangrene, a cancer that threatened to destroy democracy. Sartre uses it in his preface to Alleg's *The Question*: torture is 'a plague infecting our whole era'.

Henri Alleg was arrested in Algiers on 12 June 1957 by men from General Jacques Massu's 10th Parachute Division. What the French called a rebellion and what the Algerians called a revolutionary war of independence was in its second year. The so-called Battle of Algiers was at its height and Massu's paras had been tasked with destroying the politico-military organization of the Front de Libération National and especially Saadi Yacef's network of bombers, who were wreaking havoc in the city. Massu had been granted full police powers, and his troops were quick to use them. The FLN's clandestine organization consisted of a series of hierarchical cells that had no direct contact with each other; Yacef's bomb network was watertight. Massu was firmly convinced that there was only one way to penetrate and destroy the FLN's networks in Algiers: the systematic use of torture would reveal the names. Alleg was thirty-seven, a member of the Parti Communiste d'Algérie and the editor of the leftist anti-colonialist paper *Alger-Républicain*. Although he was not born in Algeria, he had lived and worked there since 1940. The PCA was effectively a subsidiary of the Parti Communiste Français, and a small organization that recruited almost all its membership from the

Algerian-born French population. By 1957, it had little more than a nominal existence; some its members had rallied to the FLN and others had no doubt been killed by its gunmen. Although it described itself as a 'front', the FLN did not tolerate opposition – either internal or external – and ruthlessly enforced its claim to be the sole legitimate representative of the Algerian people.

Both *Alger-Républicain* and the PCA had been proscribed and Alleg, who had been named in an internment order, had been living underground for over a year. He was arrested because he walked into a trap when he made the mistake of going to the home of Maurice Audin, also a member of the PCA and a lecturer in mathematics at the University of Algiers. Audin had been arrested the previous day, and the paras were waiting to arrest anyone who turned up at his flat. Immediately after his arrest, Alleg was taken to an unfinished building in the El-Biar district of Algiers. His ordeal began at once. Alleg was stripped and beaten with fists and boots. Electrodes were attached to sensitive parts of his body and he was shocked repeatedly. He was burned on the nipples and the penis whilst suspended by his arms from a beam. He was strapped to a plank, inclined so that his head was the lowest part of his body. A damp rag was placed over his face and water was dripped on to it. He began to choke as the gag reflex kicked in, and was convinced that he was going to die. The torture went on for a month, day after day, with added refinements. From his dark cell, Alleg could hear the screams of the paras' other victims. He was told that, if he did not talk, his wife and children would share his fate, and he believed the threat. When he heard what he thought was a woman screaming, he was convinced that his wife was being raped or tortured. At one point, an encounter with Audin was staged by Alleg's captors. The young mathematician was in a pitiful state, but managed to croak: 'It's hard, Henri.' Those were his last recorded words. Audin was never seen again, and his body has never been found. It is possible that it lies at the bottom of the Bay of Algiers. The army claimed that he was 'shot while trying to escape'.

Unlike Audin, Alleg survived. After a month, he was transferred to a detention camp and then to Algiers' Barberousse prison. There was no more torture,

but Alleg heard the cry of pain that rang through the prison when FLN fighters were taken out to be guillotined in the exercise yard. Three years later, he was transferred to a prison in Rennes, and charges were at last brought against him. He was sentenced to ten years for offences against the security of the state and for 'reconstituting a proscribed organization'. During a period in hospital he was helped to escape by PCF members, and fled to Switzerland and then Czechoslovakia, where he remained until the Evian Agreements put an end to the war. He continued to work as a journalist; his other works include a three-volume history of the Algerian war.

*The Question* was written in prison and in the detention camp on small sheets of paper that were smuggled out, a few at a time, by Alleg's lawyer, who passed them on to his wife. She forwarded them to Jérôme Lindon, the austere publisher of Éditions de Minuit. The small publishing house was founded during the Occupation and was one of the major publishers of Resistance fiction; together with Seuil, it now became a voice for opposition to the war in Algeria. It was proud of its history and, despite the fact that there had been a change of ownership, proclaimed on the back cover of its anti-war books 'founded in clandestinity in 1942'. *The Question* appeared in February 1958 and,



quite predictably, was banned within a fortnight. Even before it was banned, an estimated 60,000 copies were sold. The book continued to circulate. First published in *L'Express* in March, Sartre's article 'Une Victoire' (published as a preface to the present edition) helped to make it an unexpected and strange bestseller. A new edition incorporating Sartre's essay was published by Presses de la Cité in Lucerne and copies were smuggled into France. Later in the year, the present translation by John Calder appeared in Britain and the United States (John Calder and Brazillier respectively). The

French text was republished in 1961, by which time it was obvious to all but the most fanatical partisans of *Algérie française* that Algeria was about to become independent, and is still in print. The banned book has become a classic. (See the long interview with Gilles Marin published as *Retour sur 'La Question'*, 2001.)

Alleg's text is short (just over sixty pages in this edition) and plain to the point of being stark. There are no stylistic flourishes, no self-pity and no bids for sympathy. We are told in the simplest possible terms: this is what happened, this is what was done to me. Alleg claims no exceptional status for himself: what happened to me is happening to thousands of others, the only difference being that they have no voice. Alleg bears witness, and that is all. His account is all the more effective for that. Written in pain, the book is still painful to read.

*The Question* was not the first revelation of torture in Algeria. That the police and local military used torture (often in the form of anal penetration with a bottle) was no secret; years before the insurrection began, certain journalists were warning that 'a new Gestapo' was at work in Algeria. Knowledge of what the 'police operation' involved, which began after the first bombs went off in Algiers, was available to those who wanted it. The crimes committed in the name of pacification

– the villages burned to the ground, the crops and animals destroyed, the civilians interned in camps, the summary execution of prisoners – had all been described, mainly in the pages of Sartre's journal *Temps modernes*, the left-Catholic *Esprit* and news magazines such as *L'Express* and *France-Observateur*, as well as in clandestine eyewitness accounts from reservists serving in Algeria. (See *Des Rappelés témoignent*, 1957.) The revelations continued. The anonymous *La Gangrène* (1959) revealed that young Algerians were being tortured by the security services in Paris itself. The gangrene was spreading.

The case of Djamila Boupacha, arrested for throwing a bomb, tortured and then raped with the neck of a bottle, was widely publicized by Simone de Beauvoir and others. Books dealing with the French army's crimes were regularly banned, magazines and newspapers were regularly seized, but the revelations continued and fuelled moral outrage at what was being done in the name of France. The moral outrage rarely translated into actual solidarity, and still less into concrete support for the FLN. The 'dirty war' became more and more popular, but Algerian independence was never a popular cause in France.

The continued revelations caused a wave of moral outrage, not least because they undermined a certain idea of France. Judicial torture had been illegal since the Revolution, and France was the birthplace of human rights. The sham was enhanced by the feeling that something obscene was being repeated. French Resistance fighters had died under torture: the new torturers were a French Gestapo. One of the worst atrocities of the war occurred in the little town of Oradour in 1944. In reprisals for resistance activity, the Das Reich division of the 2nd SS Panzer Division hanged 99 civilians from the lampposts of the village of Tulle; days later they killed 642 people in Oradour. The men were shot; the women and children burned to death in a church. In a private letter, a young reservist officer serving in Algeria admitted 'We are committing Oradours every day' (see *Des Rappelés témoignent*). There were also fears that the widespread use of torture would corrupt the perpetrators themselves. Watching a young conscript striking a 'Muslim' prisoner, Alleg remarks that his place of incarceration 'was not only a place of torture for Algerians, but a school of perversion for young Frenchmen'. Such arguments would lead an enraged Frantz Fanon to object, not without some justification, that sections of the French Left were more concerned with the damage to French minds and even souls than with tortured and broken Algerian bodies. He could also have pointed out that the moral outrage was all the greater simply because Alleg and Audin were, after all, white Europeans.

Officially, there was no torture in Algeria. A few rebels may have been shot while trying to escape. At worst, prisoners were subjected to 'muscular interrogations'. When forced to justify their actions, military men like Massu would put forward the ticking bomb argument: 'You know that a bomb is about to go off and cause civilian deaths and heavy casualties. You know that your prisoner knows where the bomb is. Wouldn't you use torture to protect innocent lives?' The argument is still in use, but it is not difficult to refute this piece of sophistry on purely empirical grounds: there is no recorded instance of torture revealing the location of a bomb in this way, either during the Algerian war or in subsequent conflicts.

When Alleg was strapped to a plank and half-drowned, he was, in modern parlance, 'waterboarded' (some progress has been made: the rags and cloths have been replaced by polythene sheeting or even clingfilm). US vice-president Dick Cheney is on record as describing this as being 'dunked' in water, as though it were part of some frat boy initiation. It is in effect

a form of mock execution. Former defence secretary Rumsfeld likes to read standing at a lectern, and does so for hours on end. He therefore sees nothing wrong with placing a suspect in a stress position: legs apart and standing back from the wall, the whole weight of the body supported by the finger tips. Probably without realizing it, he is repeating one of Massu's fallacious arguments. The general had himself tortured with electricity and concluded that, whilst it was painful, it was bearable and did no lasting damage. Massu was never in danger of being killed; nor are Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld.

Although they were identified and named, Alleg's torturers were never brought before a French court. A series of amnesties – introduced by presidential decree – ensured that no crime committed by the French police or military between 1954 and 1962 will ever result in prosecution. The issue of torture has always refused to go away, and was revived in the late 1990s when, in circumstances concisely described by Le Seuer, new witnesses came forward to accuse Massu himself of having committed acts of torture. (For a fuller account, see Neil MacMaster, 'The Torture Controversy (1998–2002): Towards a "New History" of the Algerian War?', *Modern and Contemporary France*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2002.) He finally concluded that the battle of Algiers could have been won without torture. His men certainly learned nothing from Alleg.

Using all the erudition and textual-critical skills he developed as a Hellenist, Pierre Vidal-Naquet (a combination of Classicist, human-rights activist and scourge of Holocaust deniers; he died in 2006) assembled a damning dossier on the Audin case and completely demolished the 'shot while trying to escape' claim. (Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *L'Affaire Audin (1957–1978)*, 1989.) There is a 'place Maurice Audin' in the centre of Algiers. Since 2004 there has been one in Paris's Latin Quarter too. Following a decision taken by the Paris City Council, the junction of the rue des Écoles, the rue Saint-Victor and the rue de Poissy was designated 'place Maurice Audin' and a plaque was unveiled in the presence of his widow, the mayor of Paris, the tireless Vidal-Naquet and members of the Comité Maurice Audin. According to those who campaigned for it, the naming of the square is a symbol recalling all those who died from torture during the war in Algeria. Josette Audin was reported as saying 'Everyone is horrified by what has happened in Iraq. So they should be, but it would be a good idea if we remembered our own mistakes' (*Libération*, 26 May 2004). Significantly, the naming

of this little square resulted from a decision taken by the Council and not by the French government. Perhaps even more significantly, the cause of Audin's death is not recorded on the street sign. Some things still cannot be remembered, or said.

Most editions of *The Question* have, like the present one, reprinted Sartre's preface. The new edition is augmented by a brief afterword from Alleg, a foreword by Ellen Ray and an introduction by James D. Le Sueur. Le Sueur has written extensively on the Algerian war; Ray has written on Guantánamo. Ellen Ray begins her 'foreword' by asking why we should read a book about a journalist who was tortured by French soldiers fifty years ago? She immediately answers her own question: because 'torture is increasingly part of the arsenal of our military services'. The primary meaning of her 'our' is presumably 'American', but no country has a monopoly on terror. British forces are certainly involved, and a New Labour government has colluded over 'extraordinary renditions'. Alleg would have recognized many of the techniques that are still in use. Others are new, but the prisoners once held in Northern Ireland would be familiar with the hooding, the stress positions and the use of white noise to disorient – heavy metal music can serve the same purpose (see Peter Taylor, *Beating the Terrorists? Interrogation in Omagh, Cough and Castlereagh*, 1980). These practices were declared illegal by British courts but, like Camus's vectors for the plague bacillus, they have resurfaced. They have been supplemented by more 'refined' techniques, including induced hypothermia and various forms of sensory deprivation. Captives in both Iraq and Afghanistan are subjected to sexual humiliation and violent racial stereotyping (it is obviously much easier to brutalize a 'towelhead'). We have become grimly familiar with the hideous pictures from Abu Ghraib in Iraq and with the reports from Baghram in Afghanistan, and, above all, Guantánamo in Cuba. There are no pictures of what goes on in the 'black sites' operated by the CIA in undisclosed locations around the world, but it is not difficult to imagine what they might show. We read of the deportation of failed asylum seekers and terrorist suspects from Britain to countries such as Syria, Egypt and Algeria, and of the diplomatic 'assurances' given by their governments that the deportees will not be harmed or tortured. Anyone who lends any credence to such assurances must be able to believe a great number of impossible things before breakfast.

Algeria was one of the places where the postwar history of torture began. There were others, such as Malaya and above all Kenya (see Caroline Elkins,

*Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*, 2005). The history is now a lengthy one. As Ray notes, Algerian veterans were invited to Fort Bragg (North Carolina) in the 1960s. Their mission was to train troops bound for Vietnam in their interrogation methods. The GIs learned their lessons well. French expertise was incorporated into a body of very practical knowledge about interrogation, resisting interrogation and torture that began to be accumulated in the first days of the Cold War (see Michael Otterman, *American Torture: From the Cold War to Abu Ghraib and Beyond*, 2007).

The psychology of torture usually involves the dehumanization of the enemy-victim. Crude racial stereotyping is part of the process: the use of contemptuous expressions like 'towelhead' is only one part of the process. Al-Qaeda–Taliban suspects rounded in up in Afghanistan and Iraqi insurgents have no legal status, and have been defined as 'unlawful combatants', not prisoners of war (they are officially designated 'persons under control') and therefore do not, apparently, enjoy any protection under any of the conventions ratified by successive British and American governments. And what, one might ask, is the status in international and military law of the growing number of private security contractors employed by companies like Blackwater in the USA and Aegis in the UK? Such private armies used to be described as 'mercenary' and had no legal status. Referring to the concentration camps of the Second World War, Giorgio Agamben speaks of 'an extratemporal and extra-territorial threshold in which the human body is separated from its political status and abandoned, in a state of exception, to the most extreme misfortunes' (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*). When the West crosses Agamben's threshold, does it really have the moral authority or superiority to protest when the mutilated corpses of security contractors are hung from a bridge over a river in Iraq? At what point does a 'war on terror' become a war of terror?

A lot of lessons were learned in Algeria. Perhaps there is one more to be learned. Ellen Ray remarks that, well before the invasion of Iraq, the US Army screened Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* in the belief that it provided a textbook example of how an urban counter-insurgency should be conducted. Torture figures prominently (and very graphically) from the opening scenes onwards. It is to be hoped that someone reminded the US officer corps that, whilst Massu did win the Battle of Algiers, France could not win the Algerian war.

**David Macey**



# Borrowed time

Penelope J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 2007. 336 pp., £25.00 hb, 978 0 300 11558 1.

One of the unacknowledged paradoxes of historiographical practice, whose knowledge is organized according to categories denoting time, is how little interest it has actually shown in the question of temporality. Historians are puzzlingly reluctant to recognize that any concept of history, or indeed culture, embodied in their practice is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time. This experience is a fundamental condition of the historiographical enterprise, which demands both a recognition and an accounting of its relationship to time as something more than simple fidelity to chronology. But because experience is fleetingly transitory and memory temporally imprecise, history's knowledge (which in large part is based on somebody's representation of experience) has claimed exemption from subjective intimations derived from sensory impressions, and asserted a superior status on the basis of measurable objective time (chronology). A lasting reminder of this indifference to time is reflected in history's reliance on regimes of temporality belonging to domains of perception and inquiry other than its own – metaphysics, myth, natural and physical sciences, phenomenology and so on – as if they were derived naturally from its content.

If historians have been slow to recognize the temporal imperatives of their conceptions of history, philosophy has leapt to express its unease with the world of scientific measurement by constructing a critique directed at capitalism's commitment to a quantitative and measurable abstract time inscribed in the calculation of value (labour time). The familiar guideposts of this discussion are Bergson, who probably inaugurated it; Simmel, who linked the new urban metropolis to a life dominated by objective quantification that led to a necessary interiorization of time; Lukács, whose powerful critique politicized a philosophy devoted to enumerating the exemplars of science that were being made to disclose how social life had become objectified (and reified); Husserl, who bracketed the external world to gain access to the state of pure experience; and Heidegger, who temporalized existence and ontologized Being's 'historicality'. When historians finally got around to approaching the problem of history's time, they fell into endless quibbling over its status as an empirical and objective 'science', or subordinated it to considerations of narrative, implying that the time of

narrative and history were one and the same thing, in so far as they have both aimed to flatten out time and remove from it uneven rhythms.

Penelope Corfield's *Time and the Shape of History* is one of the few books in which a historian seeks to address the question of historical time directly. Corfield was prompted to write the book out of a gradually accumulated dissatisfaction with the historiographical habit of slicing time into short spans and periods, unconnected to each other, as if they represented natural dictations. Interested in determining how history, as such, is shaped in time over the long haul, she envisages a 'longitudinal approach' consistent with the way time behaves in the long run, matching the operation of space 'in the round', in order to realize the space–time continuum as the proper site of historical inquiry. It is not simply the shape of historical time that has captured her attention but the parallelism she discerns between the movements of history and those manifest in the natural and physical sciences. Her argument for the parallel tracks joining history with nature and the cosmos is based on the conviction that they are all concerned with time and its powers of shaping. Corfield is thus persuaded that despite the plurality of usage and practice the fact that 'differing systems can all be converted from one to another demonstrates the presence of a singular process at work'. What links history's time with the time of nature and cosmos is the shared kinship of longitudinality.

This effort to restore history to nature and/or the cosmos, to make its preoccupation with the past interchangeable with all those scientific observations that require a long view of 'time's arrow', derives principally from Corfield's valorization of scientific thinking and how, since Einstein and before, it has revolutionized the ways we grasp the world we inhabit. Particularly important for her account is the Einsteinian theory of relativity – measuring time's movement in space – and the recognition of their co-dependence, refigured by Hermann Minkowski as a singular unit named 'space–time.' Corfield proposes that the model of space–time as 'curved or warped' offers a productive alternative exemplar to a history that follows the straight line informing theories of progress. With this move she provides historical inquiry with the

overdue possibility of acquiring a new unit of analysis not necessarily yoked to the nation-state or progressive linearity. Yet Corfield's insistence on rejoining history to nature through the mediation of scientific conceptualizations of temporal longitudinality risks recuperating the fetishization of objectivity so prevalent in the historical world of the Cold War, so admirably detailed in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question in the American Historical Profession* (1988). By focusing on the shared ground of space-time continuum, where relationships are infinitely convertible (only the scale need be changed), her bonding of history and science resonates with Cold War ideological echoes that identified the 'West' – the 'free world' – with scientific objectivity and neutrality and the Soviet sphere with 'ideology'. In Corfield's reckoning, this Cold War reflex of the 1950s and 1960s is dramatically reflected in her special treatment of 'modernity' and 'Marxism' in separate but strategically placed chapters.

Marx, it should be recalled, envisaged a science composed of co-dependent human and natural histories. But he distinguished humans from the natural world, especially the animal species, by proposing that humans produced their means of subsistence to constitute an initial singular historical act. Humans initiate production and new ways to satisfy needs, which lead to forms of social cooperation and the development of attributes that will guarantee something more than the simple reproduction of the species. While Corfield might agree with this relationship between history (practice) and nature, she has no explicit way to differentiate a human historical act like production from, say, the inaugural 'Big Bang', other than to suggest that both occurred in a distant past. Yet a history founded on production and practice is simply different from and temporally inconvertible into a natural history where things happen according to nature's 'agents'. Moreover, the immensity of scale and length of temporality implicated in astro-cosmic or geophysical events simply dwarf the inaugural events of human history and its subsequent reproduction generating an unimaginable, incommensurable relationship.

With this conception of history founded on the inaugural historical act of production and its continuing practice, Marx went on to envision a number of different representations of time capable of manifesting the dynamic of history – the most important being a differentiation between the historical order of succession of capital's categories (evolutionary time) and the logic determining how these categories are related to each other within a social formation (synchrony).

While Corfield need not agree with Marx's conception of history, which she evidently wishes to discount in its evolutionary stage incarnation, she must nonetheless still have a concept of history in order to supply it with a temporality that is both suitable and adequate to its demands. Failure to articulate such a concept results in subordinating history to some larger temporal dynamics, thereby committing it to a state of endless dependence upon 'borrowed time', as the Japanese philosopher Tosaka Jun put it in the 1930s. This is a temporality Giorgio Agamben would later (in his *Infancy and History*) rename 'negative time', describing the flow of endless instants humans have fallen into temporalizing, unable to take possession of their own historical nature promised by the foundational historical act of production. In this scenario, the original human nature of a being-in history has been replaced by the being-in-time materialized by the commodity relation and the organization of the working day.

Instead of committing herself to a concept of history, Corfield proceeds from a conception of time distilled from the larger reservoir of convertible temporality governing nature and the cosmos – 'one cosmic time-space' – that supplies the framework through which all history, and not just human history, is interpreted. (The real question begged here is whether it is even possible to have a history without human intervention.) Yet, this distillation can never qualify as an experience of time since it has no concept of history adequate to it.

Corfield's condensation of cosmic time consists of three longitudinal velocities that shape history: *deep continuity*, *gradual evolutionary change*, and *radical discontinuity* or 'lumpy' change provoked by revolution, or, more briefly put, 'persistence, momentum, turbulence'. For every instance of a deep continuity, or micro-change or even 'radical' discontinuity found in the history of human affairs, Corfield perceives the existence of analogically comparable velocities throughout nature and the cosmos, often diminishing the historical version but nevertheless signifying a kinship and the force of a larger totalization, as if our affairs are already foretold in the stars or in the bones of animal carcasses. Whereas the first two are completely linear, and often indistinguishable from each other, the third is 'lumpy' because time behaves in a nonlinear manner. To make this point, she enlists a paradigmatic example from the arsenal of physics, in the work of Max Planck, who proposed that subatomic particles absorb energy in discrete bursts rather than a predictable flow. From recorded biological and geological catastrophes to revolutionary upheaval, which is

Corfield's principal concern, time occasionally behaves with unruly irregularity. But who is to stay what constitutes its normal, rule-bound conduct?

In the realm of human affairs, Corfield insistently targets Marxian stage theory and a historical practice that follows an evolutionary developmental trajectory, along with the category of modernity, which has often been associated with it. Here, her primary complaint fastens on to the manifestation of 'lumpy' time (or what here might more precisely be described as the coexistence of uneven temporalities) and the instantiation of a radical discontinuity that manages to divert the linear movement of history from its 'normal' course and point of arrival. While her argument with a Marxian conception of time proceeds from the staged narrative popularized as a common sense by historians after the Second and Third Internationals, it overlooks altogether both the plural complex theorizations of time Marx himself put forth in various texts and the interventions of subsequent thinkers like Walter Benjamin, who sought to rethink historical materialism in the wake of fascism and the obvious weaknesses of the productionist theory of stages.

But Corfield's dissatisfaction is with history itself. It stems from a discontent with the way history has been periodized and its time has been divided, 'minced' – quoting Saint-Simon – since the divisions neither manage to shape the narrative nor represent its complexity. Specifically, she objects to the effects resulting from such temporal mincing, with the installation of 'perma-frozen' dogmas that misrecognize how history's temporality inflects the great sidereal cosmos, whereby everything 'occurs within the temporal-spatial process that frames it'. The trouble with the endless division and periodization of historical time is that it produces what seems like a surplus of interpretations and meanings (unlike 'real' science), multiple and often conflicting explanations leading to 'historical overload', and the consequent temptations of choosing singular 'trackways' that sacrifice history's complexities. In this connection, she wishes to offer as a corrective a view that appeals to core elements, which appear and reappear punctually and are capable of persistently showing themselves despite the variety of available interpretations. These core elements – Corfield's solution to the plurality of interpretations and meanings, – provide the prospect for 'reconciling' competing explanations. However, to make this argument, Corfield must presume the presence of a surface littered with confusion and the necessary palimpsestic competence of the core elements to shine through the surface layer to reveal

a less 'chaotic picture' below and to demonstrate the operation of the more regular interaction of different forms of change occurring at the same time, with traces of even deeper continuities.

Historically, the place this presumption has prevailed is precisely in Cold War functionalist social science, which valorized 'core values' to enforce a conception of consensus nominated to ratifying the status quo. Corfield's approach leads to imagining the wholeness of history as the site of a constant and simultaneous lacing of her three temporal velocities. Less a conception of history determining its form of time than a totalizing temporal referent inflected in human affairs, Corfield presents the perspective of 'multiple dimensions', a meshing of the three dimensions configured as a 'braid' or 'plait'. These co-extensive strands of historical time cannot be separated from each other to constitute autonomous and conflicting temporalities, driven by different political velocities, as Chinua Achebe so brilliantly portrayed in *Arrow of God*. Corfield's reference to the braiding of time (momentarily reminiscent of Benjamin's notion of modern time resembling the figure of an arabesque) guarantees the realization of an equilibrium between the three unevenly related temporal longitudes and the reaffirmation of continuity.

What Corfield accomplishes by recruiting this sophisticated idea of multiple dimensions of time, unevenly related velocities, is a recuperation of an older template founded on the relationship between change and continuity, now furnished with an additional, third dimension called sharp discontinuity, complicating the pattern. But what the model really wishes to install is the mechanism of a safety valve to prevent the possible excesses produced by dramatic turbulence and totalizing transformation, by positioning the simultaneous presence of continuity and micro-change, performing as mediating agents assigned the task of thwarting the overflow of radical discontinuity. As such, this looks very much like a functionalist model of the historical totality, whereby the dimensions of time are always related to each other unevenly, but because they are interlaced the temporality of radical change remains harnessed to continuity and micro-change to secure the realization of 'reconciliation' or the restoration of socio-historical stability.

Denying history its own conception of time, Corfield's critique of both Marxism and what she names 'mutable modernity' reveals the nature of her opposition to any perspective that proposes to free historical time from the fetters of the cosmos and seeks to produce a temporality consistent with its historicity. Here, she has

joined a long list of historians who have embraced a naive nominalism to discount the use of categories like modernity and modernism – indeed, any nomenclature that hints at the presence of the discontinuous and the transforming break. Lurking behind this impulse is, of course, the revulsion to Marxism, usually represented in its most vulgar version, the stagist narrative. Even though Corfield correctly calls into question the plural uses of the category of modernity, her opposition to it is still fuelled by a distrust with its identification with Marxian historiographical practice and its privileging of a revolutionary process which demands recognition of momentous breaks in the historical line. Ever since Weber shifted the axis of social inquiry from a pre-occupation with capitalist accumulation and its history to the forms of economic and political rationalization, the category of modernity representing this change has replaced those of Marxism in social scientific and historical writing in explanations of modern society. If Corfield is right to protest the almost promiscuous utilization of the category, rendering it meaningless and ‘unstable’, it is, nonetheless, difficult to imagine what for her constitutes stable behaviour in the use of categories. And what are we to make of terms like ‘lumpy’?

When her criticism extends to ‘modernism’, which she misunderstands and often confuses with categories like modernity and modernization, it begins to dissemble into mere complaint. She fails to see how ‘modernity’ has been deployed as a displacement of Marxism and how Marxism discerned in capitalism the establishment of a modernity that privileged the temporality of the present and what Benjamin and Tosaka (from two entirely different global regions at the same moment) called ‘now-time’, signifying the logic of the new.

What Corfield’s book manages to dramatize, albeit inadvertently, are the problems that occur when a concept of time is not accompanied by an adequate idea of history, and history consequently comes to rely on forms of temporality belonging to other kinds of cognition. Although Marx, and especially historians who followed him, borrowed a temporal process shaped by evolutionary biology, marked by stages of development, Corfield’s dismissal rarely exceeds the old standby of reducing Marxism to an evolutionary narrative propelled by the general paradigm of progress, reading it as merely one illustration among many, refusing to see in it a disclosure of the problems inherent in such a perspective.

Yet Marx noted differing moments in the development of capitalism and the persisting coexistence of

formal subsumption, which prolongs the final achievement of a labour totally determined by the needs of capital, revealing the realization of its final domination everywhere as a historically impossible ideal. This authorizes a present embodying the very multiple dimensions of temporality Corfield has configured into a ‘braided history’ uniting order and disorder. As Étienne Balibar reminded us years ago, Marx had already perceived how this present takes on the shape of a ‘transition’ filled with contending (rather than complementing) temporalities, reflecting differing modes of production.

Without intending to do so, Corfield’s book provokes a recognition of the importance of the difficult labour of trying to envisage a time derived from its historical content, determined by an explicit conception of history. It is ironic that her dismissal of Marx opens up this path, and offers a possible candidate that might satisfy the need to bridge history and temporality in order to repair the split between the experience of history and the experiencing of mere time. Marx gestured in this direction with his observations on the working day and capital’s desire to dominate the everyday (with the nation-state) by commodifying labour. What Marx discerned in the working day was the transformation of everyday life with little time left over. The commodification of labour-power injected a different temporality into the everyday, which managed to remove the worker from both the past and its reminder of the initial historical act and a future that hereafter would remain blocked as a sanctuary of hope. But the remainder of everydayness not dominated by work and the constant pull of formal subsumption – the force of memory – meant the persistence of a lived present positioned to behave like that permanent transition envisioned by Marx, embodying what Balibar has described as ‘a political figure representing historical time’s “non-contemporaneity” with itself’. In other words, the everyday still provides an environment capable of allowing labour power to elude the full imposition of the commodity form and open the way for collective, transformative practice.

What the everyday as remainder supplies is a temporality for history itself, the possibility of history’s repossessing its own time, a reunion with that near-forgotten initial and inaugural historical act and the subsequent history of practice devoted to fulfilling human needs, constantly driving the search for instruments to attain them. It is here that the negative temporality of the working day, into which we have ‘fallen’, might still offer the prospect for the human recovery of a nature that was originally historical.

Rather than follow the dictates of Corfield's empire of cosmic time regulating the temporal velocities of history, perhaps we might return again to the everyday that Marx sought to demystify of the 'religion' of political economy. Just as Tosaka Jun saw in this everyday the 'kernel' of the mystery of history's time, so the poet Pessoa exulted in its embodiment of life itself, as he put it, because the 'whole mystery of the world appears before my eyes, sculpted from this banality, this street'.

Harry Harootunian

## What is to be done today?

Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis and Slavoj Žižek, eds, *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2007. 352 pp., £51.00 hb., £12.99 pb., 978 0 8223 3929 8 hb., 978 0 8223 3941 0 pb.

While in recent years Marx has become quite fashionable again and revolutionary figures like Che Guevara remain popular, Lenin is still commonly seen as a bloodthirsty dictator, the precursor of Stalin, and most philosophers disparage his writings as crude and vulgar. All the contributors to *Lenin Reloaded* maintain that he is of continued intellectual significance, certainly enough to deserve renewed attention. Furthermore, all agree that it was Lenin who made Marx's thought explicitly political; who extended it beyond the confines of Europe; and who in many respects actually put it into practice. However, they are divided as to just what is to be done with Lenin now.

The essays originated in a conference on Lenin held in Essen, Germany, in February 2001. The contributors include many of today's leading lights, from Žižek, Badiou and Balibar, to Eagleton, Jameson and Negri. All address the relevance of Lenin for the twenty-first century rather than, say, his historical significance for Bolshevism. Some are very broad in scope, such as Eagleton's on the relevance of Lenin for our postmodern age, while others, like Lecercle's highly original attempt to work out how Lenin's concepts, strategies and tactics contribute to a philosophy of language, have a narrower scope. Some, like Negri's essay, unsurprisingly have very un-Leninist conclusions.

In the words of Badiou, all contributors to this book 'are taking up Lenin's work in order to reactivate the

very question of theory along political lines'. For the collection's editors

'Lenin' is not the nostalgic name for old dogmatic certainty; quite the contrary, the Lenin that we want to retrieve is the Lenin-in-becoming, the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old reference points proved useless, and who was thus compelled to *reinvent* Marxism. The idea is that it is not enough simply to return to Lenin ... for we must *repeat* or *reload* him: that is, we must retrieve the same impulse in today's constellation.

In other words, what the book urges is a reinvention of the revolutionary project for the present in the same manner that Lenin retooled Marx's thought for specific historical conditions in 1914.

For Balibar, there is only one philosophical moment in Lenin and it is precisely the First World War that determines it. Lenin's turn to questions of epistemology and dialectical method, as it is recorded in his philosophical notebooks of 1914–15, constitutes the first decisive step of an entire strategy to overcome the crisis of leadership of the working class that erupted with the beginnings of the war and the collapse of the Second International. These led Lenin to a profound rethinking of his earlier categories and to the lucid intuition that the methodological Achilles heel of Second International Marxism was its incomprehension of dialectics; hence his famous remark that 'none of the Marxists understood Marx'. In letting the true content of Hegel's logic emerge, Lenin was able to restore the properly revolutionary impulse of Marxism itself, its dialectical heart. For example, his notes on Hegel's doctrine of Being end with the well-known exclamations on the 'leaps' and their necessity, thus distancing himself from the gradualism of Second International Marxism. The clear and informative essays by Kevin B. Anderson and Kouvelakis in particular demonstrate how Lenin's reading of Hegel opened the way to a new beginning, a genuine re-foundation of Marxism itself.

For Lenin there was no revolutionary movement without revolutionary theory. Callinicos emphasizes how, for Lenin, every significant turn in events drove him to reconsider how best the situation was to be understood from a theoretical perspective in order to intervene in the conjuncture. Lenin's famous dictum that 'politics is the most concentrated expression of economics' is intended to highlight the necessity of focusing on the ways in which social conflicts are refracted in the political field in a specific and irreducible form, governed by the logic of the struggle for

state power. Lenin thought of politics as a time full of struggle, a time of crises and collapses. The specificity of the political is expressed in the concept of the revolutionary crisis. Lukács was right to call 'the actuality of revolution' the core of Lenin's thought.

Daniel Bensaïd and Callinicos counterpose the Leninist concept of crisis to Badiou's concept of 'event' and the left decisionism of Žižek:

The dialectical relation between necessity and contingency, structure and break, history and event, lays the basis for the possibility of a politics organised in duration, whereas the arbitrarily voluntarist gamble on the sudden explosion of an event may allow us to resist the mood of the times, but it generally leads to a stance of aesthetic resistance rather than militant commitment to patiently modify the course of things.

Sylvain Lazarus, a co-thinker of Badiou, argues for 'an intellectuality of politics without party or revolution'; whereas Bensaïd defends the necessity of political organization: 'A politics without parties ... ends up in most cases as a politics without politics: either an aimless tailism towards the spontaneity of social movements, or the worst form of elitist individualist vanguardism, or finally a repression of the political in favour of the aesthetic or the ethical.' The Leninist mode of politics is often thought to be elitist and authoritarian, but Lars T. Lih's contribution responds to those kind of criticisms by arguing that Lenin's ideas have often been misunderstood as a result of confusions sometimes caused by mistranslations. Eagleton gives the following example to illustrate Lenin's much maligned concept of the vanguard:

Those members of the Citizen Army and Irish Volunteers who fought with James Connolly against the British imperial state in the Dublin Post Office in 1916 constituted a vanguard. But this was not because they were middle-class intellectuals – on the contrary, they were mostly Dublin working men and women – or because they had some innate faculty of superior insight into human affairs, or because they were in serene possession of the scientific laws of history. They were a vanguard because of their relational situation – because, like the revolutionary cultural avant-gardes in contrast

with modernist coteries, they saw themselves not as a timeless elite but as the shock troops or front line of a mass movement. There can be no vanguard in and for itself, as coteries are by definition in and for themselves. And a vanguard would not be in business unless it trusted profoundly in the capacities of ordinary people, as elites by definition disdain them.

Badiou notes how today the political œuvre of Lenin is entirely dominated by the canonical opposition between democracy and totalitarian dictatorship. In an excellent essay, Domenico Losurdo undermines this opposition by examining the relation between Western democracy and imperialism/colonialism. He contrasts the thought of classical figures of the liberal tradition, such as Tocqueville or John Stuart Mill, with the central role of the critique of colonialism and imperialism in Lenin's thought. Lenin represents a break not only at the political level but also at the level of epistemology. Democracy cannot be defined by abstracting the fate of the excluded. Also, in periods of crisis, war and other 'states of exception', democracy tends to be suspended, with power resting on the unelected and repressive apparatus of the state. This is why the Leninist understanding of the state is not just of the specific material condensation of the balance of forces between classes, but one of an essentially coercive body.

This collection of essays is recommended, not just because of the quality of the various contributions, but above all because Lenin's philosophical interventions have been largely neglected and ignored since Althusser. The book has one negative aspect though, in that no essay discusses *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (aside from occasional negative remarks, such as Eagleton claiming that it is 'a work in which one can hear the occasional gurgling of a man well out of his depth'). However, it remains interesting as a political mode of intervention into epistemological questions of science (there, a crisis of physics). Finally, none of the authors really addresses a decisive political consideration: whether the 'historical Lenin', still much demonized today, remains an obstacle to their attempt to reload Lenin for the twenty-first century.

**Liam O'Ruairc**

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