

### 'Never a fascist'?

Maurice Blanchot, *Political Writings, 1953–1993*, trans. with an introduction by Zakir Paul, foreword by Kevin Hart, Fordham University Press, New York, 2010. 224 pp., £57.95 hb., £22.50 pb., 978 0 82322 997 0 hb, 978 0 82322 998 7 pb.

It is perhaps appropriate that this collection of political writings by Maurice Blanchot is marked by a troubling absence. Yet it is hard to join the editor and publisher of this translation in respecting the decision of the editors of the French collections to begin their coverage in the 1950s: the first edition published in 2003 spanned writings from 1958 to 1993, the second in 2008 reached back, but not far enough, to 1953. For the decision to date Blanchot's political writings from the 1950s constitutes such a drastic act of exclusion that not even the judicious foreword by Kevin Hart to the English edition can repair the damage.

As is well known, Maurice Blanchot pursued a career during the 1930s as a well-paid journalist of the extreme Right, producing on a conservative estimate several hundred articles. Apart from his contributions to small reviews of the extreme Right, and to the *Journal des débats*, his known contributions to *Le Rempart* alone well exceeded sixty. This suffocating mass of political writing is nevertheless absent from this edition, and cited only indirectly and selectively in Hart's introduction, indebted to Christophe Bident's pioneering 'biographical essay' *Maurice Blanchot: Partenaire Invisible* (1998). The nationalist and virulently anti-communist political commentator specializing in foreign affairs and the critic of French parliamentarianism are discreetly detached from the apparently ultra-leftist political writer of the post-war years. Unfortunately this censorship does little to help readers understand Blanchot's political writing and to assess the character and extent of his change of convictions.

The quarantined writings of the 1930s provoke a number of defensive reactions that are frankly apologetic. The first, echoed by Hart, is to evoke surprise that their content is not quite as bad as it is rumoured to be; that Blanchot was 'never a fascist'. Detached from their context as an extreme and essentialist French nationalism, Blanchot's journalistic writings, especially from 1933, pursued a consistent and rigorous critique of German National Socialism, explicitly attacking its anti-Semitism. Yet the anti-German, anti-Nazi posture was by no means unusual for the dissident circles

around the Action Française, and was also compatible with a local anti-Semitism, such as Blanchot employed in his attacks on the Blum government in the article 'Terrorism – Means of Public Safety' in *Combat*, July 1936, deploring its 'holy alliance' of the interests of the 'Soviets, Jews, Capitalists'. Hart cites this as evidence that Blanchot did not make anti-Semitic comments 'as such', although his translation turns the nouns into adjectives, thus softening the identification 'Soviet, Jewish, Capitalist interests'. Bident's defensive argument that Blanchot made recourse to a specific journalistic rhetoric to attack the government makes things worse, since it suggests that Blanchot was an unscrupulous journalist willing to make unthinking use of anti-Semitic tropes in order to appeal to his rightist audience, who would not make fine discriminations between the three interests. The question of Blanchot's anti-Nazism and its importance for his turn is a crucial one, but this collection will not help readers wanting to know more.

Another strategy also promoted by Hart is to suggest that the Blanchot of the Right and the Left meet in their advocacy of dissidence. The only extended passage he cites from the hundreds that Blanchot wrote during this period – 'Dissidents Wanted', from *Combat*, December 1937 – seems to prefigure Blanchot's move from a dissidence of the Right to one of the Left:

The true communist dissident is someone who leaves communism not in order to find common ground with capitalism but in order to define the true conditions of the struggle against capitalism. In the same way, the true nationalist dissident is someone who neglects the traditional formulas of nationalism, not in order to seek reconciliation with internationalism but in order to fight internationalism in all its forms, including the economy and the nation itself. These two examples of dissidence seem to us as useful as the other. But they seem equally rare. We need dissidents.

The question of whether this points to a continuity between this text and the 'Manifesto of the 121' against the Algerian War is an interesting and important one, but it should be remembered that at this point the dissidence in question was that of the Right in opposition

to a government of the Centre-Left. Blanchot's calls for resistance during the 1930s are made in the name of order and the restoration of the integrity of the nation against internal and external threats. His statement of the conditions of resistance in the article in *Rempart*, for example (cited in Bident), is set in the context of denunciations of liberalism, the rights of man and citizen and, in short, the achievements of the French Revolution:

When the state has become incapable of working in favour of the state and in favour of the nation, the public good may perhaps only be defended by resistance to the public power. The general interest may be saved by private initiatives. Everyone has the right to denounce unjust laws and to withdraw themselves. And the revolution begins.

We are in revolution.

Readers of Blanchot's political writings should be in a position to judge for themselves the elements of break and continuity between a position established on the premisses of the extreme Right and those of the Left. This collection, unfortunately, will not enable them to do so.

Perhaps one of the most politically sensitive strategies adopted in dealing with the writings of the 1930s is the argument for a 'change of conviction'. Blanchot certainly repudiated his personal politics of the 1930s, but the issue remains of what prompted this change. The issue is extremely sensitive since it involves Blanchot's role in the resistance to Vichy and the German Occupation of France and his complicity in constructing a narrative of this role. Hart's introduction moves quickly from the 'not as such' anti-Semitic comment to the facts of Blanchot's active protection of Levinas's wife and daughter, to Marguerite Blanchot's aid of Paul Lévy and the difficulty of imagining 'that Blanchot himself was not involved in this good work'. Yet Blanchot's contribution to the resistance is worryingly intangible. This is of course characteristic of many resisters with respect to their activities in the clandestine resistance – Vernant above all – and the potential for perpetrating injustice when reviewing actions from this period is enormous. Yet the case for Blanchot's resistance is not clear cut.

Bident describes Blanchot's 'discrete links' with the resistance, his meeting with Char in 1940 and his active resistance against the occupying power from 1942–43 that consisted in driving clandestines from Quain to the border with Switzerland. Yet weighed against these episodes is the attempt to 'use Vichy against Vichy' with the Vichy cultural association *Jeune France* and the literary reviews for much of the

war published in the *Journal des débats*. In referring to the 'ambiguity' of the former in the essay 'For Friendship', Blanchot avoids mentioning the name of the founder of the organization, Pierre Schaeffer, referring instead to 'unknown musicians who would later become famous': a striking refusal to name the individual responsible for the organization, mentioning also his resignation from the organization in 1942. The footnote to this sentence gives the quasi-resistance 'context' that 'The group was dissolved in March 1942, after having been infiltrated by anti-Vichy artists and intellectuals intent on using it as a platform against the government.' Yet Bident shows that it was not dissolved; nor did Blanchot resign for this reason. Indeed, he was associated with the successful bid to the Vichy government for a successor organization, the 'Association for the Defence and Illustration of Artistic Values'.

The programme of a resistance to Vichy from within Vichy is at least conceivable until the Laval government and Vichy's entry into full collaboration with the German occupation. If participating in *Jeune France* seems an implausible platform for such resistance, publishing regular literary articles in the *Journal de débats* is even less convincing. Bident remains baffled by Blanchot's 'superb indifference' to the company his writing was keeping, namely 'intolerable propaganda publicity' and an editorial line fully attuned to Vichy nationalism and collaboration. Was this the work of a master literary strategist, putting the Trojan Horse of resistance into the house journal of the enemy, or a breathtaking act of opportunism? How to interpret the near absence of any mention of Kafka, Sade and Malraux until after the Liberation? In one of his later comments on this time and the collection of essays *Faux Pas* published in 1943, Blanchot remarks on the nervousness of the censors and attributes it to the presence of a commentary on Ernst Junger's *On the Marble Cliffs*. The author of this anti-Nazi allegory of the nationalist resistance to Hitler, published by the German army in 1937, was widely known to enjoy the protection of Hitler and was culturally prominent in the occupying army in Paris. This reference suggests Blanchot was pursuing a subtle policy of undermining the collaborationist consensus of Vichy, but in a safe way, referring to a conservative German author with protection at the highest level. In either case, the balance between compromising his own work and undermining the *Journal de débats* is at best a very fine one.

Linked with the problem of Blanchot's use of the pages of the *Journal de débats* is the more fundamental question of how it was possible for him to write *Thomas the Obscure* during the 1930s at the same

time as pursuing a career as a right-wing journalist dedicated to order and the preservation of national identity? When later reflecting on Heidegger's National Socialism in 'Thinking the Apocalypse', Blanchot deplores Heidegger's invocation 'of this very writing and this very language – through which, in a great moment of thought, we were invited to the highest interrogation that could have come to us from Being and from Time – to call for votes for Hitler, to justify Nazi Germany's secession from the League of Nations, or to praise Schlageter.' Is this to suggest that it would have been less reprehensible if Heidegger had done so in another writing, another language – that of journalism? The assumption of a separation between literary and journalistic writing seems questionable: even if



it were possible to preserve the purity of literary or philosophical language from its journalistic other, even if it were possible to insulate it in some way, would this not leave a wholly compromised and scarred purity?

The change of climate between Blanchot's pre- and postwar writings is palpable, but difficult to detect and understand without the benefit of the contrast. Nor is it possible to come to a decision about certain lines of continuity between them. The documents surrounding the Algerian War and May 1968 have undeniable power, but also, in the light of the 1930s, a persistent ambiguity. The call to disobedience of the former – currently enjoying a fresh resonance in France with the extraordinary success of Stéphane Hessel's *Indignez Vous* – is made in the name of resistance to a state that had renounced its republican vocation. The military

infiltration of the Republic justifies the withdrawal of consent from its actions and institutions with a modality entirely consistent with the justification of resistance in the 1930s.

Two original aspects of Blanchot's political thought are particularly striking in this collection. The first is his contribution to the debate about the political implications of space flight, with Blanchot's reflection on the cosmopolitical implications of Gagarin far more critical and suggestive than Arendt's and Levinas's contributions to the same short-lived genre. Blanchot shows very elegantly the recuperation of Gagarin's 'movement of pure dislocation' by Khrushchev's 'greeting him in the name of earth, his fatherland'. The other is the vista of an entirely new possibility of political thought provoked by the May 1968 revolution. Blanchot's contemporary description of the revolutionary event in the name of the Student-Writer Action Committee is concise and passionate:

In a few days an entire modern society fell into dissolution; the great Law was shattered; the great Theory collapsed; the Transgression was accomplished; and by whom? By a plurality of forces escaping all frames of contestation, coming literally from nowhere, unlocalized and unlocalizable. This is what I believe is decisive.

The experience pointed to the possibility of a non-resentful, affirmative understanding of resistance, 'a *refusal that affirms*, in releasing or maintaining an affirmation that does not come to any arrangement but that undoes arrangements, even its own, since it is related to dis-arrangement or disarray or even the unstructurable'. It is in this affirmative refusal that Blanchot's politics and political thought make a step beyond, one that moves towards a rethinking of political spontaneity. It is here and perhaps not so much in the thought of community that Blanchot's political thought is most intense and challenging.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this selection of texts presents an obstacle to the understanding of the complexity of Blanchot's political thought, despite some of the remarkable texts that it makes available. The overall impression it leaves is one of a spectacle: the performance of the ultra-leftist Blanchot presented without the benefit of an adequate insight into the sombre background from which it emerged. Such insight would have been possible with the inclusion of even four or five of the texts from the 1930s. Without them, there remains the danger that their exclusion will disable judgement and perform a disservice to the complexity of Blanchot's thought.

**Howard Caygill**

# Multimodal

Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2010. 352 pp., £70.00 hb., £16.99 pb., 978 0 82234 753 8 hb., 978 0 82234 772 9 pb.

This collection seeks to make a timely and far-reaching intervention into contemporary debates about ecopolitics and biopolitics. In their introduction Diana Coole and Samantha Frost make the case for a radical reappraisal of objectivity and material reality in which changing conceptions of material causality and the significance of corporeality are seen as crucial for a materialist theory of politics and agency. They write of their 'conviction that materialism is once more on the move after several decades in abeyance' and their 'eagerness to help define and promote its new directions'. In the history of thought, they rightly note, materialism has been a sporadic and marginal tendency; the theory of the past few decades, with its emphasis on a radical constructivism, has seen it eclipsed by the privilege granted to language, culture and values. On the one hand, this has had the benefit of eschewing any straightforward appeals to matter as naively representational and naturalistic. On the other, it has meant that the tremendous changes and developments taking place in the material world have eluded theory and shown it to be out of touch with changing configurations of material reality. As the editors stress, in the light of the massive materiality that structures our everyday lives, affording new possibilities and circumscribing our horizons, how can the 'power of matter' be ignored and the primacy of matter in our theories be neglected?

Developments in material culture suggest that the textualist approaches associated with the cultural turn are no longer adequate for understanding contemporary society and its most pressing challenges concerning environmental, demographic, geopolitical and economic change. Moreover, it is not as if there have not been developments in theory and philosophy that do not open up possibilities for thinking materiality and corporeality in novel ways and so help to set the agenda for a new politics. Here one thinks of Merleau-Ponty's turn to a new conception of nature in the late 1950s and early 1960s, of the innovative work of Deleuze and Guattari, of Althusser's interest in a philosophy of the encounter, which included, at least in part, an attempt to revitalize Epicurean sources of materialist thinking, and of Foucault's work on biopower. These figures and the intellectual developments associated with them are drawn upon in the collection,

along with other familiar figures such as Spinoza, Nietzsche and Bergson.

Although the editors depict a brave new world, in which our lives are said to be governed by biotechnological engineering and digital and virtual technologies, and in which science fiction is declared to be ahead of mainstream ethics, the actual book that ensues is, thankfully, a lot more modest and philosophically sensible. Many of the best essays mine neglected, marginalized or wayward sources for their promotion of a new materialism. They can be defined as 'renewed materialisms'. However, as the editors also point out, new paradigms are emerging for which no overall orthodoxy has yet been established: much, then, is in flux. The editors insist that if it is to be successful a reprisal of materialism needs to be 'truly radical.' To be this it needs to return to the most fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied agents within a material world, making connections with work being done in the natural sciences – as the editors point out, the great materialist theories of the nineteenth century which we associate with Marx, Nietzsche and Freud took place in the context of a new physics and new biology – and attending to the transformative ways in which the material environment is produced, reproduced and consumed. This necessarily involves challenging some of our most basic assumptions about the human and about agency. A new reality is emerging in which questions about the boundaries between life and death and the organic and non-organic are being unsettled, in ways that raise unprecedented normative questions. In addressing such questions, 'we unavoidably find ourselves having to think in new ways about the nature of matter and the matter of nature: about the elements of life, the resilience of the planet, and the distinctiveness of the human'.

The basic idea, then, is that the dominant discourses that flourished under the cultural turn, and that have been dominant in the humanities and social sciences since the 1970s, have reached a point of exhaustion. Constructivism cannot do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and a global political economy. The aversion to 'the real' that characterizes the linguistic and discursive forms of constructivism has had the fatal consequence of discouraging inquiry

into the kinds of empirical investigation that material processes and structures necessitate. The authors thus suggest a theoretical rapprochement with material realism – through it has to be noted that there are few places in the volume where this actually takes place; and I could find no references to recent work in so-called ‘speculative realism’. The editors instead propose three interrelated themes or directions for new materialist research: (i) an ontological reorientation that is resonant with, and even informed by, developments in natural science: one that requires an orientation that is decidedly post-humanist, since the commitment is to an agentic conception of matter, and that amounts to a fundamental break with the mechanistic materialisms that have dominated in the West during the modern period; (ii) a focus on a raft of bio-ethical and biopolitical concerns to do with the status of life and the human; (iii) a critical re-engagement with political economy, including an engagement that would explore in fresh ways the relationship between the materials of everyday life and broader geopolitical and socioeconomic structures. In short, materiality in all its contingent forms and lively expressions must be given its due.

It is a radical agenda that Coole and Frost are setting, and it presents innumerable challenges to those seeking a way out of the impasse and closed horizon of hitherto dominant discourses, such as constructivism and normative political philosophy. I personally find it a lot more attractive than the much-hyped new realisms for the simple reason that it has the potential to be more politically focused and engaged, as well as theoretically sensitive and significant. The new materialisms promise new ontologies that take us well beyond old approaches that construe matter as an inert substance subject to predictable causal forces. The new materialisms challenge both the Cartesian–Newtonian conception of matter as well as Promethean ideas of human mastery over nature. Instead materiality is to be construed as more than mere ‘matter’: active, dynamic, self-creative, productive and unpredictable. The new materialist ontologies are avowedly post-humanist in the sense that they serve to displace what Agamben has called ‘the anthropological machine of humanism’. It should perhaps be noted that both the editors and some of the contributors make appeals to matter’s ‘immanent vitality’, and at times the analyses slip more into philosophical poetry than rigorous scientific practice. Often the claim is advanced that matter possesses emergent, generative powers or agentic capacities, but this is not adequately demonstrated in the essays and with the necessary reference to actual developments

in the new physics and biology. Nevertheless, this is a strong and welcome collection of essays that is clearly in tune with global planetary developments, and that does offer novel and challenging analyses of the ways in which we can theorize afresh questions of ontology, politics and agency. How do the new conceptions of matter suggest we reconfigure models of society and the political?

The volume is divided into three main parts. The first part is on ‘the force of materiality’ and features essays by Jane Bennett (who writes largely on the neglected biologist Hans Driesch and the nature of a vital materiality), Pheng Cheah (on the new ‘materialism’ we encounter in Derrida and Deleuze), Diana Coole (on Merleau-Ponty’s work on nature and the body and its legacy), and Melissa A. Orlic (who provides a very rich and nicely nuanced essay on Nietzsche’s conception of ‘impersonal matter’). The second part is on ‘political matters’ and features essays by Elizabeth Grosz (highly instructive on Bergson and the relevance of his conception of freedom for feminism), Samantha Frost (on fear and the illusion of autonomy in Hobbes), William Connolly (on the materiality of perception drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Foucault) and Rosi Braidotti (on the politics of life and new ways of dying). The third and final part is on ‘economies of disruption’ and features essays by Rey Chow (on materialism, post-structuralism and the signifier), Sara Ahmed (on ‘orientations’, drawing heavily on Husserl’s phenomenology), Sonia Kruks (on de Beauvoir and ‘discrepant materialisms’) and Jason Edwards (on the materialism of historical materialism and how it can best be defended in the wake of the anti-humanist challenge of post-structuralism). The contributions are uniformly thought-provoking; some are riskier and braver than others.

Ultimately, the editors advocate what they call a ‘multimodal materialism’ as a way of exploring in plural but consonant ways the production and reproduction of the contemporary social order. Although they do not conceptualize the renewed critical materialisms as being synonymous with a revival of Marxism, there is a link with this theoretical and political practice – and it is telling that the volume should conclude with an essay on the future of historical materialism, simply because Marxism has traditionally been the critique *par excellence* of capitalism. What has clearly fallen to the wayside are ideas of a historical meta-narrative, any valorization of an originary, pristine nature, and any positing of communism as history’s idealized material destiny. It is clear that what needs criticizing are neoliberal fantasies about the present

and future functioning of the global order, and here Marxism remains a vital source. No renewed materialism, however novel or fashionable, can afford to do without its critical machinery.

Overall, the volume makes a convincing case for the renewal of materialism, in terms of both its theoretical purchase and its radical political potential. It shows, in ways that are often exemplary, that there are rich, and sometimes surprising, resources in the philosophical tradition for renewing materialisms. Some of the essays strike me as being too academically conservative, but others have an effect that is both ethically powerful and philosophically challenging. Ultimately, the collection as a whole does not live up to what is promised in the book's long introduction, and a riskier volume could have been ventured. Much more attention should have been given to what one can broadly call 'ecological' thinking or ecosophy, and the manner in which materialist traditions of thought, from Epicurus to Marx and Nietzsche (and Guattari) have shown a concern with the fate of the health of the

planet, in ways that are non-human-centred. One worry one might have about biotechnological developments is the way they seek to extend and gain control over 'life', so contributing to a modern technological will to master nature for typically conventional humanist ends. Although the editors note this concern, it is not sufficiently explored in the essays that make up the volume.

As to why one might pursue a radical post-humanist project, perhaps the best answer given in the volume is by Rosi Braidotti in one of the most engaged essays. There is the need to work against, on the one hand, the general lethargy, including the neoliberal rhetoric of selfish genes and possessive individualism, and, on the other, the ideology of the melancholic lament, refusing both in the name of an affirmative ethics of sustainable futures, deep generosity towards the world, and what she calls 'the ethics of nonprofit at an ontological level'. One does not pursue this project out of reason: 'Reason has nothing to do with this. Let's just do it for the hell of it and for love of the world.'

**Keith Ansell Pearson**

## Thriller

Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx*, Bookmarks, London, 2009. 425 pp., £16.99 pb., 978 1 90519 253 3.

John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, Pluto Press, London and New York, 2010. 305 pp., £60.00 hb., £17.99 pb., 978 0 74533 009 9 hb., 98 7 0 74533 008 2 pb.

That images of zombie banks, 'vampire squids' (aka Goldman Sachs), zombie economics, and the rest, have come to supplement the plethora of zombie movies and television series in recent culture is indicative of the attempts of contemporary capitalism to regenerate itself from out of the fetid remains of the credit system as it is remortgaged on the backs of taxpayers in general and students in particular. Meanwhile, in Cameron's Britain, the Big Society is gearing up to suck the life out of public services. Under such accumulated circumstances it's not surprising that we should be looking for cracks, a way out that is unconditional, a complete liberation. In these two new books, the language of the crack (Holloway) resonates with the vicariousness of life under zombiedom (Harman) – it indicates a kind of disconnection: something debilitating which stands between us and whatever objective we might have, a kind of rapacious vacuity, a hole in our productive resources. At the same time 'the crack' is

also redolent of the point at which the system stops: its limits and boundaries. Gaps or lacunae are paradoxically the point at which the hole becomes the being, the way out, opportunity; the commodified life as an opportunity for reversal, *détournement*. Yet the image of unconditional liberation here is, in a way, also a reverse image of the zombie as human absence. That is to say, these representations of desire/loss are without a mediating shadow, a penumbra of determination: they lack any sense of internal tension or real ambiguity.

Arguably, the use of words like 'zombie', 'vampire', 'crack' in contemporary accounts of capitalism represents the horrific sublimity of the discourses of non-being, where chaos looms, things threaten to fall apart, inspiring abyssal terror of non-recognition as the predatory thing appears in the guise of another being. Here we have the horror story as both being-in-a-hole and possibility of escape. Hence the penchant of authors and publishers for a good horror

story relates the vicariousness of gaining life in the cracks – ‘where the crack is’ – in the sense that the state of vicariousness or of non-being depends on the cracks to sustain its nothingness, to provide it with an impression or afterglow of the living. The oscillation between presence and absence in the language of non-being has us well and truly spooked and might explain the publishers’ liking for titles with the cross-genre appeal of ‘gothic capitalism’. The books under review can usefully be examined within the purview of this hybrid genre, and it’s worthwhile looking at the extent to which they fall within the dualistic categories of ‘horror’ as a result. Given the linguistic excess or productivity of these oppositions the authors and publishers may find that language acts behind their backs, subverting readerly notions of labour, valorization, economics, non-identity, liberation and so on.

In *Capital*, Marx famously describes the twofold character of labour embodied in commodities. This point is important for both books, but in different ways. Both Harman and Holloway recognize this duality as the basis of the valorization process, the creation of surplus value within capitalist wage labour. Yet Holloway goes on to argue that, because of this, much Marxist writing on political economy reduces to ‘economics’, rather than being a *critique* of subsumption. Instead, for him labour is a ‘unitary category’ – one under which he subsumes abstract labour. Unalienated creative, free labour is hived off under the heading ‘doing’. The effect of this dichotomization is to occlude the experience of commodity production – that is, the experience of the abstraction and alienation of one’s labour with capitalist labour relations. Abstraction is an experiential process just as it is also capital’s self-actualizing valorization. For *Capital* commodity production is lived as an experience of *Verrückung* – derangement or displacement, according to Christopher Arthur. It would follow from this that labour is a contradictory unity rather than, as Holloway claims, a unitary category. As such, the effect of Holloway’s classification is, in effect, to elide concrete labour via the category of ‘doing’ as creative labour. This is where, he argues, openings in capitalism enable us to do something authentic, preferably widening the cracks in the process. Unfortunately for this autonomist argument, ‘cracks’ do not enable us to escape into unfettered creativity but rather to contest the usage of the products of capitalism in favour of hitherto unimagined ways of making something from the ready-to-hand debris of commodification – of course recuperable as market opportunities.

Consequently there is always a tension in the labour process between using its environment and being used by it, having one’s labour abstracted. Apart from customizing the products of capitalist objectification, concrete labour ‘appropriates’ or ‘creatively’ negotiates capitalism in its approach to the working day. Holloway’s overlooking of this moment in the labour process identifies a lacuna in his account – work as the *everyday*. His sectarian purist approach to labour relations misses this ‘negotiation’ in his ‘unitary category of labour’. Trade-union activity is condemned as being concerned solely with affirming abstract labour and any details surrounding its employment which are consequently taken to be equally abstract. Terms and conditions of employment are subject to negotiation, but it does not follow from this that negotiation as a process is a form of abstraction; rather, arguably, it is the opening up of abstractions, their reformulation in favour of the ability of employees to go on living their customary lives. This is in effect the intervention of everyday life in the valorization process, in the mode of insertion of concrete labour within capitalism. Whether trade-union negotiators take for granted capital’s reproduction process, which seems to be Holloway’s objection, is beside the point – it is the *ontological* significance of the process of negotiation as capital’s non-being that in fact, inter alia, engenders cracks in the system.

More generally, the role of concrete labour within capitalism, whether subversive or otherwise, can be identified via its indexical features: the non-abstract sedimented skills and stocks of knowledge; that is, the specific situated concrete knowledge required of workers. These may be direct skills, aptitudes, ways of coping with routine and monotonous work, the spaces won, the imaginings, physical sensations, projections of time and space, relation of work to other activities, generalized motivations, for example; or more deep-seated meanings including the Protestant work ethic, and so on. All this may be embodied in concrete labour. Work as commodity production requires, at the same time, all these aspects of the everyday, and it incorporates what Holloway calls ‘doing’, although not usually on the grand scale of creativity envisaged in *Crack Capitalism*. Nonetheless, abstraction and concrete labour are two sides of the same coin – one appears as the non-being of the other but depends on it at the same time for its ‘life’. Capitalism and the lived experience of concrete labour are ontologically linked; they bear the mark of each other. Capitalism converts all the above aspects of living labour into value, whether of labour or other commodities.

Holloway's treatment of time as duration is also characterized in a unitary way. Here his approach is 'apocalyptic', relying to some extent on Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life*. Vaneigem argues for the

worker places his life in the object; but now it no longer belongs to him, but to the object'. Further, 'The rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of the object over the human, of dead labour over the living ... it



is the alienation process of his own social labour.' Harman, then, like Holloway, notes that *Capital* was never just a work of economics, but precisely a 'critique of political economy', of what other schools of economics took for granted.

For Harman the present crisis represents the aftermath of an infusion of credit through which the system is spasmodically brought to life with chaotic consequences. He argues that, following the crisis of the

need to break the duration of capital's linear time and thereby recuperate other times, past and futural. He identifies the determinations of this breach as lying in the temporal tensions between linear and cyclical time in the everyday. Holloway simply argues that creative doing is thwarted by instrumental time ('time-as-which'), where we perform according to preordained goals. The breaking of time in this sense – the cycles of rationalization as capital both extends and intensifies – is a theme he certainly shares with Vaneigem. The time of the break is a series of moments of self-organizational triumph, which assert a different rhythm or pace to events. These appear however as complete, sutured moments or 'cracks', where, incredibly, Holloway ignores the temporal structure and tensions of the everyday and so lacks any sense of liberation from capitalist time as being marked by the conditions of its genesis; that is, of any determinate process through which the duration of capital can be broken. This is the autonomism of the Ouija board: liberation emanates from abstract labour and time.

By contrast, Chris Harman's work is salutary in its treatment of Marx's spectral vision of labour, in which the same thing appears in different guises and provokes the lived experience of work as derangement, commoditized labour as a dead ringer for the concrete. The commodity 'is' an artefact, horrifically mistaken regarding its inscribed property relations, as theft bears out. Marx observes in his *Capital* notebooks that 'the

1970s, capitalism witnessed a bout of creative destruction as the regulation form of recovery, but that this annihilation of assets was nowhere near severe enough to re-create the levels of profitability seen in the 1950s and 1960s. The globalization of capital nevertheless created something of a revival, but one which was crucially dependent on loans to developing states rather than on an intrinsically profitable new start. Credit later facilitated the property boom and the popular focus shifted onto the banks, which commentators described as being in an undead state, incapable of performing any positive function and, moreover, as representing a threat to everything else. Harman takes up the theme of a 'runaway system' where capitalism is characterized as a cross between Frankenstein's monster and the vampire, and it's clear that the scope for misrecognition of and possession by the apparition is magnified in the circulation of credit. It's here that the value of assets is incredibly fluid and the opacity of capital, hiding behind concrete things such as living accommodation, becomes apparent as property owners are 'dispossessed'.

Hence Harman perceptively argues that capital is blind to itself, and indeed that this is what exacerbates the contemporary crisis: the inability to distinguish assets which have any life in them. This is stressed in particular in relation to the problem of climate change, which it cannot recognize as a problem because it is not immediately transmutable

into value terms; its environment will always be its other. Capitalism has no continuity with its concrete environment, which is nothing to it, is not value, but paradoxically is at the same time its raw material. Its context is simply swallowed – that is, destroyed – as capital consumes it, creating a self-sustaining bubble-illusion as it feeds off its ground and simultaneously sublates it. This dualism of the spectral/abstract and the actual/concrete is hence intrinsic to bourgeois thought forms, as Lukács noted.

Harman, then, recognizes the duality of labour as both the source of surplus value and also culturally situated social labour, and he follows Marx in arguing that one condition of valorization is that, despite everything, everyday life must continue: getting workers to apply their faculties in full requires sustaining their ‘habits and degree of comfort’. Hence the contested process in which living labour is transformed into value denotes Marx’s critique of a bourgeois economics, in which the environment or context of production is taken for granted. Harman observes that these social conditions are dynamically established, institutionalized as the product of struggle. However, in discussing

environmental catastrophe, he reverts to ‘economics’, arguing that global warming will be displaced as a priority by the need for profitability. In other words, everyday life drops out of the equation regarding real subsumption: the fact that catastrophic climate change might impinge on everyday life is ignored. So we are back to the ideological problem of the blindness of capital, which Harman himself raises, namely that it makes its conditions of possibility disappear.

Capitalism’s dualistic ontology of being and non-being is ironically reflected in various ways in the books under discussion and is overdetermined by the Gothicism of their cultural–linguistic context. The horrific seduction suggested by the experience of abstraction – the appearance of non-being as being, as derangement – is inexplicable and uncanny within the real categories of bourgeois ideology. However, this Gothic experiential structure turns out to be not just a metaphor for capital, but taken as an abstraction can also be seen as constitutive of it: the Gothic *is* capital. Notwithstanding this, it is arguably an abstraction recuperable in its non-being as the lived experience of zombiedom, as zombies widening the cracks in its edifice.

**Howard Feather**

## Reanimation

Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley and Gyan Prakash, eds, *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2010. 264 pp., £44.95 hb., £19.95 pb., 978 0 69114 697 3 hb., 978 0 69114 698 0 pb.

‘There is no history’, writes Reinhart Koselleck in *Futures Past*, ‘which could be constituted independently of the experiences and expectations of active human agents.’ Examining the temporal structure of historical experience, Koselleck considers two factors which are crucial to any interrogation of the utopian impulse: (1) the dialectic between the private, autotelic daydreaming of individual subjectivity and its embryonic purpose within collective political transformation; and (2) the non-contemporaneity of those utopian pasts and futures that are extant within the lived present.

Koselleck’s reconsideration of the role of the subject within historical conceptualization echoes those distinctions between the ‘warm’ and ‘cold’ streams of Marxism – or between human desire and historical analysis – formulated by the German utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch. Interestingly, Koselleckian *Begriffsgeschichte* also forms the basis of a recent engagement with the processual impulses of utopian dreaming in

the collection *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*. Developed out of a two-year seminar series at the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton, *Utopia/Dystopia* joins other recent studies in ‘utopian historicity’ – notably Eric Weitz’s *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (2003), Jay Winter’s *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the Twentieth Century* (2006), and Russell Jacoby’s *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (2005). Writing a spirited defence of ‘shopworn’ utopianism, the editors argue that ‘[e]verywhere we turn, historical conditions continue to throw up utopias and dystopias as ways to shape, understand, and critique our contemporary world.’ Contra liberal anti-utopianism and its devastating consensus (fluently historicized by Jacoby in *Picture Imperfect*), *Utopia/Dystopia* thus sets out to rethink disciplinary parameters and ‘breathe new life into transformative politics’ through a historical analysis of concrete utopian visions.

To a certain extent, the book succeeds in its ambitious task. The editors offer a useful introduction, defending utopia and dystopia as axiomatically wedded and historically grounded analytical categories (a task which is not new, however, as regards the analytical frameworks of utopia/dystopia that have been used since the late 1980s to study speculative literature and its generic hybrids; as in the work of Tom Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini, Lyman Tower Sargent and others). The first essay in the collection, by Fredric Jameson, offers some characteristically illuminating comments on utopian methodology, reflecting on his recent *Archaeologies of the Future* to consider the possibilities of the utopian impulse within 'enclave utopias', signalling the 'miniaturization' of utopia in recent years. Echoing Karl Popper's famous distinction between 'piecemeal' social change and utopian engineering, Jameson abstracts the utopian impulse from authoritarian social restructuring. As he argues:

The utopian impulse calls for a hermeneutic, for the detective work of a decipherment and a reading of utopian clues and traces in the landscape of the real; a theorization and interpretation of unconscious utopian investments in realities large or small, which may be far from utopian. The premise here is that the most noxious phenomena can serve as the repository and hiding place for all kinds of unsuspected wish fulfillments and utopian gratifications.

This process of historical exhumation owes a clear debt to Ernst Bloch's poetic task of locating 'the gold-bearing rubble' in historical phenomena: rescuing the concrete core of utopia from its undialectical, phantasmagoric mist in even the most atrocious historical moments. Jameson's analysis of dialectically wedded utopian possibility and dystopian actuality traces the global capitalist leviathan Walmart by way of Lenin's seemingly indefensible fascination with financial monopoly. Viewed through a dialectical analysis, Jameson asserts, Walmart offers a possible negation of the negation: as the unalloyed articulation of capitalism's profit motive, it secretly harbours a vampiric capacity to devour itself. Thus, although Walmart offers affordability to the poorest Americans whilst simultaneously impoverishing them through the wholesale destruction of small-town businesses, its colossal purchasing power means that it could – if it chose – impose improvements in labour conditions around the globe as well as welfare standards; for example, in its Chilean salmon fisheries. It becomes possible in Jameson's structural analysis, therefore, to think the utopian and the dystopian simultaneously: 'this is precisely what is meant by the utopian here,

namely that what is currently negative can also be imagined as positive'.

Jameson's opening chapter on dialectical methodology paves the way for a series of carefully chosen historical examples of the conjunction of utopia and dystopia. Jennifer Wenzel, for instance, revisits the Xhosa cattle killing of 1856–57 to examine the dystopian outcomes of prophetic Xhosan utopian dreaming (40,000 people died of starvation, 50,000 were forced to leave their lands and the British seized 600,000 acres of their territories). Read comparatively alongside contemporaneous Christian evangelization, the Xhosa millenarian project thus reveals 'the collision of visionary impulses and material limits' encountered by these two eschatological projects and the complex and mutually interacting transmissions between them. Luise White, meanwhile, considers the limits of racism in her chapter 'The Utopia of Working Phones: Rhodesian Independence and the Place of Race in Decolonization'. White's argument is that the vocabulary of race and racism obscures objective historical studies of Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), and her study leaves aside moralizing judgements concerning the xenophobic and imperialist aspects of UDI. Instead, she reveals a state whose legitimizing ideology replaced history with a utopian form of racism predicated upon a reliable telecommunications system and fully functioning roads and hospitals.

Perhaps the most ambitious attempt at the negation of the negation in this collection, Timothy Mitchell's chapter 'Hydrocarbon Utopia', examines the relationship between petroleum and political freedom. Literature on the problem of the rentier state, Mitchell asserts, characteristically explores the so-called 'oil curse' within economic processes of rent and the conversion of exported petroleum to government revenue. Such studies ignore those globalized networks through which oil is produced, distributed and used, as well as the aspirational utopian lifestyles that seek to distance themselves from petroleum consumption. This 'ambiguous role' of hydrocarbons in our Western utopian imagination means that fossil fuels have created 'the most prosperous, healthy, and democratic communities in human history', whilst simultaneously propagating a carbon-heavy lifestyle in North America. Meanwhile, the postwar political and economic mechanisms that coalesced Western democracy, oil and the US dollar have established what Mitchell refers to as 'petro-knowledge': the dependence of Keynesian economic systems on a utopian assumption of abundant and low-cost energy supplies.

Mitchell's chapter is thus extremely relevant given the recent global recession (as, of course, is Marx's theory of the inevitable cycles of crisis and consolidation endemic to capitalism), and his linking of the invention of GDP to the utopian possibilities of fossil fuels demonstrates the usefulness of a utopian/dystopian analytical methodology for tracing those complex economic and political networks imbricating rentier states and their democratic clients. Meanwhile, chap-

ters exploring the *détente* of 'Atoms for Peace' as a utopian project which became subverted by the USA's self-interest and exhortation of hegemonic consensus, the proto-utopian impulses of pre-World War I European cosmopolitanism, and the impossible Stalinist utopia of an egalitarian society predicated on the decimation of interlopers, reveal the importance of thinking utopia and dystopia together in historical analysis.

The largest criticism one might make of the collection, however, is that it fails to fulfil its own task of understanding the 'historical interplay between self and collective'. Consider, for example, Aditya Nigam's chapter, 'The Heterotopias of Dalit Politics: Becoming-Subject and the Consumption Utopia', in which Nigam argues that the 'new consumption utopia' has replaced the historically *uchronic* space beyond capitalism's naked 'cash nexus'. Contemporary utopias, he writes, are no longer concerned with resisting commodification but position themselves in the here and now of an 'existential politics of place'; and Dalit political subjectivity is no exception, seeking a politics of difference within the emancipatory world of capitalism and its Brahmanical opportunities. This dichotomizing of *utopia-as-elsewhere* (whether geographical or temporal) and the emancipatory politics of *the here and now* (albeit, in this case, along a consumerist basis) is in fact a distinction that interdisciplinary utopian scholars in North America and Europe have been labouring to establish since the 1980s. Whilst the editors of *Utopia/Dystopia* enter into the Blochian tradition of reconceiving utopia as a *dynamic* practice rather than a *static* location, many of their contributing chapters are insufficiently theorized and elide the role of individual subjectivity within a globalized



system, whose rampant consumerism maintains a radically anti-democratic status quo. In this sense, David Pinder's chapter on the 'everyday utopianism' of André Breton, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's chapter on the Indian historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar – who single-handedly struggled for the implementation of Rankean principles of history and equal access to archival resources in India – come closest to elucidating the 'subjective positionings of historical agents' that this collection aims to investigate.

Finally, the collection's binary structure of 'Anima' and 'Artifice' – intended to consider the constraints of human existence and natural objects in contradistinction to *Homo faber's* technologization of the environment – is not the most clearly developed structure, nor, I suspect, the most useful for a rethinking of utopianism that successfully moves beyond the stigmatization of totalizing utopias (whether Stalinist or consumerist). It owes more to a ritual preoccupation with Land of Cockayne fantasies than any serious theorization of a utopian politics through democratically organized transformative action. If we are to move beyond what Walter Benjamin called history's *Immergleiche*, or eternal return of the same, we should heed Jameson's provocation: to use a utopian/dystopian analytical perspective not merely to locate the utopian content within our own grossly imperfect political and cultural life, but to rethink the conditions of our empirical present 'as components of a different system'. Such a prospective hermeneutics of utopian thinking offers a first, modest step on the long road to strengthening our atrophied historical imagination, both within and beyond the West.

**Caroline Edwards**

# Democracy as spectator sport

Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2010. 284 pp., £22.50 hb., 978 0 19537 264 9.

A thought-provoking first book, Jeffrey Green's *Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* constitutes an ambitious attempt to overturn the intellectual mainstream of modern democratic theory. The work claims nothing less than that the dominant modes of theorizing about democracy have been unduly restricted by what the author creatively describes as a *vocal* – now to be supplanted by a novel *ocular* – model of democracy. Unfortunately, the author's legitimate excitement about the real theoretical discoveries he has made leads him to overstate and probably undermine his case.

Green notes that both classical and many recent theorists of democratic politics tend to look askance at the ordinary citizen's relatively limited political involvements. Despite the fact that for most people most of the time, political engagement under the conditions of complex mass democracies consists of relatively passive *spectatorship*, writers have either ignored this familiar fact, or have problematically understated its significance in order to justify attempts to alter it. In this spirit, agonistic, deliberative, participatory and radical democrats – despite the obvious differences separating them – have all fantasized about how their competing visions might help revitalize what Walter Lippmann once derided as the 'omnicompetent sovereign citizen'. According to Green, however, this move was already anticipated by traditional liberal and democratic authors (e.g. Rousseau and Mill). Notwithstanding their cautious and indeed conservative views about universal suffrage and many other key questions, they laid out the basic groundwork for the dominant vocal model of democracy: self-government was associated with popular *autonomy* which expressed itself in political *decisions* taking the form of *law*. Even though the democratic mainstream consists of myriad competing glosses on this deceptively straightforward underlying intuition, the unsatisfactory result has been a tendency to privilege those activities (active participation, deliberation, lawmaking, voting, and so on) most easily interpreted as meshing with it.

Given the unavoidable restraints on direct political activity in complex large-scale polities, however,

most of us will never do anything more than watch political elites and leaders who rule over us. By necessity, modern mass democracy is a spectator sport. Joining sides with both 'realist' democratic theory à la Joseph Schumpeter and a massive body of disheartening empirical findings from political science, Green worries that too many writers not only have *undemocratically* ignored the political experience of ordinary citizens, but when they have bothered trying to make sense of it they unfairly pathologize it. Recall, for example, the harsh description by the young Jürgen Habermas of contemporary citizenship as having succumbed to 'civic privatism', or the countless warnings in the literature about the alleged perils of mass-based 'plebiscitarianism'. Unfortunately, realist democratic theorists have dropped the ball as well. Like Schumpeter, they offer a normatively unappealing and inadequately constructive vision of democracy as spectatorship. Spectator-centred democracy needs its own normatively minded theoretical defender; Green aspires to fill the role.

This is where his alternative *ocular* theory comes in. Since most citizens will never shape lawmaking through collective action based in active participation or free-wheeling deliberation, we instead should focus our intellectual energies on figuring out how they might constrain leaders who actually make the rules. Rather than interpreting plebiscitarianism as the high road to authoritarianism, we need to distinguish its normatively appealing from its deplorable variants.

Even if the people cannot rule via collective decisions, Green posits, their *gaze* can help tame office holders. The concept of the gaze, it seems, can be harnessed to normatively admirable and eminently democratic purposes. But how might this work? We need to formulate and then institutionalize a rigorous normative standard of *candour*, described by Green as a strict 'institutional requirement that leaders not be in control of their publicity'. Even if the people cannot rule in the conventional sense of the term, their watchful eyes can constrain policymakers, who can in fact be successfully prevented from manipulating and manufacturing public appearances. Press conferences, candidate debates, public inquiries and legislative question sessions need to be as unscripted and spontaneous as possible. Manufactured public relations should be jettisoned for unmanaged forms of publicity where elites present themselves to the public and are forced to take some real political risks. Of course, politicians will undoubtedly resist such changes. Green still hopes to bring about the desired changes, however, by reforming existing political

practice in accordance with a demanding normative ideal of (political) candour.

Unfortunately, the fundamental modesty of Green's proposed reforms highlights the book's limitations. It seems at least somewhat unrealistic to posit that the pervasive tendency among political elites to script and manage their appearances could be halted without greater attention to many of the worrisome social conditions of contemporary democracy (for example, the capitalist mass media) about which Green remains uncannily silent. For a writer who purports to defend the cause of democratic realism, the book offers a surprisingly naive view of the far-reaching reforms necessary to improve even the basic conditions of democratic publicity. Even though Green is right that some core facets of modern mass democracy challenge traditional democratic aspirations, his failure to disentangle alterable from unalterable political and social conditions means that he risks reproducing realist democratic theory's widely noted failure to give due consideration to the possibility of abrogating present political ills (e.g. declining participation rates) via far-reaching social change.

To be sure, Green has much more to offer than normatively numb authors like Schumpeter. Yet his refusal to consider seriously the possibility that the reduction of democracy to a spectator sport (and, for most of us, an uninteresting spectator sport at that) rests in part on alterable social causes means that what he occasionally describes as a critical and normative model is probably neither critical nor normative. Perhaps this failure was preprogrammed: he has arguably undertaken the impossible task of providing a positive normative gloss on a situation which remains – despite his insistence to the contrary – normatively alarming. Even the innocuous forms of political and institutional tinkering proposed by Green sit uneasily with the book's tendency to downplay the normative significance of traditional democratic institutions and practices. After all, reform prospects depend immediately on changing, if only modestly, existing institutional practice. Significant political and social movements, whose participatory and/or deliberative energies will be indispensable to the requisite electoral and political shifts, constitute a necessary presupposition for Green's proposed 'ocular' reforms. Here, as at many other junctures in his analysis, ocular democracy remains parasitic on vocal democracy. How might we distinguish manipulated from non-manipulated public appearance, for example, without positing a demanding counterfactual model of something like 'undistorted' communication? To be sure, Green sometimes seems chiefly intent on

interpreting his novel ocular democratic model as a mere *supplement* to the dominant vocal model. For the most part, however, he insists on its normative and institutional *superiority*. Yet this theoretical move inevitably leaves the status of key democratic institutions and practices somewhat unclear. Many of them – most obviously, the central place presently given to voting and elections – seem intrinsically tied to the vocal model he abandons. Even Green implicitly concedes that strengthening ocular democracy depends on more fundamental changes to institutions directly related to democracy's vocal (i.e. participatory and deliberative) attributes.

In fairness, readers can turn fruitfully to Green's book for fascinating reconstructions of a vast range of political thinkers from Aristotle to Carl Schmitt. He does a splendid job in reinterpreting them in order to pull together an always fascinating and sometimes persuasive alternative narrative about democratic theory. At the end of the day, however, he fails to make a sufficient case for the superiority of his ocular alternative. Even the occasional suggestion that he merely intends to supplement existing theories remains problematic since his ocular alternative has obviously been conceptualized *in opposition* to them. His argument also suffers from a certain intellectual populism: as noted, he believes that the ubiquity of spectatorship somehow requires that professed democrats need to make it central to their thinking. In this oddly twisted retelling of modern democratic theory, the 'elitists' are those (e.g. Habermas, Carole Pateman, and perhaps even the recent Robert Dahl) who express disdain for many of the ways in which democracy has been reduced to a (commercially driven) spectator sport, but not those willing to acquiesce in rule by barely accountable elites over a fundamentally passive populace.

Finally, the thesis that only ocular democracy can do justice to the concept of the people as 'a collective, inclusive entity to which all citizens belong, irreducible to the aggregation of individuals who form it' seems enigmatic in light of the author's simultaneous endorsement of 'a subjectless, anonymous, and disembodied account of sovereignty'. Allegedly, these seemingly inconsistent claims cohere because the ocular model redefines popular sovereignty as 'the rule of a principle'; that is, 'the People will have its collective interest realized – to the extent that candour governs the public presentation at hand'. To be sure, forcing politicians to take off their make-up, fire the overpaid spinmeisters and the rest of the public relations team, and face some real questions at unscripted public events, is a decent and indeed potentially useful democratic aspiration.

But if this now represents the core of ‘popular sovereignty’, many readers will perhaps join this reviewer in continuing to prefer so-called vocal democratic theory. Unlike Green, we will also need to continue to think about how we might successfully attack or at least mitigate the many structural impediments to robust political and social democracy in the twenty-first century.

**William E. Scheuerman**

## Not a psychological issue

Theodor W. Adorno, *Guilt and Defence: On the Legacies of National Socialism in Postwar Germany*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick and Andrew J. Perrin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2010. 233 pp., £29.95 hb., 978 0 67403 603 1.

In 2010, 59 per cent of all Germans, according to the radical monthly *Konkret*, agreed that ‘the Jews more than other people work with nasty tricks to achieve what they want’; while in 2008 *Die Welt* noted that ‘seventy years after Kristallnacht, Germany is still a hotbed of anti-Semitism: in the first nine months of this year, there were nearly 800 nationwide anti-Semitic and 14,000 right-wing extremist crimes’. Such an unbroken legacy of authoritarian attitudes and Nazi ideology is the theme of this new book, for which Adorno’s 1955 essay ‘Guilt and Defence’ provides the core.

During the early 1950s, the Frankfurt School conducted what they termed a ‘Group Experiment’. Equipped with the latest empirical social science methods from the USA, members returned to Germany from exile to carry out a ‘massive investigation into legacies of National Socialist ideology among a large and diverse, if not quite representative, sample of post-war West Germans’. Adorno’s ‘Guilt and Defence’ delivers a textual analysis of German excuses, defences and guilt-avoidance ideologies that includes practically every phrase I ever heard during my youth in Germany, and the book as a whole provides a high volume of empirical evidence on what one can still hear in many places today. This first chapter is followed by the psychologist Peter Hofstätter’s critique of Adorno’s methodology, along with the latter’s rejoinder, and, finally, Adorno’s 1959 essay ‘Working Through the Past’. When Germans say ‘we have to work through the past’, Adorno argues, they do so to avoid the past.

In their introduction, Olick and Perrin map out the historical contingencies of Nazism in Germany, the role of critical theory and its research on Nazi ideology, the composition of Adorno et al.’s *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), with its famous study of anti-Semitism, immediate postwar debates around the extent of German guilt discussed in Olick’s previous book *The House of the Hangman*, and the developing concept of ‘public opinion’. Their introduction explains the meaning of the Group Experiment, considers whether Nazi ideology is specifically German, and asks why elements of this ideology continue in Germany even today.

The Nazi war machine was brought to bear to eliminate – among others such as gypsies, homosexuals and communists – the Jewish people. In preparation for this, Nazi mass murder was accompanied by a stratospheric rise in ideology broadcast via corporate and state mass media, which started well before Hitler came to power. The Silvio Berlusconi, Rupert Murdoch or William Randolph Hearst of Nazi Germany was mass-media owner Alfred Hugenberg. Hugenberg headed the German National People’s Party, which was instrumental in Hitler becoming chancellor; indeed, he served in Hitler’s first cabinet. Along with well-known Nazi-sponsored corporations such as Mercedes-Benz, Krupp, Allianz Insurance, Deutsche Bank, SS uniform maker Hugo Boss, Zyklon-B producer IG Farben, and so on, this is a stark reminder of Horkheimer’s comment that ‘anyone who does not wish to talk about capitalism ... should also keep quiet on the subject of fascism’. In fact, during the Nazi era capitalism thrived, while Nazi ideology provided ideological support for capitalism. Adorno’s postwar study sought to evaluate how effective Nazi ideology had been, and how much of it Germans were still carrying with them. Their study was paralleled by British and US efforts to re-educate West Germans during the very early postwar years through a programme of ‘denazification’, which soon ended following Germany’s integration into the Western bloc opposed to capitalism’s real ‘enemy’: the Soviet Union. Germany was allowed to move ex-Nazis back into leading positions in state and industry. The East German *Braunbuch*, which listed 1,800 ex-Nazis in West Germany’s power elite, was published in 1968 (it can be seen at [www.braunbuch.de](http://www.braunbuch.de)), while no West German publisher would touch the book (so much for the free world with a free press!).

Despite the psychological intent of the Group Experiment, Adorno knew that ‘fascism is not a psychological issue’. However, the study used quantitative empirical, psychological and interpretive–hermeneutical

methods to ascertain the longevity of Nazi ideology. The research ‘began by testing versions of a fictional letter (the Colburn letter) by a fictional sergeant in the US Army to a newspaper back home conveying a negative assessment of German national character, particularly highlighting Germans’ unwillingness to acknowledge what they had done during the Third Reich’. The response of Germans to this is outlined in Adorno’s ‘Guilt and Defence’, which takes up the main part of the book. To highlight the main findings, Olick and Perrin’s introduction summarizes the German attitude towards the Jewish people during the postwar period through a telling example from another thinker.

In the 1950 ‘Report from Germany’, published in the American Jewish magazine *Commentary*, émigré philosopher Hannah Arendt (who had little admiration for Adorno) described the self-absorbed and defensive reaction she received when she revealed to Germans she encountered, for instance in a train compartment, that she was a German Jew:

This is usually followed by a little embarrassed pause; and then comes – not a personal question such as ‘Where did you go after you left Germany?’; no sign of sympathy, such as ‘What happened to your family?’ – but a deluge of stories about how Germans have suffered (true enough, of course, but besides the point); and if the object of this little experiment happens to be educated and intelligent, he will proceed to draw up a balance sheet between German suffering and the suffering of others.

This signifies three things: the general inability of Germans to show compassion and sympathy for the Jewish people; a diverting response to move on quickly to German suffering; and a false equalization of things that are inherently non-equal – the suffering of ‘ordinary’ Germans and the singularity of German death factories that exterminated Jewish people (one of the central issues of course in the notorious *Historikerstreit* between Habermas and Ernst Nolte during the 1980s).

Olick and Perrin’s second example comes from Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry. Olick and Perrin report an incident that Améry ‘had in 1958 with a South German businessman over breakfast in a hotel [saying] the German people bear no grudge against the Jewish people’. Again, this testifies to a typical response, reversing positions and thereby avoiding the real question: do the Jewish people have a grudge against mass-murdering Germans? It shows the inability to position at the centre of the issue those who should be there: the Jewish people. It is no longer the Germans who can pass judgement on the Jewish people (by ‘holding a grudge’). The last example comes

from social-democratic Chancellor Helmut Schmidt’s ‘German foreign policy may no longer be held hostage to Auschwitz’. It never was. It wasn’t German foreign policy that was ‘held hostage to Auschwitz’, but, as in William Styron’s famous novel, women like Sophie who were given such ‘choices’ as to which of her two children would be permitted to live.

In sum, this book, though largely written in the 1950s, explains why Charles Maier was correct in his analysis in *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (1988) as to why there are neo-Nazis in German parliaments today, why masked Nazis roared ‘Heil Hitler’ in a pub called Hamburger Hof in a city called Minden on 3 December 2010, why there are 26,000 neo-Nazis – 9,000 of whom are openly violent – in contemporary Germany, and why (as gutefrage.net reports) some are still wondering ‘Why are there so many Nazis in Germany?’

**Thomas Klikauer**

## The unknown unknown story

Rebecca E. Karl, *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-century World*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2010. 216 pp., £56.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 978 0 82234 780 4 hb., 978 0 82234 795 8 pb.

China’s spectacular economic performance over the past two decades has seen an exponential increase in media and academic debate about its implications for the global economy and the political systems of the West. Accompanying this has been a series of publications about China’s revolutionary past that claim to put the record straight on the historical processes establishing the conditions for China’s repudiation of Maoism and its rise to the status of economic powerhouse. Too little of this has gone beyond the binaries of demonization or defence of Mao’s China that are the staple of popular representations of China’s revolutionary history, and demonization seems to have won out. Indeed, the most widely publicized of such accounts, Chang and Halliday’s *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005), constructs China’s revolutionary history as the product of a monstrous architect of a regime of terror. The commercial ‘success’ of the demonizing narrative lies in its implicit affirmation of the superiority of Western liberal values. However, students and

politicians, opinion formers and observers interested in exploring the sources of the Communist Party's continuing success deserve something better.

In treating China's revolutionary past with critical and historical scrutiny rather than sensationalist distortions, Rebecca Karl's lucid and measured account does just this. Her starting point is a rejection of the polarized revisions of China's recent past; she dissociates herself from them by refusing the alternatives of defensiveness or condemnation. She treats Mao as a serious revolutionary philosopher and leader whose vision of revolutionary transformation led to military success and remarkable economic and social achievements. Her analysis is far from uncritical, and her narrative charts Mao's conflicted trajectory towards the events that engulfed China in political conflict, famine and violence from the late 1950s onwards. However, her task is not to pass judgement on Mao's role, but to explore and explain the successive stages of China's revolution, both before and after 1949, as the condition of a historical knowledge that can confront the occlusions of dominant historiography of the period. For this, she insists, China's revolutionary history, and Mao's role in it, have to be explained against the backdrop of the configurations of international politics.

The narrative structure of *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-century World* is basically chronological, weaving the different stages of Mao's life and ideas together with the main decisions and events configuring the revolution. Readers familiar with what was called 'Party history', as taught in China during the 1970s, and with academic publications of the same era, such as Jean Chesneaux et al.'s *China: From the 1911 Revolution to Liberation*, first published in 1972, will recognize the main thematic contours and analytical emphases of Karl's account. However, there are differences, including Karl's emphasis on the 'world' context of Mao's China. As she writes: 'Recalling Mao's challenge is to recall a time when many things seemed possible, and when fundamental global transformation could be thought.' Mao's formative years as a revolutionary thinker corresponded with a political moment when passionate convictions in the possibility of anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist revolutionary transformation overrode all other (including personal) considerations. It puts into perspective not only the emergence of Mao's own political commitments but the decisions he and many of his comrades-in-arms made in putting the revolution before the welfare of their spouses and children. International forces were crucial in shaping the fortunes of the CCP throughout the decades between its founding and its

institutionalization in the bureaucratic apparatus of state. Conflict with the Nationalist Party during the 1920s and between different leadership factions of the CCP in the early 1930s was in large part framed by Comintern interests in building up international support for Stalin's authority. Despite Mao's early realization that the epicentre of China's revolution would be in the countryside, he only emerged as leader of the peasant revolution after more than a decade of CCP subservience to the Comintern's fateful insistence, first, on the CCP's demilitarized alliance with the Guomindang, and then on pursuing a revolutionary strategy of urban insurrection. Faced with the daunting tasks of national economic recovery after 1949, the fledgling government of the People's Republic of China was pushed into a reluctant reliance on Soviet aid by the US and Western embargo and the USA's attempt to contain the spread of communism in Korea. The consequences of this were complex, embroiling China in a series of tactical international alliances and conflicts, the full meaning of which only came to light, and then very hesitantly, between the UN's decision in 1971 to recognize the government of the PRC and Nixon's visit to China in 1972.

The pressures of political and military survival in the face of Stalin's demands, Guomindang attack, Japanese invasion and occupation, and, by the 1940s, US military and economic intervention, took their toll on the conditions of possibility for Mao to implement his vision of an egalitarian society. The contradiction between Mao's conceptualization of a transformative politics linking theory and practice and his demands for ideological uniformity and respect for his personal authority can, in part at least, be seen as the effect of a revolutionary politics shaped by conditions of violence. Karl's analysis of the significance of Yan'an is insightful in this context, notably for its identification of Yan'an as the moment establishing the key – and contradictory – features of Mao's articulation of revolutionary politics and his performance as autocratic leader. Yan'an was the base area in the north-west where the survivors of the Long March landed up, and to which intellectuals, students, artists and writers flocked to support the CCP's stand against Japan. In his famous set of lectures 'On Protracted War' delivered there in May 1938, Mao argued that the key to securing the conditions for military and political success lay in correct recognition of local conditions: only this would provide the military flexibility required to defeat a technologically and militarily vastly superior enemy. This also identified Mao's distinctive concept of politics as the creation of 'a culture of revolution

and a revolutionary culture' in which the 'self mobilization of the masses' would be the premiss of grassroots transformation of the conditions of everyday life. In conditions of anti-imperialist war, politics was thus envisaged as a continuous struggle to overthrow oppressive social relations. At the same time, Yan'an signified the imposition of an ideological uniformity that implicitly questioned the revolutionary implications of Mao's politics. Mao's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' in 1942 signalled an attempt to define a revolutionary literature and art that was both subordinate to as well as influential on politics. However, following critiques, most notably by the feminist writer Ding Ling, of the limitations of Mao's views about mass culture, a party rectification campaign was launched to establish the correct interpretations of Mao's revolutionary canon. Deviations, including Ding Ling's, were to be punished. 'Truth now became whatever Mao said it was', establishing the beginnings of the excesses of the Mao cult in subsequent years.

The first decade after the formation of the People's Republic of China saw a series of economic and social measures that led to vastly improved rates of agricultural production, improved health and mortality rates, girls' education and new rights for women, and the first baby boom of the communist state. However, between Stalin's death and the Hungarian uprising of 1956, Mao became increasingly concerned about the implications for revolutionary politics of what he saw as the entrenchment of bureaucratic attitudes on the part of the political, professional and intellectual elites. His decision to speed up collectivization without due consultation of the Party leadership gave clear signs of his claims to represent the will of the masses. A campaign was mounted in 1955 against the writer Hu Feng for his criticisms of the Party's cultural conformity. This soon exploded into an attack on 'counter-revolutionaries', personally endorsed by Mao, setting the scene for the more vicious attacks on intellectuals that were soon to follow in the anti-rightist movement of 1957. Increasingly alienated from his erstwhile revolutionary comrades-in-arms, Mao relied on his personal authority as leader to implement a series of 'voluntarist' policies in the Great Leap Forward to industrialize China through the establishment of communes, which claimed 20–30 million lives in the famine between 1959 and 1961. While many other Party leaders were actively implicated in supporting and implementing these policies, they were, as Karl points out, ultimately the responsibility of Mao as Party leader. Yet these events, and particularly the Cultural Revolution which

led to the deaths, torture and internal exile of millions, were instances of the contradiction already apparent in Yan'an between Mao's passionate belief in the capacity of mass mobilization to 'seize politics – the power of culture and mass speech for revolution' and the logic of his insistence on his own position as arbiter of revolutionary truth. A number of published accounts, including Karl's, point to the exhilarating idealism of his young Red Guard followers. Yet unknown to most of them, Mao's revolutionary vision was falling foul of his interests in retaining political power. The political tragedy of the Cultural Revolution was, as Karl explains, the result of the incompatibility between a conceptualization of politics as revolutionary and transformative and the bureaucratic imperatives of economic and social construction. Mao's final years of rapprochement with the USA and accommodation of policies that he had condemned in earlier years met with attempts by the so-called 'Gang of Four' to reassert a virulent version of his revolutionary vision. Between his physical degeneration and policy conflicts, a way was paved to eclipse his revolutionary vision as soon as he died.

Mao is now officially remembered as a leader whose achievements far outweighed his mistakes. Indeed, as China's socio-economic differentials increase, many of China's disadvantaged think of him with nostalgia for lost times of stability and certainty. If their nostalgia may be interpreted as a reflection of their current conditions of insecurity and vulnerability in China's competitive market economy, so too is it a complaint against a system that continues to invoke his name to support all that he struggled against.

*Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World* is not a biography, as Karl points out early on in her narrative. The volume therefore begs many questions about, for example, the inconsistency between Mao's early emphasis on women's rights, his increasing negligence towards the politics of women's equality and his manipulative treatment of women, his wives included. It also gives little attention to the embedded political and gender culture in which Mao – and his peers – grew up, and which significantly contributed to moulding Mao's heavy style of 'patriarchal' authority and expectations of obedience. But a volume of this length can only do so much, and, targeted at a broad and non-specialist readership, it is a salutary reminder that just as the fortunes of a political leader can only be explained by reference to the domestic and international forces upholding him, so those of a national movement have to be explained within reference to the political and social forces producing and sustaining

it. A recent exhibition in Berlin on 'Hitler and the Germans' addressed its spectators with an attempt to explain Hitler's power with reference to the social and political conditions and emotional sensitivities of the German people. The exhibition attracted vast numbers of the German public, from young to old, eager to explore a critical narrative of their recent history. This book makes an equivalent attempt, albeit with reference to a very different configuration of national and international interests, and on a very different scale. Given the current official Chinese and internationally orchestrated amnesia about the Mao era, there is little chance that it will become the topic of critical public debate in China, but with any luck enough Chinese readers will be able to access it to begin to challenge the trivializations, vulgarizations and omissions which are still the staple of current rewritings of China's revolutionary past.

**Harriet Evans**

## The fear factory

Geoffrey R. Skoll, *Social Theory of Fear: Terror, Torture, and Death in a Post-Capitalist World*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010. 234 pp., £55.00 hb., 978 0 23010 349 8.

Judging by a fairly substantial output of recent writing about fear, we live in scary times. From its rise in the late 1990s, with Frank Furedi's *Culture of Fear* (1997, rev. edn 2002) and Barry Glassner's *The Culture of Fear* (1999), publishers are now falling over themselves to publish work in the same field. In quick succession we have had fear's political history (Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, 2004), its cultural history (Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History*, 2005) and its philosophical contours (Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Fear*, 2008). Amidst this one would also have to situate some of the claims made about fear in relation to 'risk society' (Dan Gardner's *Risk: The Science and Politics of Fear*, 2008), the politics of terrorism (David Altheide's *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear*, 2005), the broader realignment of political positions (Furedi again, with *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right*, 2005), a rising neo-conservatism (Manuel Gonzales and Richard Delgado, *The Politics of Fear*, 2006), and the rise of political theology (Stefan Skrimshire, *Politics of Fear, Practices of Hope*, 2008, or Jason Bivins, *Religion of Fear*, 2008). Scary days indeed.

The value of Skoll's contribution to this new form of non-fiction political horror writing is the manner in which it situates fear within the capitalist world and in terms of the question of torture. Noting the long tradition of torture by liberal democratic states as much as authoritarian, a history closely connected to colonialism and race war, the book traces the increasing professionalization and institutionalization of torture, torture-lite, and techniques which regimes now like to present as merely coercive but which most human beings would call plain old torture. It therefore moves smartly across historical contexts – from Northern Ireland to the USA via a range of military dictatorships – landing squarely, if unsurprisingly, in the new 'politics of fear' that is the war on terror. In the process the book spells out some of the recent transformations in criminal law and media spectacle shaped by the logic of torture, rightly circumventing the tired old debates (ideological distractions) about torture – is it ever justified? what are its limits? what counts as torture? – and instead reinforcing what should in fact be our starting point: that the practices carried out at places like Abu Ghraib are not aberrations but are part of a long tradition of state power and the violent imposition of capital. For this Skoll should be commended.

The book is weakened by the fact that it utilizes categories which even the author concedes have severe limitations ('social control', for example, which is used to structure one chapter despite Skoll's own recognition of the concept's ambiguities and limits). But its main weakness lies in the attempt to incorporate 'gender, sex and feminism' into the later chapters. Trying to make some claims about gender in the context of resistance against social control, the book loses sight completely of its own theme of torture. In this it falls far short of Marnia Lazreg's *Torture and the Twilight of Empire* (2008), in which she offers a much broader argument about the sexual politics of torture under colonial rule 'from Algiers to Baghdad', as she has it in her subtitle. By homing in on the use of rape as a military strategy, structuring part of her argument around the fact that women who survived the French war in Algiers use the word 'torture' among themselves as a code for 'rape', and pointing to the appropriation of feminist concepts by military forces in their machinery of pacification, Lazreg offers a more compelling account of the gendered nature of torture. Taken together, however, Skoll and Lazreg's books offer a salutary reminder of the nature of torture within the wider context of colonial state power and capitalist order, and thus a useful reminder of what it is that we need to be afraid of.

**Mark Neocleous**