

# Hegelian Leninism today!

Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall, eds, *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence. Aesthetics, Politics, Literature*, Continuum, London and New York, 2011. 256 pp., £60.00 hb., 978 1 44115 790 4.

Michael J. Thompson, ed., *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics*, Continuum, London and New York, 2011. 272 pp., £70.00 hb., 978 1 44110 876 0.

They are like buses. You wait twenty years for a substantive critical book on Lukács, then along come two at once, and both from the same publisher. In these two hardback books priced for library sales rather than student activists, Continuum offer nearly 500 pages of new material on and by Lukács. Anyone interested in Lukács will need to read both volumes. There are some differences of orientation and some common ground: Andrew Feenberg, Michael Löwy and Timothy Hall offer substantial essays in both volumes. Anyone approaching these two books might wonder why they were not combined into one large volume. The experience of reading both books together nevertheless foregrounds the more interesting questions: why Lukács and why now?

Since the collection *Lukács Today: Essays in Marxist Philosophy* (1988), edited by Tom Rockmore, there have been a number of post-1989 shifts in the reception of Lukács. The discovery, publication and translation of Lukács's *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness* (2002) provided important new critical contexts. But, although there has been a steady trickle of critical studies, there has not been an obvious resurgence in active enthusiasm for Lukács. As a committed revolutionary communist, he can just about be defended as someone who criticized Stalinism from within, but his evident complicities have won him few friends in non-Stalinist traditions of Marxism. A parenthetical remark from *Georg Lukács Reconsidered* suggests some of the problem: 'Lukács actually participated in the short-lived Hungarian Soviet of 1919, regrettably killing a number of hostages...' Regrettably?! The social will required to rehabilitate the meaning and struggles of Soviet communism is evidently some way off, even if necessary, if anti-capitalist movements are ever to overthrow actually existing capitalism. Lukács should be part of any reassessment of the legacy of the Russian Revolution. It will take more than intellectual effort, however, to delimit the affinities of Lukács with totalitarian communism, not least as regards the centrality to his work of categories such as *totality*.

Association with Stalinism also limits the interest of Lukács as the single most important and founding figure of Western Marxism. These two books make strong cases for restating the significance of Lukács for critical thought. With the possible exception of Lucien Goldmann's claim that Lukács was an influence on Heidegger, Lukács has scarcely been of interest to philosophers outside the traditions of Marxism. The prospect of a group of Oxford analytical philosophers sitting down with some MIT specialists in artificial intelligence to work through *History and Class Consciousness* is about as plausible as imagining the central committee of the SWP organizing a week-long retreat to immerse themselves in *Being and Time*. Although an important influence on literary criticism, Lukács has had little influence on philosophers hostile to Marxist modes of argument, and worse, such influence Lukács has had appears tainted by association with a fuzzy set of humanist and politico-existentialist laments against reification, alienation and the like. Merleau-Ponty's critique of Lukács in *Adventures of the Dialectic* finished off the credibility of such dialectical attitudinizing as long ago as 1955.

Recently, one sign of renewed interest in Lukács's major work, *History and Class Consciousness*, has been Axel Honneth's critical reworking of Lukács in *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (2008). In the two volumes reviewed here, Timothy Hall and Andrew Feenberg both offer persuasive critiques of Honneth: put bluntly, although detailed, Honneth's reading of *History and Class Consciousness* appropriates Lukács for his own purposes, and distorts his central philosophical and political purposes. Lukács's work stands as a Marxist rebuke to Habermasian critical theory rather than offering anything much to the project of communication ethics or the politics of recognition.

One significant faultline through both these collections of essays on Lukács is what might be called the spectre of Adorno. An initial argument for the necessity of Lukács now might stem from the realization that Adorno's debts both to Lukács and to

Marx remain suggestive rather than substantively argued. *History and Class Consciousness* remains the most sophisticated attempt to sketch a philosophical Marxism, and one whose critique of the commodity form and of reification is central to Adornian critical theory. Given that the research paradigms gleaned from Adorno's work appear now to be nearing exhaustion, Lukács offers the opportunity to rethink and renew what is critical about Adorno's residual Marxism and the critique of capitalism. In a number of essays in *Georg Lukács Reconsidered* and in *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence*, the arguments offered set up critical dialogues between Lukács and Adorno, with regard to both Adorno's critical theory and his aesthetics, and the results are often suggestive. Adorno evidently protested his difference from the later Lukács too strongly. But for all the efforts to understand Lukács through Adorno, the substantive confrontation between them remains in the wings of these books: what, then, is more central?

In their introductions to the two volumes, the editors variously acknowledge the shibboleths of Lukácsian Marxism: reification; totality; the proletariat as the subject-object of history; the defence of realism against modernism. Of these problematics, the question of the proletariat emerges as a persistent thorn, seeming almost an embarrassment. Neil Larsen's essay in the Bewes and Hall collection is even entitled 'Lukács *sans* Proletariat, or Can *History and Class Consciousness* Be Rehistoricised'. Andrew Feenberg notes that 'there are many aspects of Lukács' book [*History and Class Consciousness*] that are thoroughly outdated, notably his faith in proletarian revolution.' Timothy Hall puts it a little less bluntly: 'His work, I believe, remains relevant and this notwithstanding the historical demise of classical class politics.' There is something more than a little awkward, if not contradictory, about the intellectual genealogy of 'classical' as an adjective used to describe 'Marxism'. This is compounded by the assertion that class politics as understood by Marxism is historically obsolete. Through much of these books it is assumed that what has come to be understood as 'classical' Marxism – the Marxism of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Gramsci, Trotsky, and perhaps of Lukács – is at best a kind of negative resource for the critique of capitalism, besides which the critical perspective and political praxis associated with proletarian revolution are moribund. It may be that the proletariat as understood by Marxism remains immanent only as a potential force, and thereby stands accused of being a problematic critical fiction, a theoretical 'mask', a speculative counter-factual or an ideologically dis-

torted ideal. There is nevertheless a global labour force whose relation to the forces and relations of production of capital remains a site of struggle. Is it so implausible that the workers of the world might decide to resist the 'austerity' measures inflicted upon them in the interests of capital, and reinvent revolutionary socialism?

Even if thoroughly reified, alienated, complicit with capital, and mired in the failed solidarity of historical defeats, the class struggle of the proletariat is bound up with the fortunes of capital and not so simply consigned to the historical dustbin. It might make it more



acceptable to the habitats of academic argument to pose this as *the question of the proletariat*, but one of the provocations of *History and Class Consciousness* is the challenge to understand the critical perspective of the proletariat through praxis, rather than as some messianic or utopian horizon of spectrality. The standpoint of proletarian revolution is surely a determinate and historical abstraction, less idealist than the standpoint of redemption associated with Western Marxism's various negative theologies. Put differently, for all the Hegelian and Marxist originality of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács also articulates a Leninist understanding of Marxism, concerned with praxis, with party organization, and with the revolutionary legacy of Bolshevik politics. Gramsci famously described the Russian Revolution as the revolution *against* Karl Marx's *Capital*, and the extent to which history might be made consciously through revolutionary praxis rather than as some sociologically determined inevitability is clearly the problematic horizon for Lukács. As Stanley Aronowitz suggests, in *Georg Lukács Reconsidered*, 'a careful reading of *History and Class Consciousness* reveals a sophisticated exposition of the philosophical basis of the Kautsky–Lenin thesis against the possibility that the working class can, on the basis of its exploitation and struggle, achieve revolutionary class consciousness.' In *History and Class Consciousness*, and especially in his 1924 book *Lenin*, Lukács is perhaps the prime

example of Hegelian Leninism. Readers of *Radical Philosophy* may perhaps nevertheless be reassured to hear that there is not much sign of ‘classical’ Marxism or Leninism in the attempts offered by these two books to bring the present into dialogue with Lukács.

Some of the most interesting interpretations of Lukács offered attempt to break down the periodization of Lukács’s work. Lukács’s pre-Marxist books *Soul and Form* and *The Theory of the Novel* rightly figure prominently in a number of essays. In *Georg Lukács Reconsidered*, Peter Uwe Hohendahl’s essay on ‘The Theory of the Novel and the Concept of Realism in Lukács and Adorno’ exemplifies this hermeneutic reconstruction of arguments in Lukács, explaining and clarifying Lukács’s epistemology of ‘realism’. Indeed, across the two books, there are a number of insights into the problem of realism. János Keleman illuminates Lukács through his early work on literary history and continuing interest in Dante and Goethe. In the Bewes and Hall volume, David Cunningham offers a more radical and original argument, suggesting, in effect, that the question of abstraction posed by the logic of capital is already immanent within Lukács’s pre-Marxist *The Theory of the Novel*.

Less convincing or persuasive than these attempts to reconfigure the different periods of Lukács’s work are the attempts offered to defend the work Lukács produced after the 1930s. In *Georg Lukács Reconsidered*, Stanley Aronowitz bravely attempts to defend Lukács’s *Destruction of Reason*, but is more persuasive in reminding readers of, for example, the interest and influence of Simmel’s exposition of reification in the *Philosophy of Money*. Michael J. Thompson draws for himself the short straw, attempting a reconstruction and defence of ‘ontology and totality’ in Lukács’s later writing. There may be a project of real substance in the late ontology and aesthetics of Lukács, but a convincing case has not yet been made. More engaging is the cluster of arguments offered by Timothy Hall’s two essays, which suggest reconsideration of Lukács as a thinker of *ontological novelty*, articulating the ontological risks and non-normative praxis of improvisatory politics.

The most substantial and engaging of the essays in these two books share Hall’s attempt to illuminate Lukács in ways that have both philosophical depth and political currency. The attempt to understand the role of Kant in *History and Class Consciousness* is illuminated from a number of different perspectives, including subtle accounts of the use Lukács makes of Fichte, Simmel and Weber. There’s much of philosophical interest in the various discussions of reifica-

tion and the critique of the commodity form, though more might have been made of Lukács’s *The Young Hegel*. Stewart Martin captures the urgency of Lukács in his account of the question of ‘capitalist life’, as a problem for thought now. Where they are discussed, supposed luminaries such as Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri and Judith Butler are relatively marginal, and treated with respectful but forceful scepticism. Neil Larsen cites Kevin Floyd’s *The Reification of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism* (2009), but queer theory, psychoanalysis and the discursive formations associated with post-structuralism are largely absent from these books. Gail Day’s lively if incongruous reading of contemporary art perhaps comes closest to straining the relevance of Lukács. The substance of these books remains refreshingly persistent, then, in focusing on critical illuminations of Lukács, most effectively in the central set of essays in *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence*. What emerges is the need for a thorough rereading and rethinking of *History and Class Consciousness* as a primary text in contemporary political philosophy. A new translation, especially of the ‘Reification’ essay, would help, along with more detailed notes and critical commentary of the kind developed here.

The case for Lukács as a literary critic has been widely recognized for some time, though no less widely resisted, and while engaging is less persuasive or urgent here. These two books do make good the argument that Lukács’s work needs to be read across philosophy, politics and aesthetics. Yoon Sun Lee’s essay on the work of form is persuasive; Timothy Bewes offers some original angles through cinema; there are interesting essays on Lukács’s Walter Scott by Norman Arthur Fischer and John Marx; Andrew Hemingway provides an excellent contextualization of the pivotal essay ‘Art for Art’s Sake and Proletarian Writing’; and Michael Löwy reopens the question of Kafka’s realism for Lukács. The inclusion of translations of two essays by Lukács himself in *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence* helps to give that book an edge. To choose between the two, however, would be to reify criticism as the commodification of judgement. Against this, Katie Terezakis offers some bracing reminders as to the perilous state of living criticism: ‘Lukács today ... directs academic professionals to renew criticism with comprehension of the reification that pervades its professionalized enclaves.’ Paperback or electronic versions would be much appreciated. And perhaps, who knows, these will be snapped up by the proletariat busy renewing Hegelian Leninism today.

**Drew Milne**

# What is historical epistemology?

Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *On Historicizing Epistemology: An Essay*, trans. David Fernbach, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2010. 128 pp., £44.50 hb., £16.95 pb., 978 0 80476 288 5 hb., 978 0 80476 289 2 pb.

Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *An Epistemology of the Concrete: Twentieth-Century Histories of Life*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, with a foreword by Tim Lenoir, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2010. 352 pp., £70.00 hb., £16.99 pb., 978 0 82234 560 2 hb., 978 0 82234 575 6 pb.

At a recent conference I attended, a member of the audience impatiently asked the members of the ‘historical epistemology’ panel what historical epistemology was. If the speakers could not provide a definition, he argued, he would then have to conclude that their talks might not have been about anything in particular. It is undeniable that the label ‘historical epistemology’ has been applied to diverse projects, developed in different times and to different ends – first, to the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem (the latter’s work also called ‘epistemological history’), and sometimes extended not only to other historians and philosophers within the French traditions (Jean Cavailles, Alexandre Koyré, Michel Foucault), but also to other philosophers of science who have taken history seriously, such as Thomas Kuhn. However, ‘historical epistemology’ is not only, and nowadays not mainly, a label for past philosophies, but one that, instead, very much covers current projects. Many contemporary scholars describe their own work as historical epistemology, including, among others, the philosopher Ian Hacking (although, in order to avoid confusion with the philosophies of Bachelard and Canguilhem, he has preferred to switch to ‘historical meta-epistemology’), and the historians Lorraine Daston and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger. More specifically, there is a high concentration of scholars who regard their work as inscribed within the historical epistemology project located in particular at the Max Planck Institute for History of Science in Berlin, of which Rheinberger was a director until his recent retirement.

All my name-dropping does not go very far in answering that academic’s question: what is historical epistemology? Luckily, two new books by Rheinberger himself provide a kind of cumulative 430-page answer to this question. A much shorter, if indirect, reply can also be found in a discussion about the concept of gene contained in *An Epistemology of the Concrete*, in such a way as to pre-empt any demand for a definition. Here, Rheinberger points out that in the last half-century geneticists have ‘redefined [the gene’s] properties and boundaries’ so often and so deeply that our conception

of gene has changed accordingly ‘beyond recognition every time [scientists have redefined it]’. Far from lamenting this situation, however, Rheinberger argues that ‘fuzzy’ concepts have proved extremely productive in scientific research, whereas ‘overly precise definitions have tended to function as epistemological obstacles’; indeed he argues for an ‘epistemology of the imprecise’. Consistent with his argument, we thus do not find any simple or ‘precise’ definition of historical epistemology itself in these two volumes. However, what we do get are answers, suggestions and illustrations of how to *do* historical epistemology.

Both volumes are collections of papers: *On Historicizing Epistemology* is inspired by seminars that the author held at the Technical University in Berlin in 2005–07 and 2006–07; *An Epistemology of the Concrete* brings together papers that in many cases had been previously published elsewhere, but have undergone extensive revision. The choice and arrangements of these papers tell us almost as much as do the content of the papers themselves. *On Historicizing Epistemology* is a history of historical epistemology: for Rheinberger the fathers are certainly Bachelard and Canguilhem, but also German philosophers, first of all Husserl, Heidegger and Cassirer, while the Polish immunologist Ludwick Fleck deservedly occupies an important space in the narrative of early historical epistemology also. At the same time, Rheinberger looks to thinkers earlier than Bachelard, by dedicating a section to the *fin de siècle*, where he locates the beginning of a movement to make epistemology historical. At the other end, Alexandre Koyré, Stephen Toulmin and Thomas Kuhn all receive due attention, while the penultimate chapter examines the extension of the French tradition that, stemming from Bachelard, continued with Canguilhem, Althusser and Foucault. Derrida does not always appear in discussions of historical epistemology, but he also plays a prominent part here, placed at the end of the book’s narrative dedicated to the past. His presence is unsurprising, as Rheinberger has extensively used Derrida in his own work, and is also Derrida’s German translator.

Following the account of Derrida, the last section of *On Historicizing Epistemology* is dedicated to 'recent developments'. Rheinberger places his own work at the end of this history of historical epistemology, though very modestly in a short sentence in the middle of a paragraph. In doing so, he includes himself in a list of those science studies scholars who, for him, are most relevant to both the movement of historicizing epistemology and that of 'concretizing epistemology' (which is the focus of the other book reviewed here): the sociologists of the Edinburgh school (including David Bloor, Harry Barnes and Harry Collins), Andrew Pickering, and the historians Simon Schaffer, Norton Wise, Peter Galison, Mirko Grmek and Frederic Holmes. The chapter, however, has two major focuses: Ian Hacking and Bruno Latour. Their placement here is interesting: Rheinberger emphasizes that their projects to develop a historical anthropology of science are at odds with the post-structuralist tradition that he discusses in the previous chapter (Derrida in particular), but not at odds, or at least not necessarily so, with the previous tradition of historical epistemology, in so far as this was focused not only on the historical development of knowledge, but also on ways of knowing. Hacking's and Latour's versions of historical anthropology are rather different, but, in this respect, Rheinberger is particularly interested in some features of their works that resonate with his own. One, needless to say, is the historicity of knowledge; another is their attention to the practices of obtaining knowledge. This last point is crucial, and is specifically linked with the tradition of historical epistemology, to the extent that Hacking and Latour focus on the *process* of producing knowledge, rather than on science as a finished product. Indeed, many scholars, including Rheinberger himself, demonstrate that it is a rather complex issue even to identify a science as a finished product, or as a stable and 'definitive' body of theories and practices: scientific knowledge does not 'stop', but is rather a process whose beginnings or conclusions are often just arbitrary points that are fixed *post factum*.

In very different fashions, Latour and Hacking both focus on experiments: the latter finds his scientific realism on 'doing', or, as he puts it, on 'intervening', that is to say on laboratory activities (see his *Representing and Intervening*); the former carried out an ethnological study of experimental science in his and Woolgar's *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*. Rheinberger also stresses that Latour's perspective in analysing the day-to-day work of scientists 'puts in question the separation between the natural, the social and discursive aspects of all the

circulating objects that make up our modern world'. These two aspects, the focus on experimental activity and the critique of the distinction between the diverse elements of knowledge, are crucial in Rheinberger's own historiography and epistemology, as shown in the other book reviewed here, *An Epistemology of the Concrete*.

An important part of the tradition of historical epistemology has focused on the formation of concepts and on the changing ways of thinking displayed in the history of science. For some scholars, for instance Koyré, the role of experiments in science was comprehensively downplayed. However, current historical epistemology has decisively emphasized the experimental part of science, and the role of material things in it. Arguably, nobody has done more in this respect than Rheinberger, whose 'epistemology of the concrete' has provided important reflections on the nature and role of 'epistemic things' (in his expression) in experimental work. Rheinberger finds the roots of his conception of epistemic things in 'classic' historical epistemology (as opposed to the current projects that bear this label). Indeed *An Epistemology of the Concrete* opens with a section on historical epistemology that comprises three chapters on Fleck, Bachelard and Canguilhem, respectively. Bachelard's concept of phenomenotechnique is particularly important for Rheinberger; indeed it appears to be at the core of his own concept of 'epistemic thing' (or epistemic object; Rheinberger seems to use the two expressions interchangeably), which is an object that is informed by particular experimental techniques and manipulation practices.

Part II and Part III of *An Epistemology of the Concrete* are collections of case studies. The former covers the period 'from the establishment of classic genetics to the dawn of molecular biology in Germany', and focuses on four different model organisms, respectively: *Pisum*, *Eudorina*, *Ephestia*, and Tobacco mosaic virus. These case studies are interesting from different points of view. They are interesting from the most obvious point of view, that of history of science, as they construct new historical narratives. The methodology and the sources used are important historiographically. For instance, the case study 'Carl Correns's Experiment on *Xenia*, 1896–99' (*Pisum*) mainly relies on laboratory protocols. This reliance on protocols shows the distance between scientists' tortuous, sometimes contradictory itinerary that leads to their results, and the linear, logical and tidy narratives of many traditional histories of science. The case study 'Alfred Kühn's experimental design for a developmental physiological genetics, 1924–45' (*Ephestia*) affords a similar

lesson, and also shows how disciplinary boundaries get redrawn or even erased by scientific activity.

Part III's case studies are dedicated to concepts and instruments in the history of molecular biology. In addition to the aforementioned study of the concept of gene, these include a case study of the liquid scintillation counter, and of the concept of information (focused on the writings of François Jacob). The mix of concepts and instruments in the same part is far from odd; in fact it displays one of the fundamental epistemological lessons that Rheinberger intends to give in these books – that the various elements of scientific activity all interact with one another, indeed are not readily separable, and that they all have a history, entangled inseparably with the histories of the other elements.

Part IV of *An Epistemology of the Concrete* brings all the various themes together, and presents the epistemological lessons that are to be drawn from the case studies. From a philosophical point of view, this is the crucial part of the book. Rheinberger's attention to the space of the 'intersections' in Chapter 11 implies that instruments and experimental objects (in many cases only visible or detectable through an instrument) cannot be conceived as separate entities. Even less should one forget the role of the instrument itself in the understanding of the results of experimental science. The intersecting elements do not stand in a void either: Rheinberger emphasizes that 'as a rule instruments neither work nor produce insights by themselves. Rather, they are embedded in historical and local contexts, and their success depends on the more or less informed manner in which they are applied.' Objects become scientific, then, thanks to the place that they are made to occupy. For instance, a rock or a plant becomes scientific thanks to its place in a rock collection or a botanical garden. The rock, or plant, becomes part of an order which is theoretical but also practical, as it is subjected to particular handling practices. This is because these objects are not only placed in a particular context, but they are 'prepared' and transformed into scientific objects. Rheinberger proposes the name of 'epistemologica' for 'all material things rendered permanent in various ways that play a part in knowledge production by enabling facts to be exposed and elucidated'. 'Preparations', to which Chapter 12 is dedicated, are a special class of epistemologica. They include a vast gamut of objects, from anatomical and botanical preparations to microscopic ones. For Rheinberger they are of special interest because – unlike, for instance, models – 'they consist of the same material thing for which they stand'. The last chapter of the

book goes back to the use of laboratory protocols as historical sources, and to the ways in which meaning emerges from them. In the case studies, as well as in the concluding reflections, Rheinberger aims, overall, at a new way of writing history of science, in which 'the concrete', or material things, occupies centre stage. This is in fact Rheinberger's long-term project, as some readers are likely to know from his previous book *Towards a History of Epistemic Things*, translated into English in 1997.

Rheinberger strongly vindicates the classical roots of his own historical epistemology (in the sense of what I called 'classical' historical epistemology above). His own philosophy and historical method certainly show that he derived his inspiration from the works of the philosophers and historians discussed both in *On Historicizing Epistemology* and in the first part of *An Epistemology of the Concrete*. These essays will be of considerable interest for historians of philosophy and epistemologists alike, but their main value is as independent studies. The historical arrangement in *On Historicizing Epistemology*, possibly due to an editorial rationale, is however less satisfactory. The narrative that emerges is clearly linear, and the scholars discussed seem to share a zeitgeist across places and traditions. A reader may wonder why history of science is rightly represented as far from a linear development, and as a local enterprise in which places and material circumstances play a crucial role, whereas the history of philosophy is presented as enjoying such linear and homogenous development. Similarly, whereas science is represented as a collective and social enterprise, philosophy appears to be the product of isolated individuals. Indeed, their isolation is often overstated: for instance Bachelard, a powerful Sorbonne professor, is repeatedly represented, in both books, as an 'outsider', not belonging to any school, and self-taught in epistemology. In fact, despite his relatively unconventional curriculum vitae, Bachelard nevertheless obtained a degree in philosophy, and a doctorate in the same subject at the Sorbonne, with a thesis on 'approximate knowledge' (supervisor Abel Rey) and one on philosophy of physics (Léon Brunschvicg). His philosophical debt to Brunschvicg is widely and rightly recognized, both by his contemporaries (e.g. Jean Wahl) and by later critics (including Gary Gutting, François Dagognet, Jacques Gagey, Teresa Castelão and myself). More to the point, Bachelard was very much part of the movement of combining history and philosophy, and indeed history of science and epistemology, that had been developing at the University of Paris. Indeed, he was immersed in a milieu in which

knowledge more generally was being historicized in a profound manner, from Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's theories of mentalities to Hélène Metzger's reflection on the different ways of thinking of natural philosophers and scientists, just to mention a couple of examples. These many scholars organized themselves in groups and committees (e.g. Société française de philosophie, Centre de synthèse, International Committee for the History of Science), which, although certainly not comparable with laboratory work, greatly facilitated their exchanges and circulation of ideas. I found that the minutes of their discussions give insights into the formation of their ideas in relation to one another's in a way that their polished books do not always afford.

However, it is not Rheinberger's aim to write a history of philosophy of that period, and his interest in past philosophers is theoretical. The reader will learn a great deal from his essays on the scholars whom he sees as crucial in order to conceive of scientific knowledge as inherently historical, social and 'concrete'. The reader of *An Epistemology of the Concrete* will also find an answer to what is historical epistemology today, or at least one version of it, both in theoretical terms and through case studies that show how a historical epistemological perspective enables the epistemologist, historian and sociologist to read scientific activity.

**Cristina Chimisso**

## Why Keynes was wrong

Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 2011. 258 pp., £16.99 hb., 978 0 30016 943 0.

Paul Mattick, *Business As Usual: The Economic Crisis and the Failure of Capitalism*, Reaktion Books, London, 2011. 126 pp. £12.95 pb., 978 1 86189 801 2.

In 2008, as journalists and pundits struggled to account for the return of a crisis that was not – following political promises of 'the end of boom and bust' – supposed to recur, copies of *Capital* and *The Communist Manifesto* reportedly flew off bookshop shelves. Even some mainstream media commentators began to wonder if Marx might have been right all along. But such doubts – coming from commentators not accustomed to harbouring them – were often as ephemeral as they were grudging, and lay readers seeking robust

but accessible understandings of Marxist thought have hardly been well served in recent years. This year, however, has seen the publication of at least two new, highly accessible books – written by, respectively, a veteran Marxist literary critic and one of the US's most clear-sighted Marxist polymaths – which argue, in detail, for the continuing and deepening relevance of Marx's ideas for our times.

In *Why Marx Was Right*, with characteristic erudition and verve, Terry Eagleton addresses the commonplace charges that Marxism represents a utopian, soulless, outdated, unduly statist, unnecessarily violent or economically determinist school of thought. Eagleton gamely takes on and demolishes these criticisms one by one, showing Marx to be a flexible, pragmatic and undogmatic thinker and arguing for the eminently human – even humanist – character of Marx's political outlook. Importantly, too, he distances Marxism from the terroristic regimes of the twentieth century that claimed to operate in its name. Maoism and Stalinism, he notes, were 'botched, bloody experiments which made the very idea of socialism stink in the nostrils of those elsewhere in the world who had most to benefit from it'.

The criticisms of Marxism addressed in the book are the ones typically levelled by Marx's right-wing critics (while they are not mentioned by name, the latter would surely include philosophical anti-Marxists such as John Gray) – and rightly so, since these are the criticisms that Eagleton's intended audience is most likely to have encountered. Those seeking some discussion of the more sophisticated interventions into Marxist theory made by anarchists, autonomists and left communists will, however, be disappointed. Indeed, while it would be impossible for a short polemic such as Eagleton's to deal even cursorily with every political school of thought influenced by Marxism, the version of Marxism defended here is broadly Trotskyist, and other Marxist traditions are given somewhat short shrift. Eagleton dismisses as 'ultra left', for example, those Marxists who 'look to revolution rather than to parliamentary democracy and social reform', a point which is followed by a joking footnote that mocks the supposed absurdity of left-communist positions: 'In the militant 1970s, ... the true purists or ultraleftists ... were those who were able to return an unequivocal No to the question "Would you call the bourgeois fire brigade"?' This dismissiveness towards 'ultra left' positions is unfortunate, since elsewhere in the book Eagleton is at pains to emphasize that matters to which he devotes extended discussion – such as the desirability of 'market socialism' – have been the subject

of serious debate among Marxists themselves; but it is also indicative of Eagleton's tendency to emphasize the humanistic and reformist, rather than the revolutionary, aspects of Marx's thought.

Indeed, while Eagleton is certainly not neglectful of history – he notes, for example, that the composition of the working class has changed significantly since Marx's time – he does tend to present the reformist character of nineteenth-century socialism as more or less adequate in the current era. But capitalism today is not the same as that which confronted workers in Marx's time. The nineteenth century, for all its horrors, was a period of rising wages and capitalist expansion, in which unions served as more or less effective organs of working-class reformism. The revolutionary wave of the early twentieth century, by contrast, indicated that the communist transformation of society was possible. The state, meanwhile, has grown enormously in size and scope since that period, absorbing the unions, which have in turn played a mostly reactionary role by supporting the world wars and dividing struggling workers by nation, sector and job role – however militant their rank-and-file members may be. However one describes such historical shifts (as a movement from formal to real subsumption, from ascendance to decadence, etc.), their political ramifications cannot be ignored. The qualitative differences between the capitalism of Marx's day and ours have changed the rules of the game, transforming the nature of working-class organs of struggle. Admittedly, it is difficult to take full account of a century and a half of capitalist development in a short polemic such as Eagleton's; nevertheless, *Why Marx Was Right* does rather underestimate the dramatic shift in the nature of capitalism since the beginning of the twentieth century and its implications for proletarian political strategy.

On a more prosaic level, some readers may find the relentlessly puckish literary style of *Why Marx Was Right* irritating. Eagleton, as always, is droll; but the characteristic trope of illustrating abstract concepts with vividly concrete images and eccentric analogies – to which the author gives full rein – is often more grating than illuminating. 'To judge socialism by its results in one desperately isolated country', he writes of the Soviet Union under Stalin, 'would be like drawing conclusions about the human race from a study of psychopaths in Kalamazoo'. Despite these reservations, however, *Why Marx Was Right* will provide reassurance to newcomers to Marxism – of which, in these troubled times, there are many – that Marx did not hold all, or even any, of the views attributed to him by his detractors.

Since Eagleton is more concerned with defending Marxism from attack than advocating it as a means of critique, a better – albeit less stirring – title for his book might be *Why Marx Wasn't Wrong*. In fact, Eagleton's actual title rather better describes the stance of Paul Mattick Junior's *Business As Usual*. At just 126 pages including footnotes, Mattick's book offers a Marxist explanation of capitalist crisis for a lay readership in a highly condensed format. Beginning with an analysis of the *longue durée* of capitalist business cycles, Mattick shows, in characteristically precise and jargon-free prose, how Marxian economic theory offers resources for explaining the latest crisis of the system in its historical context. Mattick is well qualified for this task: just as his father, the council communist Paul Mattick Senior, had used Marxian economics to predict the ultimate failure of postwar welfare Keynesianism in his 1962 book *Marx and Keynes*, Mattick's Marxist method has enabled him correctly to predict the ways in which the economic crisis would unfold since 2007. As Mattick stresses, such predictional accuracy is not a matter of intelligence or insight, but is rather 'a matter of knowing how to think about what is going on'. Indeed, continuing the theme of one of Mattick's earlier books, *Social Knowledge*, Marxism is posited here as the best guide to acquiring knowledge in the social sciences. As such, one of this book's clearest messages – recalling his father's argument in *Marx and Keynes* – has to do with the bankruptcy of mainstream economic analysis.

In the first part of the book, Mattick addresses some common misconceptions, arguing that economic crises are not, as is often claimed, caused by 'exogenous shocks' to the system, but are internal to the dynamics of capitalism. However, the central problem with mainstream accounts of the recent crisis, Mattick argues, lies in their mistaken assumption that the point of capitalism is to create goods in order to satisfy consumer demand, rather than that capitalists aim to create profit. Thus, in response to Keynesian commentators such as Paul Krugman, whose recommendations for beating the recession include massive stimulus spending and job-creation schemes, Mattick points out that 'capitalism is a system not for providing "employment" as an abstract goal, but for employing people who produce profits'. And therein lies the problem. Following the work of Robert Brenner, Mattick points to the more or less steady decline, since the mid-1970s, in levels of capital investment and profitability – a decline that would have led to a crisis much earlier had its effects not been staved off by enormous levels of private, public and government debt.

While emphasizing the cyclical nature of economic downturn, Mattick notes that the present crisis is unfolding in a radically different context to that of earlier depressions. The state-capitalist solution of large-scale government spending that was implemented by leaders from Roosevelt to Hitler in response to the depression of the 1930s is virtually impossible to implement today (and in any case, as Mattick points out, it was actually the Second World War, not these Keynesian measures, that finally enabled capitalism to climb out of depression). Keynesians, argues Mattick, have never faced up to the long-term consequences of government borrowing, which has now spiralled out of control – in the USA it has risen from \$16 billion in 1930 to £12.5 trillion today – raising the prospect of default for many countries. Governments are therefore caught between the rock of allowing the crisis to ‘play out’, imposing austerity and trying to contain the ensuing social unrest, and the hard place of stimulus spending, which will lead to disastrously high levels of government debt.

An added problem is that capitalism today is integrated as never before in its history, so that any solutions that capitalism invents to remedy its own problems must be international in nature – a virtual impossibility in a world of competing nation-states. World war has, of course, traditionally offered one such global solution for capitalism; but, as Mattick notes, although the world today is racked by conflict, mobilizing an (as yet) undefeated working class for a world war would prove difficult for the ruling class (although, in a world full of nuclear weapons, one wonders if troop mobilization would even be necessary). Moreover, even if the economy does temporarily recover, this will only exacerbate the environmental destruction and depletion of natural resources that already threaten to render the planet uninhabitable for human life.

In the book’s final pages, Mattick is upbeat about the decline of the ‘traditional’ Left of ‘parties, unions and radical sects’, arguing that the solution to the problems created by capitalism will have to come through the actions of ordinary people. This might begin with people simply taking and using housing, food and other goods, organizing production and distribution to meet their own needs. In this, Mattick sounds a refreshingly pragmatic and undogmatic note, and, unlike Eagleton, shows an awareness that organs such as the unions no longer serve the progressive function they once did. Inevitably, however, some Marxists will feel that Mattick, by seeming to present the overcoming of capitalist social relations



as a process of communization that bypasses the need for proletarian dictatorship, underestimates the importance of working-class political organization to any post-capitalist transition.

Some will say, too, that Mattick’s account of economic crisis overemphasizes the causal importance of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. There is a significant divergence, for example, between Mattick’s focus on profit rate and the more pluralist account of capitalist crisis given in David Harvey’s *The Enigma of Capital* (another of the few accessible Marxist books about the crisis to have appeared of late). Those interested in Mattick’s critique of Harvey’s position will, however, need to look elsewhere for illumination, since Mattick focuses here primarily on his own thesis, rather than engaging in lengthy dialogues with the arguments of others. Still, whatever view one takes of the role of profit rates in capitalist crisis, Mattick’s book valuably locates the roots of the crisis in the nature of the capitalist system, providing a forceful counter-argument to those liberal-left commentators who have sought to blame the recent crisis on ‘greedy bankers’, ‘neoliberalism’ or other manifestations of ‘excessive’ capitalism, while arguing for a return to a regulated Keynesianism. Like his father before him, Mattick argues convincingly that neither the ‘free market’ nor the Keynesian policies of the ruling class offers a way to overcome the cycle of boom-and-bust in an increasingly beleaguered system. Indeed, both Eagleton’s and Mattick’s books serve as accessible reminders that, as Sartre observed half a century ago in *Search for a Method*, we cannot ‘go beyond’ Marxism until we have transcended the circumstances which engendered it.

**Stephen Harper**

# The new paternalism

Frank Furedi, *On Tolerance: A Defence of Moral Independence*, Continuum, London and New York, 2011. 224 pp., £16.99 hb., 978 1 44112 010 6.

Peter John et al., *Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think: Experimenting with Ways to Change Civic Behaviour*, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2011. 208 pp., £40.00 hb., 978 1 84966 059 4.

Gilles Saint-Paul, *The Tyranny of Utility: Behavioural Social Science and the Rise of Paternalism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2011. 174 pp., £27.95 hb., 978 0 69112 817 7.

‘Nudge’ and ‘Think’ are currently popular buzzwords of government policy reform, informed by developments in contemporary behavioural economics, psychology and the neurosciences. ‘Nudge’ suggests that governments should act to manipulate lifestyle choices – for example, by changing the ways in which choices are presented or the default options involved – while ‘Think’ suggests that citizens need to be influenced to change their decisions or behaviour through participatory or deliberative engagement. Such discussions of government intervention to change lifestyle behaviours thus tend to bypass two commonplace approaches: traditional paternalism, or direct intervention – the banning or taxation of behaviour (such as smoking, smacking or fox-hunting) – and non-paternalism, such as the provision of information that enables citizens to make up their own minds on a supposedly autonomous basis.

What is often loosely termed the ‘new paternalism’ is thereby a self-consciously ‘Third Way’ approach to social policy. On the one hand, government does not directly assert and impose political authority; on the other, citizens cannot be left to decide for themselves. For many critics of Nudge and Think, it is the second part of this equation that is the focus of their ire. Two new books (by Saint-Paul and Furedi) argue that the shift towards new paternalism – or ‘libertarian paternalism’: the term coined by Thaler and Sunstein in their best-selling book *Nudge* – is a dangerous trend threatening civil liberties and social freedoms. The third (*Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think*), by contrast, advocates such a policy shift and argues for the importance of the first part of the equation: the move from ‘big government’ to what David Cameron has famously promoted as the ‘big society’.

For Frank Furedi, in *On Tolerance: A Defence of Moral Independence*, new paternalism reflects and institutionalizes social intolerance. Drawing on classical liberal philosophers, including Locke, Kant and Mill, he remarks that the shift towards the regulation and manipulation of our private choices undermines

classical liberal principles of freedom of conscience and individual autonomy. The freedom to choose differently is the basis of democratic public reasoning, and the availability of choices develops our capacities for judgement and moral reason. As against this, Furedi argues, today we feel uncomfortable with tolerance for its own sake and the responsibility it imposes for individual judgement. Rather than see difference as a healthy and necessary challenge to clarify our own beliefs, we are more likely to see difference as a problem that needs to be managed. This bureaucratic or administrative operationalization of toleration as a technique for evading the problems of difference, through the imperative not to cause offence, hence essentializes difference. In this way, discourses and practices of tolerance constrain individual freedom and responsibility rather than becoming the precondition for them.

For Furedi, radical and left advocates had already created a culture less tolerant of free judgement, in order to protect the sensibilities of minorities and to protect the vulnerable from offence and potential psychological harm. This has meant that more recent, right-wing government assertions of the need to regulate interpersonal relationships, in order to prevent harm to vulnerable groups and individuals or to our collective welfare, have become difficult to contest. In today’s therapeutic culture, the perception of the harm we can do through our autonomous reasoning has multiplied and, with this perception, our tolerance of autonomy has contracted. In this climate, intervention by the state, in censoring opinions or promoting other, ‘better’ choices, is not understood as oppressive but as a progressive act: protecting the vulnerable or powerless from offence or harm. The individual’s capacity for autonomy is therefore problematized as we are increasingly seen to be victims of the media, irrational prejudices, or as making irresponsible choices. For Furedi, the ideas of evolutionary psychology and behavioural economics provide a scientific justification and coherent rationale for government interventions in

cases where the public is seen to be unable to reach the best decisions on its own accord. According to this framework, government social engineering is an act of 'empowerment' – augmenting freedom rather than denying it.

Furedi concludes that the new paternalism in this way inverts democratic theory: rather than government serving the will of the people, the task of government is to change, re-educate and transform the will of the people. This inversion threatens to eliminate the distinction between the public and private spheres, continually presenting the autonomy of the private sphere as a problematic limit to addressing problems of economic, social and environmental order. Increasing regulation of the private sphere cannot address the underlying problem of government's inability to deal with the weakening of moral and intellectual certainties, but will merely increase the demand for further regulations as autonomy and choice-making come to be seen as increasingly problematic.

Whereas Furedi sees the new paternalism as driven by a cultural problematization of moral autonomy, Gilles Saint-Paul understands the shift to the regulation of the private choices as a product of behavioural economics and the neurological sciences. He argues that experts have now proved that individuals are not 'rational, consistent and capable of self-control'. This evidence, in conjunction with tremendous advances in digital technology, opens up the possibility that governments can intervene to regulate individual behaviour to improve economic and social outcomes. Scientists can 'prove' that we would live longer, healthier and wealthier lives if there was greater regulation and government intrusion into the private decisions we make with regard to our health and exercise, child-rearing, consumer purchases, recycling, education and welfare, while the development of scientific understandings of the brain and the problematic nature of human decision-making will continually shift the boundary of government intervention, further restricting our private sphere of autonomy.

Saint-Paul agrees with Furedi that this form of intervention does not appear oppressive; in fact it can be scientifically argued for as the best way of increasing aggregate individual preferences. However, as he points out, the ideology of *laissez-faire*, as a principle of government of the social and economic sphere, was founded on the methodological principle of *Homo economicus* – that individuals were rational utility maximizers. In the world of the rational subject, the more information there was the better the decision would be: free speech and free exchange would

benefit the market and the democratic public sphere. This liberal framework was derived from individuals' preferences as 'revealed' in their market choices, which were asserted to be the most efficient way of achieving utilitarian outcomes. Today, however, utilitarian arguments have parted company with classical liberal defences of the moral autonomy of decision-making. Instead, we live in a 'post-utilitarian' world, where it is assumed that we cannot be trusted to make decisions in our best interests. Yet, Saint-Paul argues, when 'revealed preferences are tossed out of the window, Big Brother enters through the back door', in so far as behavioural economics cannot but lead to greater government intrusion into private choice-making.

Saint-Paul makes a bold set of arguments informed by the desire to separate a principled opposition to the new paternalism from an instrumentalist one, asserting the need for a return to Friedrich von Hayek's defence of constitutional liberties on *intrinsic* grounds. A defence of liberty today involves engaging in debate about human nature. A society that organizes around the assumption of incapacity will produce citizens uncomfortable with moral independence and less able to use their own judgement. New paternalism, rather than scientifically resolving problems, reproduces them on a larger scale through encouraging the erosion of individual and collective responsibility.

In their critiques, albeit coming from rather different political directions, Furedi and Saint-Paul flag up the dangers of an erosion of individual responsibility and moral autonomy. Yet it should be noted that the current UK government, which has most enthusiastically endorsed the ideas of Nudge and Think, itself argues that it is keen to restore 'people's appetite to take control for themselves'. In his foreword, to Peter John and his colleagues' study of the effectiveness of such policy interventions in *Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think: Experimenting with Ways to Change Civic Behaviour*, Greg Clark, the Tory minister for planning and decentralization, hence unsurprisingly argues that individual responsibility needs to be *enhanced*. Nudge and Think are held to be necessary here because government can no longer 'simply tell people what to do' or achieve policy success just by 'pulling on the levers of central power'. Such discourse is that of the war on paternalism: the scaling back of centralized directives and bureaucratically developed national policy solutions. As such, addressing social, economic and environmental problems apparently comes down to the 'subtle question of behaviour change' and how the government can help 'encourage responsible behaviour by individuals and communities'. Researching the

effectiveness of Nudge and Think is held to be vital as the government looks for 'more effective ways to deliver behaviour change in the wider interest of society'.

In shifting policy responsibility from the state to society, the private sphere is inevitably problematized. As John et al. argue, 'The kinds of problems that many societies now need to solve require changing the behaviour of citizens, whose private actions are hard to regulate by laws and commands.' Nudge and Think are not, it is said, about public or macro-level policy; they are administrative techniques, which the research project authors advocate in order to 'deepen and broaden out the behaviour-change programme'. The authors thus advocate a utilitarian perspective for which government interventions in the private sphere are 'appropriate and legitimate' to the extent that better policy outcomes can be achieved this way. Individual citizens have a limited or 'bounded' rational capacity for decision-making and, at present, their understandings are shaped and manipulated by numerous 'actors, institutions and practices that (explicitly or implicitly) promote non-civic behaviour'. If we are irrational and already manipulated by social, economic and political actors – from advertising agencies to our friends and family – what could possibly be wrong with governments intervening to improve our surrounding 'choice architecture'?

Yet, *Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think*, through its case-study examples, in fact highlights not only the patronizing nature of Nudge and Think initiatives – with smiley faces on feedback and competitive street recycling leagues – but also their limited impact on actually changing people's behaviour in the 'treatment groups' studied. In some cases, the provision of information and deliberation had the opposite effect to that intended by the well-meaning pedagogic experts from the local council, as issues became less black and white. It demonstrates well the paradoxes and limits of government interventions which are meant to empower people through patronizing and manipulating them.

Each of these three books demonstrates the ambiguities involved in the drift towards a new paternalism. Through its denial of responsibility and war on traditional paternalism, the discourse of power has shifted from that of 'big government' to 'big society', yet with this has come a pressure to limit or restrict individual autonomy. Furedi and Saint-Paul are surely right to warn that culturally and politically we seem strikingly ill-equipped to oppose or challenge this shift. Yet, in mounting a challenge to the politics of behaviour change, they both seek to return to classical

liberal assumptions of moral autonomy and individual responsibility. In doing so, however, they merely reveal the weakness of any critique based on such assumption, in so far as they must also recognize the degree to which these very assumptions appear profoundly alien to us today. Nineteenth-century philosophical grave-robbing is understandable as an act of desperation, but, in the end, it simply makes it all the more clear that this can be no substitute for a future-orientated vision of the human subject and the social or political projects which could enable it to come into being.

David Chandler

## A feminist on the edge of time

Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford, eds, *Further Adventures of The Dialectic of Sex: Critical Essays on Shulamith Firestone*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010. 304 pp., £55.00 hb., 978 0 23010 029 9.

*Further Adventures of The Dialectic of Sex* celebrates the fortieth birthday of Shulamith Firestone's radical feminist manifesto *The Dialectic of Sex* by providing a collection of eleven essays that examines Firestone's classic work within the context of contemporary feminist debates. Over its forty-year-plus life, *The Dialectic of Sex* has received its share of negative attention. The book has been roundly criticized for what are claimed to be Firestone's essentializing perspectives on sex, her radical departure from embracing traditional motherhood and pregnancy, and the book's promotion of alternatives to the nuclear family. In fact, between feminist rejection of the text and conservative backlash against it, the book was out of print for almost twenty-five years, only being reissued in the mid-1990s. It now serves to help describe second-wave radical feminism and as a result has found its place in the feminist canon, even if Firestone's ideas continue to be used primarily as a foil for more contemporary work.

Forty years later, however, the retrospective essays published in this collection allow for a reading of Firestone to emerge that is both nuanced and complex. They also reclaim much, if not all, of what Firestone sought to achieve as still relevant to feminism today, with all the essays finding ample points of engagement between Firestone's radical feminist vision and today's feminist politics. The essays remark upon the strengths and weaknesses of Firestone's pathbreaking work and,

while it is difficult to speak generally about the rich contributions collected in this volume, as a whole they seek to offer a sympathetic reading of Firestone, defend her against her most vociferous critics, and pay homage to her radical vision.

In the prologue, Mandy Merck contextualizes both the feminist movement of the 1960s and Firestone's place in the movement's radical segment. Merck situates the central themes of Firestone's text within the modern theoretical landscape, and points out the irony that even as the technologies that could have made Firestone's reproductive future possible are developed, her work has been largely forgotten. As a result, the growth of reproductive technologies goes forward without any substantive feminist theorizing and it becomes clear that the nexus between motherhood and technology remains a deeply troubling point of tension for feminism. What becomes clear from Merck's reading is that, much like the heroine in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, we remain trapped in a techno-scientific world that has yet to be deconstructed by a feminist ethic, radical or otherwise.



The book itself is divided into three sections that address Firestone's work thematically. Section one deals with technology, section two with sex, love and the family, and section three with dialectics. In section one, Susanna Paasonen's essay, 'From Cybernation to Feminization: Firestone and Cyberfeminism', provides a great overview of the artistic and scholarly field of cyberfeminism before taking up the question of why the cyberfeminism of the 1990s doesn't flow from Firestone's cybernetic vision. In other words, why the break in what could otherwise be understood as a

lineage of ideas? In part the break emerges because of different understandings of biology and the argument that many other essays in the book seek to address – that Firestone held a reductionist view of biology. One of the key insights from this essay is how Firestone becomes a way of seeing what was possible to think about in the 1970s and what we no longer think about now. The value of her work, for Paasonen, is in its view of what a future society might look like. Caroline Bassett similarly offers a thoughtful piece on Firestone's utopianism and how one can assess how well her visions have travelled. In her essay, 'Impossible, Admirable, *Androgyny*: Firestone, Technology, and Utopia', Bassett argues that while Firestone writes in a way that has rendered her somewhat anachronistic to the modern reader, she must be given her due as a feminist futurist and utopian visionary. Her 'body hatred', as Bassett puts it, which she used to envision technological wombs that would free women from pregnancy, is a radically different approach to thinking through modern concepts of childbirth and motherhood. Bassett argues that Firestone's project failed, however, because neither the state nor the family has withered away (though I am not sure we can blame Firestone for this), even if her analysis remains relevant. To be sure, Firestone's utopian vision remains almost unthinkable in today's child-centred political world. Yet that is exactly what we need to do – think the unthinkable.

In the second section, Stevi Jackson's contribution, 'Questioning Heterosexual Families', helps to demonstrate that even if we end up with different answers to the problems Firestone raised, these problems continue to exist. Her critique of families, children

and love, while flawed, according to Jackson, still suggest we have not seen much in terms of more equal relationships emerge in the past forty years. Jackson's conclusion that feminists have become more pessimistic in the ensuing years, while apt, is sobering – as is the idea that heterosexual relationships remain mired in inequality and dissolve even more often now than they did forty years ago. 'Integration, Intersex, and Firestone', by Mandy Merck, takes up the evolution of Firestone's claims for androgyny and situates these claims within a more contemporary debate over race,

integration and the challenges posed by intersexed individuals. Much of the essay is not about Firestone per se, but the world after Firestone that has yet to grapple with the existence or implications of the intersexed body. Thus, while Firestone's future remains unrealized, the core effort to transcend sex is pertinent. Especially interesting is the focus on female elite athletes and the ways in which their performance challenges conventional gender norms. I would have liked to see Merck bring this contemporary controversy into a clearer dialogue with Firestone's work.

The section on dialectics seeks to retrieve Firestone from the claims of essentialism. Gillian Howie argues that we should treat Firestone's work as a political treatise, asking: 'how can we think a future that does not follow from our current political condition, which eliminates all normative imperatives that seem to follow from sexed embodiment?' To answer this question, what Firestone contributes is a 'world-changing fiction'. Howie's essay thus does a good job linking Firestone to her Marxist and materialist heritage with the feminist twist that the role of the family and patriarchy in the process of oppression and the need for change must also be considered. In one of the more theoretically complex and well-argued pieces, Stella Sandford takes up the issue of the dialectic within *The Dialectic of Sex*. Sandford does the best job of clarifying Firestone's approach to sex and gender issues as well as how misreadings of Firestone have led to her marginalization as a feminist theorist. For Sandford, the key issue is that Firestone felt it was possible to make biological differences irrelevant – that we could live in a world where genital differences didn't matter. As a result, while generations of feminists have painted Firestone as someone who takes on a 'naturalistic' approach to sex, in reality she acknowledges biology as relevant but sees that 'nature, not culture, is the potential site of revolution'. Technology has revolutionary power. However, Sandford is correct when she says it is very difficult to avoid conflating Firestone's approach with 'anti-feminist apologies for the inevitability of patriarchy'.

In the end, each essay argues that it is not possible to reject Firestone completely. I applaud the efforts of the authors to draw Firestone's work back into the academic fold and treat it with the seriousness it deserves. However, the book also conveys the distinct feeling that we have moved on, at least intellectually, and so, while we will never solve the issues raised by Firestone, they have become less theoretically interesting to modern feminists, or to academic feminists at least. Given that Firestone has not remained active

in the evolution of feminist thought, *The Dialectic of Sex* is only a snapshot from a brilliant mind. How her own thinking evolved, or would have evolved had she remained in the movement will remain a mystery.

**Debora Halbert**

## Leftist reason

Bruno Bosteels, *The Actuality of Communism*, Verso, London and New York, 2011. 304 pp., £12.99 hb., 978 1 84467 695 8.

The accusation of 'leftism' has often surfaced at crucial moments in the struggle against capitalism. Lenin's broadside against left-wing communism is of course the most important analysis of this deviation internal to the communist movement, and the various symptoms it groups to diagnose this 'infantile' disorder are well known: a dogmatic and moralist position against political struggles; the confusion of strategies and tactics, means and ends; a refusal to feel out a given situation for weak links; a deafness to the logic of objective enemies and alliances; an incapacity to enter into the dialectic of legality and illegality, and a corresponding aestheticization of illegality. When Lenin launched his polemic, the fate of the communist movement remained uncertain, and the stakes were high: the Bolshevik Revolution still consolidating itself in the throes of civil war; the recent crushing of the German insurrections of 1918–19. The term reappeared during the earliest hours of May 1968, and came to define the subsequent political sequence lasting until the mid-1970s, marked as it was by a proliferation of Maoist and libertarian communist groupings to the far left of the PCF and the increasingly compromised organs of the official communist movement. This leftist episode ended in the paradoxical yet telling rightist turn taken by the ex-Gauche Proletarienne 'new philosophers', whose anti-Marxist polemics deployed against the complex articulation of masses, classes and organization of classical communist politics, a global and timeless confrontation between a seamless and ubiquitous figure of Power and the martyred resistance of the changeless *plebe*.

Bruno Bosteels's *The Actuality of Communism* re-launches this polemic against leftism in its specifically contemporary form, taking on the emergence of what he calls, after Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, 'speculative leftism,' and which he defines as 'a name for the philosophical appropriation of radical

emancipatory politics'. As the long introduction to the book makes clear, the specific strain of appropriation he is keen to assess is the recent recirculation of the signifier 'communism' in contemporary philosophy, whether in the work of Badiou or Rancière, or that of Jean-Luc Nancy and Antonio Negri – all participants, along with Bosteels himself, in the 2009 London conference on 'The Idea of Communism'. Alberto Toscano has recently underlined the historical paradox of this resurgence of philosophical interest in the term 'communism', noting that this very theoretical vitality seems a symptom of the historical weakness and resounding defeat of the communist movement. By contrast, Bosteels confronts the theoretical recirculation of the term – where 'communism' is often dramatically opposed to 'socialism' and the historical forms this term has taken on – not with the absence of an international revolutionary movement, but with its recent resurgence in South America and in particular Bolivia. If the larger part of Bosteels's intervention consists in developing a 'critique of pure leftist reason', whose central figure is Rancière – the central chapter of the book is devoted to him, as is a large part of the second chapter otherwise concerning Roberto Esposito and Alberto Moreiras – it is not by chance that the final chapter of the book, which shares the book's title, is devoted to the writings and political militancy of the standing vice president of Bolivia, Alvaro García Linares. While an enormous debt is clearly owed to those figures who nobly and in isolation tended the fires of the communist spirit through the winter years of the crushing or winding out of the workers' movement, the eviscerations of the welfare state and the social 'entitlements' won through

worker struggles, the police interventions of the West and NATO against a changing array of 'rogue' states, and the predations of finance capital, Bosteels argues that any reflection on the fate and future of the term 'communism' today must begin with an immanent critique of this leftist 'reason' – and its implicit or explicit opposing of a speculative norm of pure communism to the actual workings of communist power, including the engagement with state power – and an attention to and affirmation of the real politics of revolutionary experimentation outside of the airless confines of Parisian and para-Parisian theoretical innovation.

For readers attracted to the word 'communism' in Bosteels's title, and familiar with the line-up put together for the London conference, some of the chapters included in this volume are bound to disappoint. Readers who expect, for example, a critical account of the most ontologically ambitious and therefore most speculative contemporary accounts of communism – Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology of the common and its dissociation from the history of communist politics, say, or Antonio Negri's Spinozian variant of communist potentiality – will have to settle, in the first two chapters, for a range-finding account of a recent volume on the possibility 'leftist' ontology and the 'impolitical' and 'infrapolitical' reflections of Roberto Esposito and Alberto Moreiras, respectively. These chapters, while pertinent accounts of various modes of the contemporary philosophical appropriation of 'radical politics', seem like deviations from the fundamental question Bosteels wants to pursue. The treatment of Rancière and his account of the historical articulation of philosophy and politics, as well as Rancière's own call for a 'properly political' reading of the political, rectifies



this initial drift, while the fine chapter devoted to Žižek's evolving conceptions of the Lacanian and Leninist 'act' brings us to the threshold of what Bosteels understands to be the actuality of communism today. In tracing the different structures of the 'act', which Žižek has propounded since 1989's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Bosteels is able to pass from the recursive temporality of an act that posits its own conditions, and a subject whose act is to identify with inconsistencies and impasse within the symbolic order, on to Žižek's more recent reconsideration of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the seizure of the state as a weapon

necessary for the crushing of remnants of bourgeois class power. It is only a step, then, from Žižek's wryly 'vulgar' Leninist act to Linares's own reflections on the 'takeover of state power in a non-statal way'.

Bosteels is particularly insightful when he proposes a historical hypothesis regarding not simply the origins of speculative leftism, but one of its widely shared axioms: the rarity of politics. This axiom makes a virtue of historical weakness, reflecting the fact that the period when this thesis emerged – the 1980s and 1990s – was indeed marked by a paucity of sustained, consistent political sequences. The third chapter of the book, devoted to Rancière's own account of the three possible philosophical appropriations and cancellations of the political – archi-, para- and metapolitics – emphasizes the way in which, unlike Badiou, Rancière offers no periodization of political sequences, positing instead a model of egalitarian rupture that has no internal historicity, and is marked only by the repeated yet discontinuous and rare staging of 'moments' and 'scenes' of dissensus. Such an account, which places so much emphasis on the invariance of the relation between politics and what *Disagreement* calls the logic of the police, is always threatened by that most egregious and fatal of leftism's errors, namely the positing of an unchanging antagonism between two static poles: between the *plebe* and power, between the potentiality of the *demos* and the actual workings of the state order of the police. It is not without some irony, to which Bosteels is sensitive, that in this book's arc from speculation to the actual, we end up with an

analysis of a text by the Bolivian vice president whose title is *The Plebeian Potential*, yoking together two of the fundamental categories of speculative leftism: the *plebe* as a quasi-ontological figure of resistance and potentiality as the excess of this communist ontology over any actualization in the form of an institution. Bosteels reassures us, however, that these terms in fact function as markers for the specificity and complexity of the class and ethnic composition of the actors in Bolivia, so as 'to bypass the classical figure of the proletariat ... in favor of a wider and much more flexible composition of the revolutionary subject'.

The merits of Bosteels's intervention are at least double, and self-evident. It breaks open the speculative closure of recent philosophical accounts of communism by confronting them with the actuality of the communist movement as it unfolds in Bolivia, or at least as it is analysed and theorized by Linares in a book that, paradoxically, is itself shadowed by some of the very 'speculative' positions it is here supposed to correct. And it does so while also offering an immanent critique of 'leftist reason' itself, through patient analysis of its positions and their internal tensions and contradictions. The book does what interventions must, namely draw a line of demarcation, in this case between communism as a real overdetermined process that must engage with the question of power and recent philosophical attempts to resuscitate the term as a pure, invariant kernel of sheer potentiality that exceeds any constituted power or historical actuality – an actuality which always amounts, in this instance, to the questions of state power and of socialism, as a certain modelling and management of the production of social wealth. In criticizing this tendency, however, Bosteels makes little effort to demonstrate the ways in which eruption or consolidation of leftist tendencies might, despite their status as deviations, also 'serve as a constant source of revitalization for communism'. Bosteels instead tends to distinguish between leftism and communism *strictu sensu*, which as a result remains characteristically Leninist, structured around, on the one hand, the articulation between party and state (however problematized), and, on the other, the triangulation between organization, classes and masses. What this unexpected move – leftism not as tendency within communism, but its other – seems to amount to is a refusal to separate communism from socialism; that is, to distinguish between a relentless movement that touches upon a certain real and the management of social production. This distinction is, nevertheless, the foundation of a properly communist politics.

Jason E. Smith



# Undressed

Colin Cremin, *Capitalism's New Clothes*, Pluto Press, London, 2011. 208 pp., £19.99 pb., 978 0 74532 814 0.

Slavoj Žižek has described his political project (at least since his 'Leninist' turn) as one of mounting an attack on the 'hegemonic ideological coordinates' of the present. Alongside this, however, has been a declaration of the 'deficiency of the Marxist project' and a frequently voiced rallying call to 'the urgent task of the economic analysis today ... to repeat Marx's "critique of political economy" without succumbing to the temptation of the multitude of the ideologies of "postindustrial" societies'. What has been absent from Žižek's writings, though, is any attempt to work through such a critique. Colin Cremin, a member of the editorial board of the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* – yes, really – endorses Žižek's aims and sets out to make use of a range of 'materialist, linguistic and psychoanalytic concepts' to analyse 'important socio-economic changes which spill over into and reconfigure the public domain, alter social reproduction and cause changes in subjective conditions and ideological orientation'.

Cremin's book is refreshing in making its endorsement of the 'tradition of critical theory' explicit. He writes clearly, and his own political positions are at the forefront throughout. For Cremin, capitalism is a 'system based on the perpetual exploitation of all resources, human and natural', and the purpose of his writing is to seek to show capital as the 'naked Emperor' and to tear off the 'ideological gown we drape over him'. *Capitalism's New Clothes* thus sets out to expose the ways by which the culture of capitalism in its neoliberal phase exploits notions of ethics, enjoyment and enterprise to depoliticize and hence conceal the reality of the 'naked economy'. In setting out his analysis of what naked capitalism represents, Cremin relies heavily on earlier accounts by Simon Clarke, Giovanni Arrighi and Fredric Jameson, mapping how finance capital seeks to become, as the last puts it, a 'play of monetary entities which ... can live on its own internal metabolism'. As Cremin states, 'the problem is that sooner or later the real economy has to catch up with the fictitious one', and the crisis of 2008 has posed a fundamental challenge to the 'already threadbare claims in support of neoliberalism'. The book is written, therefore, at a time of real opportunity to expose the 'myths propagated about the nature of capitalism today'.

The section of the book on enterprise deals with the ways in which 'as power shifts in favour of capital,

workers compete with one another to be the objects of the bosses' desire by entering into new productive relations in and outside of work.' Cremin draws on Erving Goffman's critique of 'performative practices' to examine the role of employment agencies, career guides, and so on, to foster within the working class a 'social personality that employers want': one who is never employable enough, always willing to work longer for less, to work at home, to be likeable, flexible and always available. There is useful empirical work here on the ways in which 'ethical' employers encourage community volunteering, and thereby both colonize free time and humanize their corporate personality in the process. As Cremin states (and this is his essential theme), 'Ethical values are the retractable flesh covering the corporate incisors that cut into the human tissue.' In writing on ethics, Cremin's position is that ethical activity is a 'pseudo-activity': 'the cultural logic of left liberalism'. He posits the existence of a 'culture-of-crisis industry' in the network of NGOs that respond to crises through charitable appeals, which allow left-liberals to believe they are acting ethically by donating to good causes, without addressing the fundamental inequalities that underpin the crises: 'the structural antagonism shaping existence must of course be elided.' In this way, the crisis industry, Cremin tells us, functions as an Ideological State Apparatus, in Althusser's terms, defusing crises and allowing 'the oppressor, the exploiter and the affluent middle classes [to] become heroes providing the life jackets for distribution'. Again, useful material is provided, showing ways in which the Murdoch press, Amazon and others have used links with organizations such as the Disasters Emergency Committee to whitewash themselves by posing as 'big helpers'.

There is, though, also a shrill ultra-leftism that runs through this chapter, which echoes Žižek at his worst. Cremin quotes Terry Eagleton in relation to how a left-liberal 'social democratic eschatology' robs the working class of its hatred by positing the possibility of progress under capitalism. All true enough, save for the fact that, at present, capital is the only game in town. The logic of the Cremin/Žižek position re the 'crisis industry' appears to be that if the crisis is allowed to play out without 'liberal intervention' the starving masses will rise up. This is palpable nonsense, and obscures the possibility of a more nuanced response to the crisis industry, arguing for community control of the organization and distribution of emergency response – as illustrated in Naomi Klein's writings on Haiti or Rebecca Solnick's on the grassroots New Orleans response to Hurricane Katrina. Aside from

the deficiencies of the political proposals on offer in Cremin's writings on 'naked ethics', there remains, more generally, a facile element to the critique advanced of the 'ethical stance' of the Davos brigade. Simply put, as much as I'd like to see Bill Gates taxed until the pips squeak, and as much as I'd love to live long enough to see him and his kind dispossessed, in the interim I'd sooner he spent his fortune on AIDS relief than cocaine. It is true, as Cremin states, that 'capital absorbs, transforms and then rebrands critique, turning it into a commodity. Crisis, critique and consumption enter into a virtuous circle.' A politics of critique, though, without any thought towards practice, can just as easily run aground through its own contradictions, as through absorption or adoption by its enemy.

A further problem with *Capitalism's New Clothes* is that the sections on enjoyment and ecology appear merely to recycle the arguments advanced in, respectively, the sections on enterprise and ethics, with further illustrations of the same points. Again, Cremin writes well on the ways in which the 'crisis industry' around issues of ecology seeks to avoid the fact that 'the struggle to preserve the environment for human habitation is foremost a struggle against capitalism'. There is good material here, too, on the ways in which the likes of BP seek to put forward 'politically neutral' solutions to problems of their own creation. All of this is useful enough, but it does give rise to a feeling of an argument being pushed to the point of exhaustion. The problem with the book overall is that Cremin appears at times to lose any sense of his own voice. He posits, as a solution to the 'catastrophic crises' endemic to capitalism, a notion of 'iCommunism' as 'the psychic image of a society organized around the pleasure principle.... In iCommunism there is the Deleuze of productive desire, the Adorno of negative dialectics and John Holloway's idea of communising.' The problem, though, is that iCommunism comes across, in fact, as little more than a stitched-together notion intended to allow the author to cite as many currently hip academics as possible. Like so many around Žižek, Cremin similarly evades the problem of how one can reconcile rationally and coherently a critique that relies, on the one hand, upon a 'Lacanian' Marx who 'would argue that there is no intrinsic being as such and so alienation is something that can never be overcome' – and thus a capitalism rooted in a society which commands us not to repress our desires, but to 'enjoy the desire, you must because you can' – and, on the other, a Deleuzian politics of 'lines of flight', for which 'there is always the possibility to exceed the co-ordinates of any machine of capture.'

Deleuze and Guattari's ludic politics were conjured in explicit opposition to Lacan's pessimism, and, while it may well be possible to use elements of both in developing a critique of the way in which capitalism diverts and perverts desire, one cannot do so without seeking to resolve or at least acknowledge the real differences between them.

There is much about Cremin's book that is of real value, and his commitment to forging a politics which would aim to 'crush the system that inhibits and transforms desire for its own logic' gives his writing a bite that other similar texts lack. Ultimately, though, he comes up against the same problem as Žižek himself. The book flirts with a spectre it will not openly acknowledge. Writing on ecology, Cremin states: 'we need a political subject to do the dirty work ... There is no such agent within the climate change



discourse.' The absent agent hinted at throughout the text is clearly intended to be the working class. Elsewhere in the book Cremin commits to the 'power of the proletariat' but then defines the proletariat as 'men, women, students, immigrants, Jews, Christians, Muslims, homosexuals, peasants or social activists'. Committing to 'engaging in political projects that aim to seriously challenge the existing order' (as the 'Leninist' Žižek proclaims) has to include determining whether the working class as a political subject exists, and if so – and we are back to that necessary but never attempted need to repeat Marx's critique of political economy again – how the working class might now be defined, and how best to identify its political interests within the struggle against capitalism. Simply stating, as Cremin does, that the working class is, in effect, everybody, isn't a solution. Clearly, not all Jews or homosexuals are working class, even if they may have political interests in common. How such interests might be defined requires the critique that the Žižekian project only ever hints at.

**Nick Moss**

# EXHIBITION REVIEW

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## Squeegee

*Gerhard Richter: Panorama*, Tate Modern, London, 6 October 2011–8 January 2012.

The only comic moment in *Gerhard Richter: Panorama* comes in the form of a double portrait of the artist with his long-term friend and interlocutor Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, outside the doors of an art school, but titled as if emerging from a church post-nuptially. There's nothing particularly funny about two men getting married of course. Rather, the comic aspect comes in the form of the inescapability of the image itself.

A decade ago, Robert Storr's exhibition of Gerhard Richter at MoMA New York featured the same painting. Storr's 2002 show fashioned an alternative of sorts to the hitherto dominant account of the then 70-year-old, moving away from those critics who had sought to present Richter's choices of media as merely contingent in a broader neo-avant-gardist project driven by the photograph as found object or readymade. This take on Richter is epitomized, if not indeed initiated, by Buchloh. It was Buchloh's dialogues with Richter which, to a large extent, put the painter in digs in which he never actually seemed at home: the Frankfurt School. Indeed, there is something of the Pollock–Greenberg relationship here. The marriage was always dysfunctional, yet it did produce offspring – most notably in the publication of Richter's *Atlas* with its partial correspondences with Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas project.

As the well-known 1988 conversation between them shows, however, it was, paradoxically, Buchloh privileging the neo-Warburgian aspect of Richter's project which left no credible place for the artist's other concerns, reflected, most notably, in the increasingly large number of abstracts emerging during the course of that decade. This leads to accusations of cynicism, in turn pushing an increasingly contrary and obstinate painter to assert belief in content. Whereas Buchloh nihilistically instrumentalizes the paintings, aiming at the bankruptcy of the forms, Richter retreats into them, focusing instead on doubts of his own efficacy in the face of painting's putative transcendent capacity. It was Buchloh, also, who sought to describe Richter as 'the heir to an historically divided and fragmented situation, in which there was no pictorial strategy that had any real validity ... meditating on what was once possible' at the very same time as Richter himself sought to recoup Hans Sedlmayr. And this conjuring of ghosts is what clearly unites them, for if,

in its morbidity, retreat and self-absorption, Richter's practice has always been more tragically Barthesian than Benjaminian, then his principal leftist interlocutor has done little to change that.

In many ways, however, Storr's 2002 curation did show Richter in a light more germane to the artist's words, not the least because it showed just how inept the painter could be, and that made the work all the more interesting. Up until then there had been the sense that this was a practice as slick and peerlessly engineered as a Baader–Meinhof Wagen out-driving the cultural cops, with no space for error or miscalculation. However, as Storr seemed to recognize, such an account overlooked that which was becoming increasingly celebrated and sought after in Richter's oeuvre, namely his celebrations of colour and painterly abstraction, and the apparent embrace of the *reassurances* of genre, rather than any problematization of such. Storr's show celebrated a career of hard-won proficiency, not least by its inclusion of misfires such as sand added to oils to make a bad joke of a beach scene, lazy slurred photo pieces that weren't a patch on what Malcolm Morley had done at the same time, and heavy-handed opportunist stabs such as a maudlin pair of painted glass monochromes shaped something similar to how the World Trade Center looked, up until that Tuesday morning a few months earlier. There, Richter was, indeed, presented as a painter's painter, off-days and all. Nevertheless, this last point is not easily dismissed for the resonance it probably carries with a lot of artists working today. In a massively expanded commercial and institutional art world with its attendant pressures, Richter comes to represent certain ontological claims amidst the internal and external pressures to be a certain kind of artist: namely the putative necessity of studio time and studio practice, and the desire to apply individually honed craft skill in a manner seemingly relevant to the contemporary world. Among practitioners, as with painters such as Bacon or Freud, this is where the appeal of Richter's conservatism lies.

This is, effectively, where *Gerhard Richter: Panorama* show takes its cue. Over the course of fourteen rooms of Tate Modern, and spilling out onto the concourse, the show chronologically charts Richter's work through the early 1960s to the present as a series of

unmitigated triumphs. In Tate's website clip, its director, Nicholas Serota, states: 'For Baudelaire, Manet was the painter of modern life, and for me Richter was always the painter of modern life.' Misattribution aside (it was Constantin Guys, and *not* Manet, of whom Baudelaire made the claim), therein lies the rub, since in the course of this show, the contrast between Manet and Richter could not be more evident.

This is because, rather than comedically concretizing the false universals of genre and art history in the contingent particularities of medium, moment and context – as with, say, Manet's *Olympia* or, curiously



Gerhard Richter, *Cage (I)*, 2006, 290 x 290 cm (CR: 897-1)

enough, as an earlier incarnation of Jeff Wall managed to do with his *Blackpool Donkey* take on Stubbs's *Whistlejacket* – time and again Richter's oils assume an elevatory function. So, too, Richter's *Atlas*, of course: in marked contrast to Warburg's innovatory collection of popular mediations of works of high culture, Richter's latter-day project has gained its reputation on the exact inversion, an ultimately tragic vision in which the snapshot, with all its attendant cultural instabilities, transmutes into a putatively universal statement in oils about the human condition. In Richter, the family album is raided to ensure we all have an *Uncle Rudi*, snapped in his Nazi uniform, and we all have blond daughters, like *Betty*, turning preferentially towards our immortal abstractions rather than meeting our ageing gaze. Like insects trapped in amber, this mostly becomes a sequence of dead exquisites: mournful archetypes distilled from domestic life and tourist snaps, rather than the agencies and ruptures of photography per se. It is his masterpiece, *October 18, 1977*, one of the true great works of the last century, which remains the exception to this rule, precisely because its song turns inwards at the point

where it takes on that larger political tragedy, drawing it back to the deflationary and unlikely, whilst avoiding the single definitive image through awkward repetition and non-progressive sequence.

This essayistic aspect is celebrated in this retrospective, but for the most part Richter's fan-brushing and squeegee-ing often reads as no more than an increasingly cloying stylistic painterly conceit, which, rather like Turner's sulphurous smogs, detaches from its historical referent. As evident in the National Portrait Gallery exhibition in 2009, many rely upon a feathering back trick which might (just) be read as signifiers of the televisual or some strangely dot-free web-fed offset, so long as everyone present agrees. More often, now, it just looks teary-eyed. On those frequent occasions when a painting is more blurred or its blacks more dropped out than its photographic origin, there is an obstinate echo of Turner's claim that 'such things are, though you mayn't believe it'. Looking more the result of inebriation than mediation, the vertical slurs of *Demo* (1997), a picture of a PKK demonstration in Cologne, bear this out, as surely as the artist's insistence that he really did experience 'feelings to do with contemplation, remembering, silence and death' when knocking out the long sequence of candles 'n' skulls in the 1980s.

This is not the first show to contrive Richter the enigma (as in *Self Portrait*, 1996) as Richter the innovator by suggesting he 'raises questions'. There is an increasingly airless quality to the progression of rooms, ending, appropriately enough, in an enclosure of massive abstracts entitled *Cage*, a *homage* to John Cage. Perhaps by association this aims also to place Richter in a tradition. Nevertheless, the case that this is an artist who is still 'Questioning Painting' or 'the Limits of Vision' seems forced and unlikely. In the case of the former, there are black-and-white snaps of the surface of a painting, in Room 11, which, despite the blurb, actually don't look like 'landscapes' because the plane of focus and depth of field are wrong; in the latter, paintings derived from micrography and two of the artist's occasional forays into vitreous sculpture (Room 12) merely point to an occasional experiment, rather than a thought-out project of enquiry. This latter point is a shame: the glass and metal forms almost seem like apparatuses of some sort, and pushed further might have become interestingly madcap ocular contrivances. As it stands, it is increasingly difficult to see beyond the stultifying sense that this is a latter-day Vermeer's take on Warhol, without even the possibilities or iconoclasm of the inverse.

**John Timberlake**