Ariel on the border

Alejandro Arturo Villega, *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianopolis, 2014. 284 pp., £62.00 hb., £22.99 pb., 978 0 25301 248 7 hb., 978 0 25301 257 9 pb.

Alejandro Villega's new book is a philosophical interpretation of the philosophy emerging from Latin America since the early nineteenth century. Not intending to be comprehensive, but rather a *histoire à thèse*, the book tells a particular narrative about a shift in the philosophy of the region in thematic preoccupation and political commitment, spelled out in the second part of the title. For Vallega, there is a change of philosophical focus and topic that marks a political move, a displacement of thematic concern from questions of identity to questions of construction and enunciation from some putative 'outside'. The figures that Vallega discusses are mapped onto this movement and interpretation: other figures perhaps not so straightforwardly placed are ignored, like the important Argentines – philosopher Carlos Astrada, whose trajectory from Heidegger to Mao and beyond is illuminating, and the psychoanalytically innovative thinker León Rozitchner, whose work has appeared previously in *Radical Philosophy* (see *RP* 152, November/December 2008), or even Ernesto Laclau, whose thinking on hegemony and difference addresses the same questions that Vallega's cast do. Vallega puts down a marker for a future discussion of Rodolfo Kusch, already familiar to readers of this journal. Within these limits, the text provides a worthwhile exegesis of figures probably unfamiliar to anglophone readers, and offers a *parti pris* reading of what is to constitute the future of Latin American 'thinking', albeit one that might be strongly contested.

Vallega teaches at the University of Oregon, and is probably best known for his work on Heidegger and the question of exilic thought. This new text owes something to the transformations that Heidegger – in his phenomenological and post-*Kehre* totalizing ontological versions – has undergone in Spanish-speaking America, but is most indebted to the interventions (themselves initially Heideggerian) of the Argentine philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel and the Peruvian Aníbal Quijano with his problematic of 'coloniality in thought'. The centre of Vallega's text is a dialogue with these two figures and their displacement of the focus of Latin American philosophy from identity to 'radical exteriority', the fulcral but slightly opaque notion that organizes Vallega's own positions. 'Coloniality' and its antithesis 'radical exteriority' are the political and metaphysical pivots of the text and their articulation provide the programmatic element of Vallega's polemic.

But to begin at the beginning: what constitutes Latin American philosophy? In a way, such a question is of a piece with a central topos of Latin American culture: that is, the lack of ground for the unity of what is gathered together under the name. In Vallega's philosophical history this also links to the way in which philosophy as a master discourse has restricted what is to count as thought, and how 'thought' links to other forms of 'sensibility' (the terms are never quite clearly determined). Philosophy thus occupies an ambiguous place within a place that is ambiguously denoted. Vallega starts with Simón Bolívar, certainly not a philosopher in any disciplinary sense, and the problematic of identity. For Bolívar, Latin America is an in-between space, 'neither-nor', almost constitutively lacking in identity, but impelled to discover or construct one. What might constitute a Latin American philosophy thus becomes contaminated by the uncertainty of identity of the Latin American as such, an uncertainty that permeates much of the work of the later, post-independence period.

Vallega discusses a set of thinkers all preoccupied with what is proper to Latin America and to any philosophy that might think its experience – Leopoldo Zea, Ernesto Mayz Vallilla, Augusto Salazar Bondy (all early-twentieth-century figures) – and shows that their preoccupation with European models and the imprecision and incompletion of Latin American identity condemns them to condemning Latin American philosophy as mere mimicry – a false image of the real thing that lies elsewhere – but also to condemning Latin Americans to impropriety because what is their own is unavailable for thought. Latin American philosophy here lives out the fate of Latin America itself – dependency. In setting out this account, Vallega already announces a subsidiary theme: Latin American philosophy must begin from

'lived experience' or the Latin American 'situation'. But he qualifies this with a concern that this culture not be the colonized experience registered in precisely those mimetic moments that merely mark the extension of 'Western' forms.

Here the work of Dussel is central. Dussel begins from the system of (modern) thought and knowledge that condemns Latin America to the secondary and derivative by mounting a critique of its systematicity, showing how that will to totality depends on the exclusion of its others, first and foremost the other that was the world prior to the conquest of the Americas, a diremption that founded rationality on the denial of rationality to the barbarous other. It is the effect of what Spivak calls 'epistemological violence' that produces inauthenticity: what would be authentic is devalued in order to strengthen the source of value. For Dussel the system of modernity excludes and occludes the others it depends on, inverting appearances such that dependence is now *the* characteristic of the other. Dussel engages with the thought that emerges from Europe – in some sense from Europe's own critics: Heidegger, Ricœur, Levinas and later Apel and Habermas – to criticize that thought, and to open it up, to 'expose' it to its constitutive others. Vallega sees this move as substantially positive, in that it illuminates the forms of exclusion that operate within modernity, but worries that Dussel remains within the limits of the system in that he only imagines an extension of that system to include the excluded, even as he demands a positioning within a radical exteriority, a space outside the conceptual framework that hierarchizes a (restricted) version of rationality.

For Quijano, the 'coloniality of power' is the systematic subalternization of the non-European world after 1492, with domination constructed through the installation of a system of labour and racial hierarchy justified by a hegemonic ideology that exalts the centre against the periphery, a subject of power and calculative rationality against an object of exploitation and depredation. In Vallega's terms an *ego conquero* precedes and founds the *ego cogito*. For Quijano, there is no outside to this system: the world is produced by the monological conquering Western subject as it constructs a linear and unitary form of time, whose central conceit, 'progress', organizes the multiple potential histories of the world and reduces them to a single line of march. Critique is possible but only immanently.

So, for Vallega, the displacement of philosophical questioning from what it is to be Latin American to how it might be possible to go beyond the categories that have constituted the Latin American are Dussel and Quijano's critical contributions, but they remain this side of the radical exteriority that would be the place of enunciation of a trans-rational thinking. He sees this exteriority limned in the work of the contemporary Colombian thinker Santiago Castro Gómez, whose untranslated work *Crítica de la razón latinoamericana* (Critique of Latin American Reason) begins with a critique of the very demand for a Latin American reason, showing how that demand maintains the principles that subordinate the historical experience of the many histories within Latin America. Explicitly adopting Foucault's method of critical ontology, Castro Gómez looks to the multiple 'little histories' that might exceed (and dissolve) the grand historical narratives with their exclusions and subjugations: a move to the singularities and particularities that lie outside, but also to hybrid forms that mark singular trajectories. In a critique of Hardt and Negri, he notes that the subalternized knowledges that undergo recognition in the current phase of capitalist development are differences that are only recognized pragmatically or instrumentally: an outside that can be further colonized to yield value for capital, as in traditional plant cultures and their mobilization by biotech. The asymmetry here has to be challenged by an 'epistemological democracy' which would counter the situation where 'no dialogue is possible between a Harvard trained biologist and a Putumayo [Peruvian] shaman'.

For Vallega, however, the exemplary thinkers are those who move to a 'de-colonial thinking' that at the limit attempt to delink from the conceptual forms that apportion value, rationality and domination. These are the Puerto Rican Nelson Maldonado Torres, and the two contemporary Argentines Walter Mignolo and María Lugones. Maldonado Torres sees the outside as constituted by the violence and deprivation that mark the excluded, and sees inclusion as the entry of 'enslaved subjectivities into thought', Vallega glossing this as the transformations effected by the 'pre-theoretical sensibility' that provides space for insurrection. Mignolo and Lugones seek to think from this outside, both sharing a concern for a 'broken site of enunciation' that in its fracture provides the place where hegemonic discourses and resistant discourses play out simultaneously. For Mignolo, modernity's discourses produce subaltern subjects, but these latter are never entirely caught; rather, there is some 'outside' that informs 'life' and its forms, and allows a contestatory or resistant

moment. These sites are the 'colonial difference', places where it is possible to say something beyond the mere repetitions of the system. In Lugones's case, a 'decolonial feminism' would engage with the colonial imposition of the gender system and look to specific historical situations that would provide ways out: the forms of Western thought that mould gender relations can be countered by other experiences of the body articulated, say, in Aymara or Quechua relational accounts.

As Vallega finishes his conspectus, he defines his own contribution to decolonial thinking as a 'decolonial aesthetics' that would look to the 'pre-rational … pre-theoretical' as the site of a flight beyond the coloniality of power. Rather than immanent critique which remains at the level of instrumental rationality, or a dialogical critique which only includes the excluded as another moment of the expansion of the Same, Vallega proposes the generation of decolonial images to set against the dominance of images of the subaltern provided by coloniality (here the discussion centres on a reading of Fanon's works, especially *Black Skin, White Masks*) and the incitement and strengthening of new forms of sensibility to provide sites of contestation. The book closes with a discussion of some instances of art practice that might exemplify such a strategy.

Nadín Ospina, *Crítico extático (Ecstatic Critic)*, carved stone, 1993

As this schematic account indicates, the ground that *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority* covers is extensive, and the text is a dense, at times repetitive, working-through of material that will be unfamiliar (and occasionally linguistically inaccessible) to anglophone audiences. Its interrogation of its own founding notions is illuminating and it raises philosophically rich questions about the occidental tradition(s) of thought. If philosophy finds its *fons et origo* in the classical Greek experience, and its canonical expressions within a tradition and disciplinary form that constantly reiterates and rearticulates that moment, what does it do with thought that emerges elsewhere? Obviously, part of the critique in terms of coloniality is entirely apposite as philosophy consistently derogates as non-thought – superstition, religion, anthropology, or mere unreflective culture – traditions that are articulated otherwise. But does that make all such traditions equally valid? The arguments from and about relativism are banally ubiquitous here: what is more germane is how the field of encounter can be constructed.

The strong 'colonial thought' argument is that all of Western thought is systematically organized around power: that is, there is no real dissent within that tradition (only its appearance) – it is all of a piece and has no critical or emancipatory potential. Western thought is a totality and totalitarian. Hence the drive to a 'radical exteriority'. But that exteriority cannot be accessed by any of the categories deployed by the totalizing subject: *ex hypothesi* this would be merely to extend its power. To be truly radical, this exteriority has to be absolutely different, but how to characterize this without appropriating it? This is a question that Vallega explicitly raises: 'How does a thinking from below arise without being determined by the systems of power and knowledge that have organized philosophical discourse…?' Vallega vacillates: at times, it is the 'life world' that looks familiar in Habermasian terms; at times it is 'people's lives' that 'take their orientation from their specific historicity'; at times it is a 'listening intensively to life'; at times it is the pre-linguistic, pre-rational space, 'a life in the flesh, in corporeal, existential and affected dispositions situated at the limit of fact and reason' that provide this thinking. However, the link between the silent other and its enunciation is poorly explicated. This starts to look like a fairly traditional

inversion of the valences of rationalism (echoing the eminently European Kristeva's *chora*) voiced by a dissatisfied representative of that rationalism, who is tempted to be the voice for the subaltern, or at least a voice of the desiderata that would make the subaltern subaltern. Exposure to exteriority within a fractured locus of enunciation doesn't quite do the required 'radical' work either: the constructive and resistant moments are necessarily co-present, and how that fractured site develops is underdeveloped in Mignolo et al. Much of this reminds one of the aporias of Adorno and Horkheimer's vision of Enlightenment, and their difficulty in seeing anything Other outside of its voracious digestive potential.

One problem may well be the model of power as coloniality, with its binary and exclusive articulation (the occasion for the Foucauldian critique of Frankfurt School-style understandings of power): to what extent does the 'development' of Latin America deploy other forms of productive power on the back of and in place of the diremptive forms that characterize conquest? What is striking about Vallega's text is how few examples of 'delinking' there are and how many of them are from within a traditional art world context. Now this may illustrate the difficulty of articulation of the Other – the problem that Spivak encounters after 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and her recourse to the (untranslated) indigeneous languages of India – or providing a space for the Other to speak, but it may also illustrate a prior construction of the dissident aesthetic as 'art' within its Western self-understanding.

Nevertheless the questions raised in and by *Latin American Philosophy from Identity to Radical Exteriority* are important, as are the ways in which the particularities hymned by Vallega might encounter particularities from elsewhere – the post-colonial archive not exhausted by Fanon. Is there something of a residual narcissism in Dussel and Quijano's privileging of the Latin American instance, and a deeply problematic theodicy in their seeing the Conquest as an originary and seamless imposition of system? Mignolo, for one, tries to make delinking links in his *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, but it is not always clear in his texts where decoloniality differs from assertions of neo-nativism; that is, a version of exteriority that in fact contains more than traces of its antagonist, and the instance of Islam is always a difficult one, as the most successful and problematic resurgence of a subjugated thought. More needs to be said here to avoid the suspicion of ultra-radicality obscuring what might be real engagement with traditions beyond the repetitions of Occidentalism.

Philip Derbyshire

Weaponizing life

Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014. 512 pp., £45.00 hb., 978 0 23116 340 8.

Hunger striking as a tool of protest and resistance has become widespread in prisons and detention facilities, from Guantánamo Bay to prisoners, asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in diverse locales around the globe subject to cellular isolation and panoptic surveillance, for whom every aspect of life is managed by a state. At the same time, self-destructive acts such as Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in 2011, considered to have sparked a series of popular uprisings across the Arab world, can alter existing political dynamics in profound ways. Banu Bargu's new book places the 'death fast struggle' in Turkey from around 2000–2007 in this context of the growing use of self-destructive tactics of protest against the state's power over life and death. In Turkey, thousands of people were involved in this struggle between leftist groups and the state in which 122 people died, mostly of self-inflicted deaths. While Bargu extensively chronicles and analyses the dynamics of the death fast struggle, *Starve and Immolate* is more than a rigorously documented account of a major resistance movement; it is a complex and erudite, yet lucid, theoretical analysis of the politics of life and death that draws upon, but ultimately moves beyond (among others), Foucault's and Agamben's readings of sovereignty and biopolitics to make a major contribution to thinking about relations of power and resistance in contemporary society.

The weaponization of life, according to Bargu, is 'a tactic of resorting to corporeal and existential practices of struggle, based on the technique of self-destruction, in order to make a political statement or advance political goals'. Hunger striking, self-immolations and suicide attacks have often

been theorized in either religious discourses of 'martyrdom' or in instrumentally rationalist terms. However, the failure of these approaches when applied to secular groups, and particularly to forms of 'asymmetrical warfare', according to Bargu, lies in the failure to recognize the specificity of this form of self-destructive violence vis-à-vis other forms of resistance. Bargu, drawing on Fanon and Benjamin, defends an analysis of the *form* of self-destructive violence as having a distinctive political and ethical effect that must be analysed by examining the power relations in which these tactics are situated.

Bargu begins this task by providing a reading of theorists of sovereignty and biopower, particularly Foucault, and to a lesser extent Agamben, taking as her point of departure the theses, first, that life is the object of rule in modern regimes of power, and, second, that, as such, death is outside of the boundaries of political rule. What could have been a perfunctory recitation of the key points in what is by now a much-discussed literature is made fresh again through Bargu's impressive skill at merging a well-structured theoretical discussion with extensive political and ethnographic research. Bargu frames her discussion of the strengths and also inadequacies of Foucault's and Agamben's approaches to sovereign power and biopower through the two contrasting 'death events' of Damiens (bloodily dismembered for treason, and Foucault's exemplar of sovereign violence in *Discipline and Publish*) and death-faster Mehmet, who slowly wasted away on a diet of sugar water, salt and vitamin B_1 amidst placards proclaiming revolutionary messages including 'Long Live Our Death Fast Resistance'. In so doing, Bargu argues against the tendencies of theorists of governmentality to construct a totalizing narrative in which the possibilities of resistance are at best undefined, or collapse into an embrace of biopolitics in the struggle for greater welfare. Bargu's reading of Foucault finds space within his own theory for a conception of resistance, particularly within the paradox of the exercise of both sovereign power and techniques of biopolitics.

Bargu proposes a concept of biosovereignty – an emergent, contradictory assemblage of both sovereignty and biopolitics – the distinguishing feature of contemporary power regimes. This builds on Foucault's work on the seemingly contradictory coexistence of thanatopolitics and biopolitics (a politics *of* life and death and politics *over* life) and the insistence that neither sovereignty nor discipline nor security is sufficient to define contemporary power regimes. Bargu thus also critiques Agamben's transhistorical formulation of the entwinement of sovereignty and biopower while suggesting that biosovereignty is an emergent assemblage that is dependent upon local articulations of power and contestation that must be analysed in their concreteness.

In reference to current work on political resistance and 'the body', Bargu insists that the body is a conduit through which the weaponization of life works as a political tactic, but that the weaponization of life cannot be reduced to the corporeality of the body. The body is a means of staging a protest, but, paradoxically, not an empty vessel for achieving political aims; in the self-destructive acts of hunger strike until death and self-immolation it is only though the destruction of the body that this is accomplished. As such, the actions of self-destruction defy the distinction between means and ends as well as annihilating instrumental rationality. This last point is related to Bargu's central argument concerning necroresistance, as well as explaining why she chooses to refer to these tactics as a weaponization of life rather than weaponization of the body. Here, Bargu's work shifts from the theoretical concerns of one of her inspirations, Allen Feldman's *Formations of Violence* (1991), which focused on bodies as the locus of power, both in the materialization of bodies in the Northern Ireland struggle, especially the prison environment, as well as bodies as the places for what Feldman describes as the 'reversal and redirection of power'.

Necroresistance, as a specific modality of resistance that forces life into a weapon, is a form of what Foucault referred to as counter-conduct, a form of conduct that is oppositional but operates on the same terrain that was brought into being by biosovereign assemblages. Bargu locates the growing prevalence of this form of resistance in the biopoliticization of sovereign power. Furthermore, it is not a resistance *of* bare life but a resistance *to* bare life. Contra Agamben, Bargu argues that the practice of the weaponization of life involved in the death fast struggle, 'on the one hand … usurps the power of life and death from the state, thereby constituting an active challenge to sovereign power; on the other hand, it operates on a discursive and practical terrain that is enabled by the biopoliticization of sovereignty, one that mimics its delineation of life as the object of power but responds by its inversion.' The concept of necroresistance is where Bargu departs from the theoretical framework that inspires her biopolitical analysis of the prison struggles and the weaponization of life. Necroresistance is the politicization of

death that can appear disruptive not just because it contests the state, but because the biopoliticization of sovereign power makes death a site of resistance.

Combining form and function, the structure of the book mirrors Bargu's argument that forms of power and resistance not only give rise to each other but must be understood as an emergent assemblage, as the chapters move between the perspective of state power and the resistance movement in order to 'cast power and resistance both in a binary opposition and as complementary parts of the same story'. In chapter 2, Bargu traces the trajectory of how prisons came to be a locus of struggle in Turkey in which the state saw itself involved in a crisis of sovereignty over its own prisons. Building on Weber's definition of the state as the sole purveyor of legitimate force, Bargu argues that the state can also be theorized as the sole recipient of political self-sacrifice, which is disputed by the self-destruction of participants of the death fast struggle. (Here Bargu's argument may be read in conversation with another recent work, K.M. Fierke's *Political Self-Sacrifice* of 2013, which focuses on self-destruction as an 'act of speech' to communicate a political message of injustice and the process of contestation over the meaning of such acts as 'martyrdom' or 'criminality'.) The threat presented by the 'crowd' in the prison, particularly due to its spatial organization in dormitory-style wards, was both of the state's inability to enact sovereign power in its quintessential spaces of punishment, and of the state's ability to ensure the safety of those under its care in prisons as exemplified by the necropolitical resistance which undermined the state's rationale for its own authority.

Chapters 3 and 4 each narrate the story of the 'prison struggles' in Turkey from opposing sides in fairly exhaustive detail: first from the evolution of the biosovereign Turkish state, then from the necroresistance of the prisoners and death-fasters. Bargu traces the process of the state from 'making law' (instrumentalizing the law on behalf of sovereign power to differentiate, rank and hierarchize prison populations, and treating political prisoners different from 'ordinary' prisoners' in the name of the well-being of the prison population), 'making war' in the state's invasion of its own prison to restore sovereignty, named 'Operation Return to Life' (which resulted in widespread abuses against prisoners, injuries and the deaths of two soldiers and dozens of prisoners), and forced feeding and other medical interventions for death fasters. From law to war, the last element of this process was 'making peace': among other reforms, issuing pardons and discharging prisoners at the brink of death. Bargu argues that even this turn to peace is part of the process of biosovereignization, as it re-establishes the state's tarnished sovereignty on the grounds of ensuring the prisoners' 'right to live'; as well as preserving the state's status as sole receiver of political self-sacrifice, as prisoners who died from self-destructive protest outside the prison would then be unrelated to the state. In language that will resonate with readers following the hunger strikes at Guantánamo Bay, Bargu describes how security operations ultimately continued warfare against prisoners by 'saving' their lives in forced medical intervention. In the words of then prime minster Ecevit, 'This struggle is the enterprise of protecting and saving terrorists from their own terror.'

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to, respectively, an exploration of what Bargu describes as the *theologization* of the Marxist politics of the extra-parliamentary, revolutionary left in Turkey and of the complex and sometimes contradictory politics that make up the form of necropolitical resistance. Arguing that the collective experience of the prison was crucial in bringing together a highly divided mosaic of leftist groups to share in the joint effort of the death fast, Bargu charts the ways in which the secular morality of Marxism became theologized – that is, made into something worth sacrificing for, through the use of symbols and rituals. Chapter 6 collects together statements from those involved in the death-fast struggle, including from Bargu's own interviews, to bear on the question of how the death-fast struggle was understood and articulated by participants. In so doing, Bargu foregrounds the agency and self-understanding of participants themselves; a crucial part of Bargu's critique of Agamben's concept of bare life as depoliticized life. Participants in death-fast struggles made use of a sometimes contradictory language of human rights in terms of their resistance to their prison conditions (especially those of solitary confinement as torture) that are supposed to be forbidden in liberal democratic regimes, of Marxism and anti-capitalist struggle in which the cellular separation of prisoners is emblematic of neoliberalism, and of an act of refusal and struggle against state sovereignty biopolitics: dying on their own terms and depriving the state of the right to take their lives.

In her conclusion, Bargu attempts to assess the troubling legacy of the 'human weapons' who have authored their own deaths, noting that both in terms

of the stated objectives of the movement and in the expressive elements of the weaponization of life, the record is ambiguous at best, with few concrete victories but the achievement of bringing greater awareness of the underside of Turkey's democracy, whose authoritarian tendencies have also been met with widespread protest by citizens in recent years. The greater impact, as Bargu recognizes, may be that of a worldwide constellation of practices of the weaponization of life and spectacles of violent self-destruction that reveal in diverse contexts how certain forms of violence have become normalized.

Lauren Wilcox

Watery deep

Giorgio Agamben and Monica Ferrando, *The Unspeakable Girl*, trans. Leland de la Durantaye and Annie Julia Wyman, Seagull Books, London, New York and Calcutta, 2014. 150 pp., £17.50 hb., 978 0 8574 2 083 1.

Giorgio Agamben's recent publications have been outwardly occupied in large measure with medieval Christian theology and a philosophical history of the Church, matters reminiscent of late Foucault. In March 2009, speaking in Notre-Dame Cathedral in the presence of the Bishop of Paris and other Church officials, he delivered a kind of homily in which, while briefly summarizing his interpretation of the *kairos* as 'now time' in his study of the Pauline letters, *The Time that Remains* (2000; 2005), he challenged the clergy to recover their messianic vocation amidst 'the complete juridification and commodification of human relations'. 'Nowhere on earth today', he told his audience, 'is a legitimate power to be found. Even the powerful are convinced of their own illegitimacy.' (The talk has been translated into English as *The Church and the Kingdom*, 2012.) He made the point more satirically a few years earlier in an interview with the German magazine *Literaturen*, when he remarked on the conclave to elect a new pope in April 2005: 'During the recent events in the Vatican, I rather had the impression we were watching mummies presiding at their own exhumation.'

In this interview from June 2005, Agamben refers to Benjamin's famous image of the blotting pad in *The Arcades Project*, emblem of an invisible theological saturation, to explain his own attitude: 'I think that only someone who has come to terms with the metaphysical, religious, theological paradigm has access really to the present situation, including the political situation.... My books are absolutely not theological gestures in themselves but rather confrontations with theology.' In a subsequent text, *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2007; 2011), he referred to Benjamin's reopening of what Ernst Troeltsch once called 'the eschatological bureau', and to Mallarmé's 'a-theological (or rather, theo-alogical) liturgy' as constitutive for modern lyric poetry. But studies of 'pagan' culture and its afterlives and of specifically aesthetic matters (image in literature, dance, film) continue alongside genealogical analyses of liturgy, monasticism and divine economy. In 2014, after bringing out, the year before, concise meditations on the eschatological theme (written on the occasion of Benedict XVI's abdication of the papacy) and on the legally unresolved trial of Jesus before Pilate, he published a collection of essays taking its title from the lead essay, 'The Fire and the Story', which argues for the provenance of the classic novel from the mystery religions of late antiquity and their ritual of initiation. This was followed, towards the end of the year, by the appearance of *L'uso dei corpi* (*The Use of Bodies*), the final weighty volume in the *Homo Sacer* series.

At issue in this extended atheological or post-theological appropriation of theology is actually a philosophical concern: nothing less than the transformation of the classical ontology of substance and the ascendancy of the paradigm of operativity in modern thought. Instead of a conception of being as sovereign stasis, we are confronted today, formally at least since Kant, with a conception of being as having-to-be. What is distinctive about Agamben's presentation of this story is the way he highlights the role of Judaic-Christian concepts like creation and free will in helping to bring about a sense of being – a temporalization and historicization of being – that dissolves the unified grounded cosmos of the pagan tradition. Associated specifically with early Christian texts, early Christianity being more charismatic than dogmatic, the 'messianic world' is evoked in terms of eventism: it is 'not a world of substance and qualities, not a world in which the grass is green, the sun is warm, and the snow is white. No, it is not a world of predicates ... but a world of indivisible events, in which ... I am transported and displaced in the snow's-being-white and in the sun's-being warm.' Similarly, the liturgy of hours, in its original construction, is not a matter of unquestioning obedience – the Church, still tied to simple subject–object thinking, has got it all wrong – but of living the rule

in one's own daily form of life, thereby deactivating it as something external and fixed. Starting from this historical unmooring of substance and identity in a modal or effectual ontology, Agamben proceeds to demonstrate in lively detail the pervasive, if generally subterranean, legacy of theological categories in a modernity in which all that is left of God is the watery deep. The task for philosophy, he proposes, is to deconstruct these categories.

In *The Time that Remains* Agamben had invoked Heidegger's lecture course of 1920–21, 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion', in which the future thinker of *Ereignis* touches on the *kairos–chronos* distinction, remarking that 'the contracted, encapsulated temporality is constitutive for Christian religiosity', and, apropos the 'urChristian facticity' said to be at stake in Paul's letters, underlines the function of the *hōs mē* ('as not') in 1 Corinthians (7:20–31). Focusing on the antitheses in verses 30–31, 'those buying as not possessing, and those using the world as not using it up', Agamben likewise affirms the centrality of the 'as not' (not to be confused with the 'as if') to the concept of messianic life. But, unlike Heidegger, and in opposition to a conventional view of this passage as acquiescing in established authority, he stresses Paul's explicit reference to property under Roman law and contrasts to it Paul's Jewish-zealot notion of messianic use. The messianic vocation can never be an object of ownership; it is not a right; nor does it institute any sort of rank or estate. It is a generic potentiality, to be used without being owned. It points to an unsayable central vacuity fuelling the machine of power and glory (the society of the spectacle), a central inoperativity in all operation. Messianic praxis means expropriation of juridical–factical property – circumcised/uncircumcised, free/slave, male/female – under the form of the 'as not'. To render inoperative the theological and political apparatus of identity – identity as ownership – would be to yield a space for thinking and practice 'beyond economy and beyond glory'. Agamben offers the analogy of a poem, which, in deactivating the communicative and informational functions of language, opens the prospect of a new linguistic use, a relation to what escapes us.

It is in the context of this ongoing confrontation with 'theology' – which in some respects reminds one of what Heidegger and Derrida called 'metaphysics' – that we should read Agamben's short study of the Eleusinian mystery cult of ancient Athens, *The Unspeakable Girl*, which appeared in Italian in 2010 and is now available in English. One gets beyond a

historical phenomenon only by going back behind it. Something productively inexpressible – a relation to the ungraspable – is at issue here as well in the nocturnal autumnal celebrations of the god's fierce lust, the mother's sorrow that turns to laughter at the 'obscene', and the chaste young girl at play among the flowers who is brutally raped and carried away to become queen of the underworld. Agamben's title, *La ragazza indicibile*, is a translation of the phrase *arrētos korē*, thought to refer to Persephone in a lost play by Euripides. From what we know, the Eleusinian rituals were conducted as a sort of pantomime and dance, with accompanying chants and formulaic exchanges. At the beginning, a herald would command silence. Agamben emphasizes that it is not a matter of some secret doctrine about which the initiates had to keep quiet. He quotes the German classicist Erwin Rohde: 'It was impossible to reveal "the mystery" because there was nothing to reveal.' In other words, the mystery cult should not be seen as the expression of a putative 'natural religion' tied to the decline and renewal of the vegetation. (Here he takes exception particularly to the Hungarian classical scholar Karoly Kerényi, whose 1941 volume, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, written in collaboration with Carl Jung, nonetheless figures prominently in his own account.) Rather than an allegory of the seed, what was really

at stake, it is claimed, was 'an experience of the unknowable – or, at least, the *discursively* unknowable … a way of undergoing, a giving of self and a completion of thought.' He quotes a fragment of Aristotle that distinguishes between two types of knowing, the didactic (or discursive) and the initiatory (Kerényi refers to 'wordless knowing'), and that says of the initiates that they 'do not have to learn something but that, after having become capable, they experience and are disposed to it'. This second mode of *theoria* thus involves the conservation (*soteria*) of potentiality. (A transformation of the archaic fertility motif?)

In the course of the six chapters making up this well-designed little book (handsomely illustrated by Monica Ferrando, who also provides a useful selection from ancient sources at the back), Agamben touches on various intertwined topics: the relation of the mystery cults to European painting, to early Hegel, and to the image philosophies of Warburg and Benjamin; the essentially comic, not tragic, character of the Eleusinian rituals (is the distinction really proper here?); the Dionysian animality or monstrosity of the triple goddess and the Medusan aspect of the *korē* or divine child in particular; and, finally, the research of Odo Casel, a twentieth-century German Benedictine monk, for whom Christian liturgy was in essence not doctrine but mystery. Although elsewhere (*Opus Dei*, 2012; 2013) Agamben examines in more detail the so-called Liturgical Movement inspired by the lexical studies of Casel and his students, and the incontestable lines of filiation linking the sacramental liturgy and pagan mysteries, here he stresses the difference between the realm of certainty in which the evolved Christian sacrament operates and the originally 'precarious' salvation – quoting *The Golden Ass* – supposed to be effected in the performance of the mysteries. The citation of Apuleius' novel occasions reflection on 'the essential connection' between the novel form and the mystery cults: 'If there is somewhere today where an echo of the ancient mysteries can … be heard, it is not in the liturgical splendor of the Catholic Church but in the extreme life resolutions offered by the novel form.… Whether it be Lucius in *The Golden Ass* or Isabel Archer in James's *Portrait of a Lady*, the novel places us before a *mysterion* in which life itself is at once that which initiates us and that into which we are initiated.'

The unspeakable girl is just such a threshold phenomenon: a zone of indistinction between youth and age, male and female, animality and divinity. She is life itself in so far as 'it does not allow itself to be "spoken," inasmuch as it cannot be defined by age, family, sexual identity or social rule'. The silence of the initiates – and everyone, including slaves, was eligible for initiation, so long as they had not defiled themselves through a blood crime – is thus comparable to what Agamben, in *Means without End* (1996; 2000), calls the silence of philosophy, the intimation of what cannot be said; that is, the 'exposure of the being-in-language of human beings – pure gesturality.' Here, with this quick recollection of the concept of ontological word ('book of life') in biblical tradition, the pathos of the unsayable deepens. For the sphere of pure gesturality, 'pure means' (Benjamin's term in 'Critique of Violence') – the sphere of initiation – is intelligible as a politics whose end is justice without law.

Howard Eiland

Disappeared

Alexei Gan, *Constructivism*, trans. Christina Lodder, Editorial Tenov, Barcelona, 2014. 178 pp., €25.00 pb., 978 8 49392 312 9.

One of the implications of this belated translation of Alexei Gan's 1922 manifesto *Constructivism* is that it has taken around ninety years for the materials for understanding the Soviet avant-garde as a whole to be available in English. Information came in trickles for decades, with misunderstandings, mistranslations and anachronisms abounding – ranging from minor mistakes (the presentation of wildly fractious and internally divided groups as a unified movement) to major (the presentation of Constructivists as 'utopian' aesthetes, way out of their depth in politics). The work of Catherine Cooke and Christina Lodder in the 1980s made the largest contribution to providing a more accurate account, but Lodder's translation of the first major manifesto of Soviet Constructivism is a milestone in understanding just exactly what was happening among these small groups of ex-painters, ex-sculptors, ex-poets, designers, directors and architects.

Alexei Gan is one of the lesser-known of these – with none of the 'iconic' fame of a Lissitzky, Popova or Rodchenko – which is curious given his centrality to the movement in all its facets. As Lodder points out in her introduction, his work spanned anarchist and Proletkult theatre in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, close collaboration with Rodchenko and Stepanova in the First Working Group

of Constructivists, and the editorship and design of two journals – *Kino-Fot*, a short run 1922–23 film magazine that contained issues on Charlie Chaplin, Thomas Edison and the first publication of Dziga Vertov's manifestos, and the more successful *Sovremennaya Architektura* (*SA*), which ran for four years from 1926 to 1930 as the main organ of Soviet modernist architecture. He also wrote what may have been the fullest and most radical statement of what Constructivism was, what its aims were and how it perceived itself. One reason why Gan is not so well known is that he wasn't – unlike a Rodchenko or a Lissitzky, no matter how reluctant – in any way an 'artist', and his works cannot be consumed in the same manner. As a designer, his main contribution was in terms of simple and legible layouts; as an architect, he designed small, demountable wooden kiosks. He made films, but unlike the montaged documentary work of his wife, Esfir Shub, they have not survived. His theatre scripts, for Moscow's Mass Action group, are also lost, and Lodder speculates that this is because they were intended to be improvised by their proletarian actors.

Constructivism was written at the point when the post-Civil War consolidation of Bolshevik power seemed to the avant-garde to coincide with a loss of territory to traditional art. One of Gan's Mass Action spectacles for May Day 1920 in Moscow was rejected in favour of a production of Sophocles. Gan's jibes at 'the petit-bourgeois pince-nez' of fine art is interpreted by Lodder as a jibe at the pince-nez-wearing Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky, who sponsored the Constructivists as merely one of many fellow-travelling art factions rather than as the definitive expression of communism in the field of culture. For Gan, this showed a defective understanding of Marxism:

> The relationship between the substructure and the superstructure, i.e the change in the superstructure as a result of changes in the relations of production – all this is forgotten as soon as a communist confronts beauty. *He becomes strange and submissive*.... [I]n the field of art we are turning back to epochs that were less perfect, more crude, and in essence extremely anti-communist.

This is explained by the fact that 'we lack Marxist literacy ... as soon as we approach art, we stop being Marxists.' He recommends not that party members become more sophisticated aesthetes, but that they take their Marxism more seriously. 'Our so-called ideologists insist on universal human values', Gan writes, and much of *Constructivism* is an attack on the very notion of any universal, eternal or imperishable values whatsoever, particularly with respect to culture.

Gan's self-designed layouts, manipulating standard printers' typefaces, boxes and block borders, organize dense passages of argumentation, quotation (from Marx, Bukharin and Bogdanov) and interjected, graphically emphasized slogans and declarations, which are mostly on the same theme. 'Art is indissolubly linked: to theology, to metaphysics, to mysticism. Death to art!' This total rejection of any continuation of 'art' is intrinsic to Gan's definition of Constructivism, and explains why the least interesting aspect of the book is its short outlining of the Constructivist trinity of 'tectonics, faktura and construction', meaning, roughly, a preoccupation with flux, material and structure. It was never clear that this in itself would produce 'the communist expression of material structures', and indeed the book ends with a short denunciation of 'western Constructivists' – naming *L'Esprit Nouveau*, De Stijl and *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* – for turning Constructivism back into 'art'. Lodder quotes Stepanova frustratedly declaring that 'Gan knows nothing about art', and this perhaps is what made him a better Constructivist.

What really differentiates the two strands of Constructivism is a question of methodology, and here *Constructivism* stands as one of the first steps in a sequence that continues with the work of Sergei Tretiakov, Brecht's work on film and radio, and Benjamin's 'The Author as Producer', where art is to be abolished for the sake of its democratic communist dissolution into collectives using reproductive technology to produce their own culture for their own purposes. In this context, the denunciation of 'art' that runs through the entire book is not that of Dada, which denounced art while producing, exhibiting and selling artworks, but a call for something quite different.

What was necessary was 'to establish a scientific approach to the business of constructing new buildings and services that will be able to meet the demands of communist culture in its transitional state, i.e., in its flux'. Accordingly, Gan advocates that Constructivists move on from their laboratory experiments, such as the lightweight sculptures exhibited in 1920 by the First Working Group of Constructivists, in favour of 'real experiments within life itself', as 'Communism is essentially dynamic, and its first and most simple task is to realize a planned order and consciousness throughout the whole social and economic activity

of the masses themselves.' Gan still believes this will be done by, not for or at or against the masses, and that the architect's role is as their instrument. The divisions of labour that are necessary within that are not something he troubles himself over.

Needless to say, in this turn from 'sculpture' to architecture, the historical city is to be destroyed completely and utterly, as 'our modern capitalist cities or cities of petty bourgeois provincial comfort have turned out to be the staunch allies of counter revolution'. Its squares are too small for mass actions, its housing is too small, its offices too poky and subdivided for the activities of Soviet organizations, the buildings in the streets are too 'awkward, varied and bulky', and the 'eclecticism of architectural forms' is too 'subjective and tendentious'. In general, 'the sign of private property protrudes at every step', as do the 'temples of the ruling religion', which 'infect the young with [their] spirituality'. Only the 'communist city' as expressed by the Constructivists will be able to 'create a clear idea of communal property in citizens'. In exchange for this will be the city of the communist flux: 'it is essential to teach ourselves how to build so that the dynamism of the product produced will not be an abstract or illusionary dynamism for visual impression, but an authentic dynamism of concrete movement'. In practice, what this means is that 'if communism needs a building for today it must be provided, bearing in mind that tomorrow it will require the next form, and that this subsequent form must be supplied, so that it will not replace yesterday's form but supplement it, and in turn supplement the next form required.' So the communist city as Gan conceives it will be in a perpetual state of planned, consciously anticipated change. His conception of communist architecture would be fulfilled much more in the kiosks he designed for the Moscow co-op Mosselprom than in any actual buildings designed by Constructivist architects in the 1920s and early 1930s, none of which even remotely approached the sort of lightweight adaptability that Gan considers to be the minimum requirement. Planning, for Gan, is not (unlike say, the early Le Corbusier and the Paris purists, or, to an extent, Malevich and the Suprematists) about the establishment of ideal and eternal types, but a question of constant – yet conscious – change.

This is not an architectural or urbanist argument but one rooted in Gan's understanding of Marxism, which comes via sources both orthodox (Bukharin) and unorthodox (Bogdanov). The longest single quotation is from Bogdanov's 1914 *The Science of*

Social Consciousness, which traces art's emergence out of the communal and authoritarian culture of the Middle Ages into the introspection of the bourgeois era. Gan finds in Bogdanov something more interesting than diamat commonplaces about the tastes of the bourgeoisie. In the text quoted, Bogdanov rejects 'politicized' art as being every bit as 'fetishistic' as pure art.

> the theory of 'public art' … maintains that an artist must endeavour to make his works serve society, convey useful ideas, and inspire virtuous feelings … [W]hen art is required to offer itself consciously to serve, for instance, a political objective or a moral doctrine, it simply becomes an 'applied' art of the kind that is used for the decoration and comfort of people's domestic dwellings.

Gan's interpretation of this is that art with a 'political' subject matter, such as that being sponsored by the Commissariat of Enlightenment, is still art, and is limited by that fact, becoming at best a 'political' style of decoration. Constructivism, on the other hand, 'should not reflect, portray or interpret reality, but actually construct and express the planned objectives of the new, vigorous and active class, the proletariat'.

One of the book's targets – named and cited, unlike Lunacharsky – is Jules Destree, who was, at the time Gan was writing, Belgium's minister of arts, from 'the opportunistic faction of socialists'. His scorn for Destree's rhetoric is the nearest Gan comes to humour. 'Boots will be worn out, pills will take effect, but a work of art … becomes an inexhaustible source of sublime joy for all mankind' claims the Belgian Social Democrat – an ancient Greek sculpture, *La Marseillaise*: these 'are always young and immortal, always inexhaustible', they are 'sources of eternally fresh and infinite joys'. For Gan, these are completely absurd statements, preposterous and ideological, as the meanings of such works are constantly changing along with material circumstance and historical movements. Citing Marx on Proudhon, Gan declares that 'the demand for final solutions and eternal truths must lose all meaning, in our eyes, once and for all. It is time to eliminate this foul atavism in ourselves.'

Gan demands that Bolsheviks be better Marxists, but what kind of a Marxist was he himself? Although his arguments on culture can be highly sophisticated, the limitations of his time are clear in the evident belief in linear historical progress. Gan doesn't argue in Second International style that socialism will emerge inevitably out of capitalism without the need for violent intervention – 'our intellect cannot be lulled into accepting such a definition. Otherwise, all the practical activity of the proletarian revolution would be completely nonsensical' – but he does argue that the October revolution confirms a progressive interpretation of history, where the proletarian revolution in the Russian Empire allegedly emerges out of the chrysalis of the high-tech capitalism of the second industrial revolution – the age of the telephone, the cinema, the ocean liner, the organized monopoly firm.

This is obviously an inadequate reading of the revolution itself, and one that would have certain consequences for the Constructivists themselves – the Gan-designed pages of *Sovremennaya Architektura* are full of glass and steel projects for skyscrapers, domes and motorized disurbanist cities, in a vast, low-tech, overwhelmingly peasant expanse; in retrospect, Gan's wooden kiosks, placed on Moscow streets to sell cheap cigarettes, were a much more intelligent, suitable form of communist architecture than the 'Constructivist architecture' that actually emerged. 'For a constructivist to be able to build today', wrote Gan, 'it is absolutely essential to know exactly what communism is and what it might require tomorrow'. Similarly, Gan's understanding of what 'communism' was becoming and what it was actually going to require was some way off, but the criticism of eternal values and final solutions suggests he had some inkling of what the combination of conservatism and authoritarianism might mean for the proletarian revolution. Gan disappeared in the late 1930s, according to some accounts after calling Stalin a 'pock-marked swine'.

Most of all, *Constructivism* makes clear that just how distant the Constructivists are from us. Even the most 'radical' art is intrinsically part of networks and institutions that Gan would have regarded as cultic, elitist, capitalistic and abhorrent. He would also have considered this to be unavoidable, given the material conditions under which art is produced; the movement that he describes from 'art', a product of a bourgeois society, to 'constructivism', a methodology for a society in transition from capitalism to communism, leaves no room for artists under capitalism to create 'the communist expression of material structures'; that is precisely why the 'Western Constructivists' couldn't fully abandon art – because the societies they made their work in had not abandoned capitalism.

Owen Hatherley

Rotten data

Jon Ippolito and Richard Rinehart, *Re-collection: Art, New Media and Social Memory*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2014. 312 pp., £24.95 hb., 978 0 26202 700 7.

Re-collection draws on and extends *Permanence through Change: The Variable Media Approach* (originally published by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York and the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology in Montreal in 2003). Jon Ippolito was associate curator of Media Arts at the Guggenheim. His influential essay 'Accommodating the Unpredictable' both established the Variable Media agenda – which emerged from issues raised by the preservation of media-based art works – and set the scene for the 2004 *Seeing Double* exhibition at the Guggenheim and the *Echoes of Art: Emulation as a Preservation Strategy* symposium that accompanied it. Here Ippolito and Rinehart provide valuable insight into installation strategies, challenges and viewer surveys from *Seeing Double*, which presented media art installations on original now-obsolescent equipment alongside emulations of those works deployed on newer technologies. But, given the appearance of a raft of new material on the subject over the intervening decade, why the delay?

Beyond its recapitulation of *Seeing Double*, the method of *Re-collection* is less clear, and seems to sense its vulnerability in mid-flight – apologizing, a hundred pages in, that what follows 'will get a bit geeky at times … feel free to skip to the final recommendation section if … computers make your eyes glaze over'. In fact, what follows isn't so attention-challenging after all, providing useful discussion of topics such as the impact of digital rights management on cultural memory, but conspicuously avoiding the underlying technological basis of preservation challenges and potential remedies. Instead, the book vexes unnecessarily about the long-term preservation of digital collections, and its focus and authority wane uncomfortably. One problem is that it has been organizations actually engaged in research using digital representations of real collections – the so-called digital humanities – rather than art museums and institutions that focus on preservation and representation of their acquisitions, which have driven innovation in collection management technologies and standards during the last decade. Serious consideration of long-term sustainability has been led by the archival and library communities. It is therefore hardly surprising that Ippolito hasn't encountered a collection management system that 'includes systematic fields for documenting the source of … information'. Failure to recognize the distinction between these fundamentally different approaches is one of the causes of *Re-collection*'s difficulty in divining solutions to problems such as file format obsolescence and the life expectancy of storage technologies.

Art institutions are concerned with protecting investment in their acquisitions and doing right by artists in re-presenting their works to visitors over time. Even online works which employ only virtualized resources make assumptions about the contemporary media and technology landscapes in which they were created, and, as such, cannot be archived in isolation with the expectation they will present the artist's intentions effectively in a different historical moment. Moreover, all of the works discussed here actually have a physical gallery presence. As a result, the successful maintenance of dessicated data files over very long periods should actually be of little concern to the authors, compared with the problems of 'capturing' enough of the performative aspects of a media art work installation in order to be able to present it effectively in the distant future. Lori Emerson's recent discussion in *Reading Writing Interfaces* (2014) of the stark difference between encountering an original installation of bpNichol's 'First Screening' on an Apple IIe and 'archived' versions is more revelatory. But, rather than take on this key issue and extend projects such as Henry Sayer's magisterial 1989 book *Object of Performance*, *Re-collection* is content with ill-informed speculation about overcoming what Vint Cerf has recently popularized as 'bit rot'. This is a lost opportunity, because a robust discussion of principles underlying the integrity of data and their implications – not only for beleaguered media art investments – has remained conspicuously absent from the literature.

In chapter 6 the authors inform us that emulation provides 'a weapon in the battle to preserve new media [art] more powerful than any in the arsenal of traditional conservators', but offer little insight into why that might be so. The computability theory (CT) of Hilbert, Gödel, Church, Turing and others, from which the rather useful accomplishments of emulation arise, should be central to media theory. CT

provides that a 'Turing-complete', or 'computationally universal' machine (i.e. almost every general-purpose computer, from Babbage's Difference Engine design of the 1820s onward), will be able to run any program – including programs whose purpose is to create the executional environment (whether at the processor instruction level or operating system level) expected by programs developed for other computers. In other words, a Turing-complete machine can 'pretend' to be – or emulate – any other computer. Running an emulator program takes some effort, and generally the machine running it must be rather faster than that which it is emulating if the emulated program is to run indistinguishably, but the computer industry produces faster hardware on a remarkably regular basis. If this strategy is inverted and, rather than emulating ancient systems, multiple state-of-the-art virtual machines are operated using a single real one, different operating systems can be run at the same time, and if one VM experiences a serious software problem or security compromise it can simply be restarted or isolated without disturbing the others. This paradigm shift has overturned the norms and wisdoms of corporate and institutional computing of the twentieth century, but it barely registers in media theory or media art. Emulation does indeed enable conservators of media art, provided that a description of ancient hardware or operating software is available or can be reverse-engineered, to run the software of any historic artwork, no matter how old, in the distant future. Of course, presenting such a work in a gallery space, so that the experience of encountering it is related to the intention of the artist, is an entirely different matter. Such is the problem which Emerson identifies. But Ippolito and Rinehart contribute little more here than was accomplished in *Echoes of Art*.

At the end of chapter 12 we are told that 'Apple's iTunes store offers 775,000 apps for the iOS alone, each capable of producing a proprietary file format.' We are then invited to multiply that number by the number of other hardware devices and operating systems and applications in order to appreciate the magnitude of the 'problem … which has permanently alter[ed] the geography of preservation'. Here *Re-collection* goes into free fall. Such a category-violating claim has little relevance to the number of possible conventions for representing texts or sounds or pictures as binary data. True, programs such as CODECs – which enable ordinarily large files, such as movies, to occupy less space for storage and transfer purposes – tend to be superseded frequently. However, this reflects rapid development in the field and it is possible at any time to make a version of a movie in a more long-lived format such as individual frame sequences used by the cinematography industry. There are actually only a handful of such 'formats', and where long-term accessibility is essential well-understood migration strategies such as 'Archivage Pérenne' are employed. CINES operates a dedicated storage facility in Montpellier using ISO 14721-compliant services with Data Seal of Approval from the National Archives of France. It guarantees that data remains accessible not just by preventing loss or corruption, but by sustaining software methods to access and utilize specific data formats and converting to contemporary formats, supported by similar guarantees in perpetuity, when software methods subsequently do become obsolete in the rest of the community. Indeed, several of these formats appear in Rhinehart's table of 'Comparative Longevity of Various Formats as of 2013', but it is unsurprising at this point that column 5 – 'Indefinite future' – contains 'Nothing' for every category.

Reluctantly, the reader must conclude that the basic regenerative properties of digital information have not revealed themselves to the authors. An image encoded as a lossless TIFF file (a convention that has been published since 1986 and which, while Adobe Systems owns the copyright, is the subject of multiple international standards, including updates still under development), for example, can be converted into another format that might have become fashionable in five hundred years, and potentially deliver the same experience (depending of course on the display technology and viewer perception prevailing at that time). Even if a specification of the by then archaic TIFF encoding convention is not known to that culture, it will be trivial to decipher without a digital Rosetta Stone if that culture is at least as sophisticated as ours. So, retrieving family photographs or taking in a season's *Breaking Bad* or,

for that matter, basking in the simulated glow of a little Super Mario in 2515 will be dependent only on survival of the media bearing that information. Luckily, mathematics comes to the rescue, in the form of cyclic polynomials that enable the retrieval of uncorrupted binary information from intrinsically faulty storage media. Error checking and correction using cyclic redundancy codes goes on unnoticed in all USB sticks, SSDs and rotating disks in use around the world, because it would be much more expensive to manufacture flawless devices. Moreover, the very small structures of semiconductor storage, such as USB sticks, actually decay with use and are sensitive to certain forms of radiation, so even perfectly manufactured specimens will develop faults in normal operation, which would render the data entrusted to them worthless without ECC support.

Nonetheless herein lies a problem, and it is seized upon by *Re-collection*. Rotating disk storage relies on precision micro-machinery, with its 'lifed' lubricants and other complications. Even with exemplary maintenance and minimum-hours use strategies, disks can only be relied upon for around five years. There are not yet adequate statistics about the real-life expectancy of semiconductor mass storage devices: manufacturers claim approximately 2 million hours mean time between failures, but current experience indicates otherwise. There is also asymmetry of deterioration from read-and-write operations, so SSDs used frequently will fail earlier. It is possible to make 'hardened' semiconductor storage: Voyager 1 has been using a computer to formulate instrument results for more than thirty-seven years, in the hard radiation environment of deep space, and is expected to fail in 2025 only because its radioisotope power source will become too depleted. However, the problem with materials suitable for making computer storage devices that are in use today is that high reliability and high storage density and rapid access do not go hand in hand. It is not necessary for Voyager to store more than the equivalent of a few books to forward in its next transmission, far less the Library of Congress, but many digital collections already have such a requirement. And not only are storage needs accelerating but multiple copies of such collections are necessary for security reasons. To reliably store very large volumes of data for geologically long periods, new strategies are essential. Migration – copying data reliably from one format to another and from one medium to another – is satisfactory while there is continuity of environment, but making a long-lived copy of a large digital collection is problematic.

In the 1960s Russian researchers proposed building information into the DNA molecule as a form of useable high-density memory, and, more recently, both US and European teams have successfully used commercially available DNA synthesis machines to make short fragments of nucleic acid strands which carried text information and could subsequently be 'read' using widely available DNA sequencing equipment. Significantly, these fragments can be replicated very quickly in the laboratory and in principle can be stored for millennia without data loss. Such replication produces high densities of 'stored information'; more than a million-million such molecules – equivalent to roughly half a petabyte will fit into a cubic millimetre. For comparison, the texts currently held in all US research libraries currently amount to around 2PB. Discussing real and virtual genetic storage, Ippolito and Rinehart suggest that 'It might be possible to encode the works of Shakespeare into every schoolchild's DNA.' Several fundamental problems are glossed over, however. In both recent Harvard and European Bioinformatics results, the size of DNA molecule and consequently the amount of information that can be stored is limited, and although replication of the encoded strand leads to very high data densities, the unique information contained in a PB droplet is equivalent only to a 1980s' floppy disk. More significantly, if much longer DNA strands, or millions of unique strands, can be made, it is not clear whether developing an addressing scheme to identify a specific strand might be practical. Together with the comparatively long times needed to extract data by sequencing, it seems that, although a volume of data equivalent to the contents of the Library of Congress might be fitted in a matchbox, it could take decades to access a single page.

By contrast, technology that uses a rapidly pulsed laser to store information holographically within fused quartz crystal was only demonstrated practically for the first time in 2003. However, it can achieve more than 50,000 times the density of conventional DVDs, with potentially much higher transfer rates and low-cost access equipment. Although still some way from market and having potential to store only hundreds of terabytes rather than petabytes per cubic centimetre, it is also intrinsically more robust and long-lived than DNA. It seems *Re-collection* might have grasped at the wrong straw. In the end this is a sawn-off shotgun of a book rather than a target-illuminating laser, creating smoke but containing serious errors and drawing misleading conclusions.

Peter Cornwell

Feisty not

Mayanthi L. Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2014. xi + 313 pp., £68.00 hb., 978 0 82235 748 3.

Philosophy that seeks to question *doxa*, and descriptive ethnography with a progressive orientation, put thought and life together in rather different but richly complementary ways. The role of the participant observer in ethnographic fieldwork has become very sophisticated in recent years, with the researcher being simultaneously more self-aware and more fully engaged in the society she is studying, often treating her 'informants' as thinkers in their own right or quasi-activists negotiating the problems that arise from social interactions that are seen as relatively fluid and often involving contradictions. Equally, the radical philosopher tries to circumvent both the more obvious logical sleights of hand and discourse control that maintains *doxa* in society and the more subtle and possibly interrelated limitations of traditional logic and philosophical concepts by abstract work on alternative logic, heuristic mathematics and liberating metadiscourse.

If the philosopher can become overly caught up in abstraction, so her ethnographic colleague can become too immersed in reality. The latter can lead to descriptions of the particular that are still hitched to a normative standard, while the former means that logical advance is locked in sterile detachment from the flux of matter. The croquet game in *Alice in Wonderland* shows one way in which the two sides can interact: an abstract heuristic substitution of animate creatures for the normal objects in the game gives it a radically different material combinatory texture, which of course turns it into another game, in which Alice is fully engaged. Significantly, Carroll was important for Deleuze, whose transcendental empiricism very much brings together immersion and abstraction, or, as David Lapoujade puts it in his recent excellent book, *mouvements aberrants* and alternative logic.

One would not expect a work that began as a descriptive ethnography to conform to this Carrollian–Deleuzean model, but Mayanthi L. Fernando's remarkable *The Republic Unsettled* does. This is because her main group of 'informants', most of whom describe themselves as *citoyen français de confession musulmane*, which she translates/glosses perfectly reasonably as Muslim French, are an anomaly or paradox, a *mouvement aberrant*, within the context of secular French society, as the use of circumlocution or oxymoron implies. This is even more so because these 'informants' are very well integrated, usually born in France to immigrant parents and high achievers, but who are, at the same time, deeply committed to the sort of 'modernizing' Islamic revival that is to be found in the beautiful writings of Tariq Ramadan. That Muslim French is a paradox, both as felt from within and perceived from without, is intimately bound up with the latent and rarely acknowledged contradictions in French *laïcité*, and much of Fernando's book is taken up with exploring these contradictions in relation both to the *fil conducteur* of her fieldwork with her Muslim French interlocutors and to a much wider historical and contemporary political framework that has been very thoroughly researched indeed.

French attitudes to Islam and indigenous peoples during the colonial period, and the legal and political development of *laïcité* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are examined in detail, as is the shift from the 1980s' Socialist *droit à la différence*, *vivre ensemble* and *partager de l'autre* to the current neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility and economic individualism – not actually as radical a shift as it seems, especially with regard to the problem of inclusion, where both approaches have real limitations, even if 'multiculturalism' is clearly much less brutal. Fernando also engages with white French politicians, intellectuals and *lycée* teachers, either in person or through their publications, neither treating them all as being hypocrites or bastards, nor falling into the trap of a citizen of one Western country demonizing or idealizing another Western country. The contradictions of *laïcité* are a systemic problem common to all versions of secularism that currently exist in the West and transcend the ideological differences between left and right.

Two fundamental contradictions are key to the argument of *The Republic Unsettled*. First, a secular polity/society is one that by definition clearly separates the private religious and public secular spheres, but there has to be extensive intervention in and modelling of religion by the state for this to be possible. The whole notion of what a religion is and the boundaries between it and the state have been constructed and

imposed by the state. This means that the division between the two is not nearly as unambiguous as it is usually said to be. Second, Western secular values are held to be universal, but, at the same time, they are perceived as the product of particular cultural and historical circumstances – broadly the Graeco-Roman, Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment tradition. This makes for real complexities with regard to inclusion. Are people of non-Western origin culturally or perhaps even genetically capable of measuring up to these very Western-marked values? Clearly, that has to be possible for some of them, or the values would not be universal, but which ones are 'civilizable', and can even those few really become fully 'civilized'? Of course, exclusion also applies to people from the West itself, as its values continue to have a strong masculist and heterosexist bias embedded within them.

The two sorts of exclusion – internal and external – interact in complex ways, and Fernando explores this impressively in her third and last section, discussing the sexually liberated *musulmane laïque* marchers in the Ni Putes Ni Soumises movement and *musulmane voilée* activists whose conservative positions on abortion and LGBTQ rights are criticized by their white colleagues in the Collectif Féministes pour l'Egalité. The secular republic can assimilate the marchers because they are feisty brown women willing to be saved from patriarchal brown men by white men – the mechanism comes from Gayatri Spivak – but their hyperfemininity also allows them to fit in with a neoliberal return to 'normal' gender roles. Here, Fernando might have added the further complexity of 'third generation' assertively feminine feminism, which is more a response to contradictions in women becoming full citizens than a return to the past. The activists are attacked in a way that relates to a more general feeling that conservative Muslim attitudes to women, race and sexuality are 'proof' that they cannot become Western, but the many right-wing or religious people in the West who hold comparable views are allowed freedom of conscience and the right to debate, and they may be regarded as 'backward', but never as non-Western. Liberal values can also seem to justify a claim to superiority when they are only lived up to in a limited way.

The Socialist transformation of Islam in the Goutte d'Or neighbourhood of the 18th arrondissement in Paris, removing worshippers from the street and putting them in self-contained religious spaces and establishing cultural centres for contact between Muslim and non-Muslim, is treated with a great deal of nuance in the first chapter of Fernando's middle section. This involves the first contradiction in secularism referred to above and the limited and rather superficial quality of engagement when a minority's culture is separated from its religion. The first section of *The Republic Unsettled* is devoted to how the desire for invisibility of Muslim immigrants turned into the Beur generation's assertion of the right to visible difference and then became the Muslim French wish for visible indifference – that is, to be identifiably Muslim but the same as any other French citizen. The internalization of the contradictions of *laïcité* are very apparent here, but something which is very close to Deleuzean paradox emerges in some of the fieldwork material connected with Muslim French women – the *musulmane voilée* – in the second chapter of the middle section and the final stages of the book.

Deleuzean paradox is the pearl that transforms the contradiction of grit and flesh in the oyster, the Darwinian mutation or *mouvement aberrant* that points to the future. A tender and intuitive but intellectually very subtle and thoughtful alternative to a Western belief in rationally obtained absolutes, with an attendant self-righteousness and egocentric lack of critical self-awareness, is revealed. There is a very non-Cartesian mixture of bodily devotional discipline and spiritual development, an empathetic capacity in the heart to modify supposedly definitive moral judgements in a positive way and a humility concerning *any* human being's ability to understand the perfection of God's justice. This gives Fernando a vantage point from which to go beyond a simple debunking of Western values and engage profoundly with political concepts such as recognition and tolerance, in which her knowledge of relevant theory is very perceptively deployed. That her book ends with a legitimate comparison between William Connolly's notions of critical responsiveness and agonistic respect and the way in which her Muslim French interlocutors think shows that the history of colonization, immigration and the creation of diasporas does not have to lead to a conflict of civilizations or economically reductive globalization. It can produce rich and complex hybrids or *mouvements aberrants* that can genuinely contribute to human progress.

What *The Republic Unsettled* manages to convey is that those who seem marginal to the present could be central to a better future, and that is indeed a very remarkable achievement.

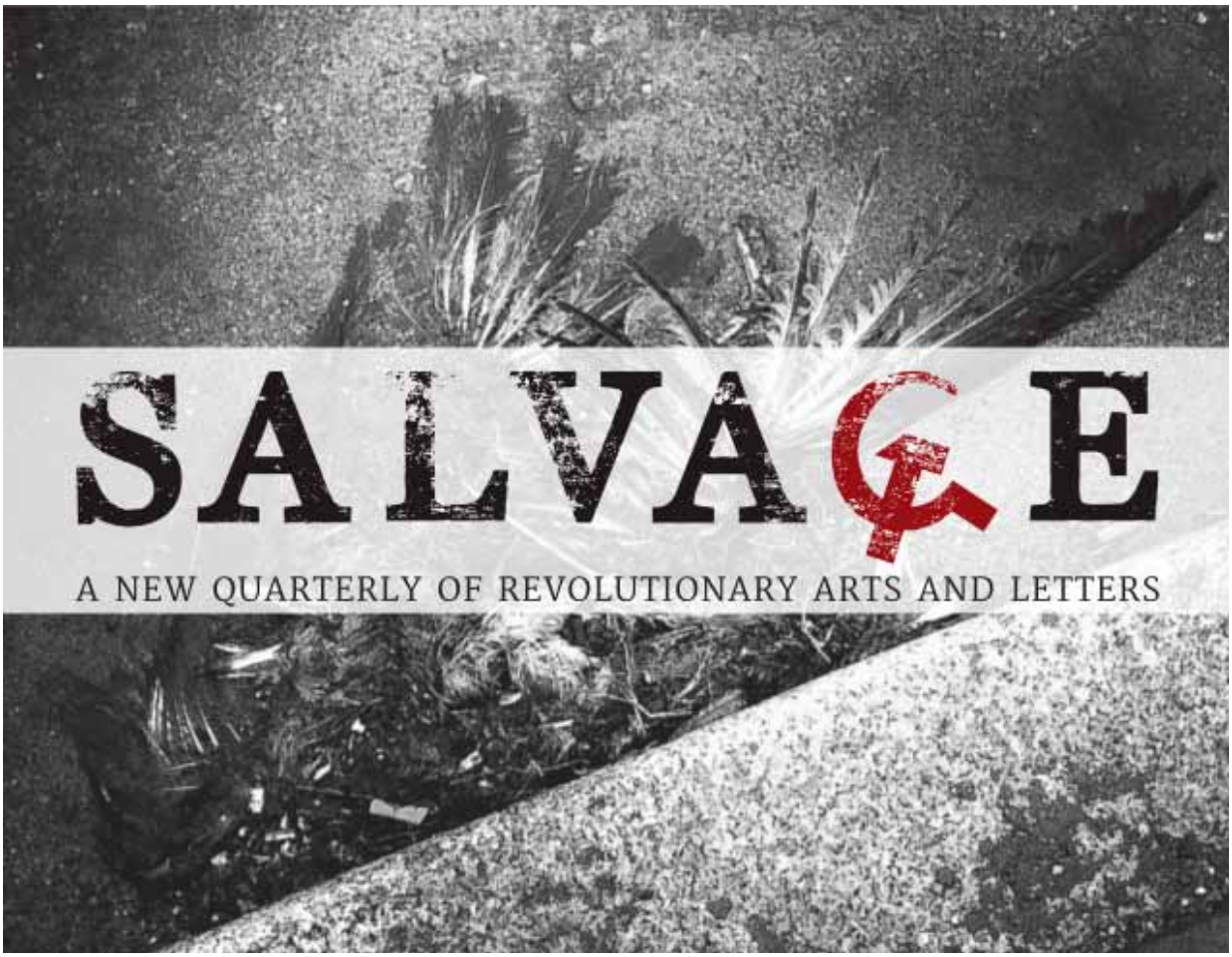
Nardina Kaur

Registration drive

John Dunn, *Breaking Democracy's Spell*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT and London, 2014. 208 pp., £25.00 hb., 978 0 30017 991 0.

In recent history, democracy has come to seem less compelling as a state form (legislative gridlock, climate change, unjust wars) while retaining its power as a de-authorizing force (Occupy, pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong). This has given rise to a reflective mood in twenty-first-century treatises on this divided, intractable concept. The collection of essays *Democracy in What State?* (2011), which included contributions by the likes of Agamben, Badiou and Wendy Brown, addressed this new phase in the idea's history, positioned as a counter to the body of broadly liberal democratic theory, exemplified in the USA by Robert Dahl, for whom democracy is a political order. Dunn, in common with one of the contributors to that collection, Jacques Rancière, recognizes that the political idea of democracy contains a dialectic between its name – government by the people – and the myriad historical state forms which have taken this name and staked themselves on its legitimacy. The two cannot be joined to the extent that the political idea derives from equality and is not a form, while the state requires subjection and can at best only claim an affinity with the idea of democracy. Enshrouding these two sides are a hundred misuses and more or less false claims.

In his new book, John Dunn recognizes both positions and relinquishes neither, a perspective in keeping with his fellow Cambridge political realist Raymond Geuss, whose *Philosophy and Real Politics* (2008) provides the argument for realism which Dunn's book assumes. The crux of Dunn's democratic realism lies in his reading of what he calls a 'notionally equal' vote: a reconciliation between freedom and subjection in the option to choose who subjects you. The choice made by voting, for Dunn, is partial, temporary and essentially inauthentic, reflecting the fact that the state form called democracy will always contain multiple elections and competing institutions even as it is also dominated by oligarchies, and that all of this will be more or less



apparent. Indeed, this book argues that it *should* be more apparent, in so far as this would increase the power of democracy as collective judgement and decrease its spell as slogan.

Democracy as a state form is not synonymous with good government, nor with economic success; the recent histories of China, the USA and India have undone, yet again and very visibly, these assumptions. Environmental destruction is the ground on which Dunn posits education and the democratic state as the test of electoral politics, and it is the crisis which his argument for a realist democratic theory attempts to provide the means to solve. *Breaking Democracy's Spell* thus acts as a coda to *Setting the People Free* (2005), Dunn's history of democracy which tracked a threefold development: the word, the network of ideas, and the records of states which call themselves democracies. That book argued that the contemporary period in which democracy became a slogan began with the propaganda of the Allies in the Second World War, who used democracy as a unifying differentiator from the Axis powers. In *Breaking Democracy's Spell* Dunn reconsiders the damage to political life which this slogan has subsequently caused, before tentatively returning to the familiar idea that the project of democracy is ineluctably also one of education and thus an orientation for collective judgement.

Dunn's reading of the vote as a reconciliation is pragmatic, and shows clearly the divergence of Dunn's thought from a writer such as Rancière, who similarly begins by understanding democracy as anti-form. For the latter, democracy (the equality of the people) is both beneath the state form (as foundation) and beyond it (as possibility, uncontained by any form). Democracy becomes a process, fighting to enlarge politics and the public sphere. Similarly for Dunn, the force of democracy enters strikingly inegalitarian structures, but Dunn's pragmatism keeps the moment of voting in view:

> that notionally equal vote enters, fleetingly and at very lengthy intervals, a dense domain of very active causality, little of which is discernibly structured through any mode of equality at all and which consequently is seldom reshaped in any evident way by that entry and almost never in ways that plainly matter or have much lasting effect.

The efficacy of the vote is an illusion, but the need for equality, or for the reconciliation of freedom and subjection, is real. For Dunn the 'interests of the people' are the guaranteeing force in modern politics, which at least leaves a way open for the people to turn this foundational authorization around to make their interests known (or to de-authorize a regime), even if the will for change currently gets lost in the grossly reduced causal capacity of collective decisions to enter the vector of power that the idea of democracy opens out. This is a process which defines the 'democratic maze' of liberal democracies. The possible failure of this reconciliation between freedom and subjection, and the actually existing complexity in which it is lost, casts an increasingly deep shadow over Dunn's treatise, more dispiriting than the enormity but conceptual clarity of the task a reader of Rancière is left with.

The shadow is found in Dunn's question: if democracy must be disassociated from the idea of 'good government', is there any other common good between those states which admit widescale democratic processes? This attempt to update Kant's line that democracy empirically gives rise to peace among democracies, now disproved by events, leads only to Dunn's observation that no democratic state has wilfully enforced mass starvation on a large section of its population if there is sufficient food available – a finding with limited scope for reliable prediction, although Dunn's suggestion is that the institutions associated with democracy might at least provide a baseline limit to the murderous potential for state power when its own citizens are concerned. However, Dunn's refusal to resolve the problem, stated as 'the far greater political cogency of democracy as a paradigm for deauthorizing incumbent power than for authorizing it', is ultimately also the source of the book's eschewal of cogency in its refusal to relinquish either radical anti-form or empirical record. Instead, Dunn's closing restatement of democracy as an educational project is the pragmatic parallel for his hope that the degree of democratic plausibility for any particular institution or action could be made clearer. We would necessarily stop talking about a 'democratic state' and begin talking of a hybrid entity, part oligarchy, part democracy and part transnational finance centre. Above all, Dunn's book is therefore a plea for greater powers of description: we the people understand more clearly what we are voting on and what political purchase a vote has. Breaking the spell of democracy would allow electoral politics to emerge as temporary, fleeting, but more truly the form through which collective judgement can be expressed.

Edmund Hardy