

## Fanon's Pantheons

Lewis R. Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2015. 216 pp., £14.99 pb., 978 1 84904 550 6.

Peter Hudis, *Frantz Fanon, Philosopher of the Barricades*, Pluto Press, London, 2015. 176 pp., £50.00 hb., £12.99 pb., 978 0 74533 630 5 hb., 978 0 74533 625 1 pb.

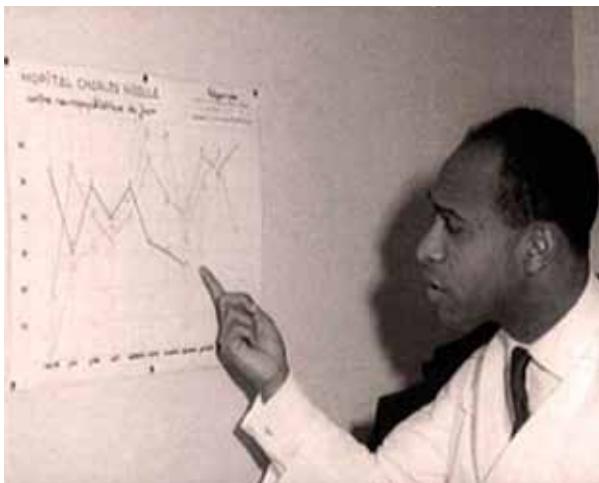
The literature on Frantz Fanon is mortgaged to cyclical emergences, and the rhythm of his putative rediscovery becomes shorter and shorter. Under the appearance of democratizing Fanon, 'introductions' succeed one another at an uncontrollable pace. As with Walter Benjamin, every disciplinary field has its own private relationship with Fanon: Fanon qua psychiatrist, Fanon qua revolutionary, Fanon qua postcolonial intellectual, Fanon qua Third World Marxist. Once the labels are put in place a great deal of effort is invested in removing them, and reconstituting the 'whole person' and the 'whole thinker' that Fanon was, with all his contradictions. But neither categorization nor reactive de-categorization can avoid instrumentalization in the tightly woven net of the knowledge economy. Whilst articles must be ultra-specific in their theoretical alignments, books have to entice large audiences; hence the prevalence of the short and catchy 'introduction'. Going by their title and their format (both are under 200 pages), Peter Hudis's and Lewis Gordon's new books seem to fall into this category. However, whereas Hudis's is truly introductory and will find a natural readership among undergraduate students, Gordon's oscillates between the monograph and the introduction. Despite the book's claim to address Fanon on its own terms, *What Fanon Said* comprises multiple levels of analysis, which might confuse those who are only looking for Fanon's fundamental ideas.

Gordon has been focusing on three aspects of Fanon's works since his first book, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, published in 1995: Fanon's existential-phenomenological account of race, his metacritique of European Reason, and his humanism. For Gordon, these three aspects are intrinsically linked: Fanon's critique of European reason and science would lead him to reject 'ontology' in favour of a renewed humanist existentialism. At the same time, Gordon also interprets Fanon's metacritical register as a critique of philosophy. As he writes in the

introduction, Fanon's focus on human possibilities contains an implicit critique of philosophy as 'the ultimate critical theory and arbiter'. More importantly, Gordon argues for the study of Fanon's ideas in their own right, defining his own strategy as the refusal to reduce the 'intellectuals of African descent' to either their 'white' theoretical references (typically the canonical figures of the European tradition) or to their biographies. Gordon is interested in understanding and correcting the systematic delegitimization of black intellectuals, both in philosophy and within the broader scope of theory. Black thinkers, he claims, are supposed to provide 'experience' in a theoretical world overwhelmingly dominated by white scholars and European philosophers. This is how Gordon pertinently introduces considerations of race and racism within the epistemological field, engaging his readers to be more perceptive with regard to what could be called a 'colour line in theory'.

Gordon's interest in metatheory is evident from the outset and runs through the whole book. However, the manner in which Gordon implements such a 'non-reductive' method is perplexing. Gordon cannot avoid both remarking on Fanon's relationship to the European canon, and stressing numerous biographical details. One of Gordon's methods is to consider that existentialism is what simultaneously *distances* Fanon from traditional philosophical modes of analyses and *warrants* him a place in the philosophical pantheon. But there is something almost patronizing in Gordon's repetition of Fanon's heroic virtues. The matter seems to be one of retroactive recognition within the realm of 'professional philosophy'. The parochialism of Gordon's methodological gaze is especially striking towards the end of the book, where Gordon bluntly confronts Fanon's decision to appeal to a 'white-centered and Eurocentric Sartre' to write the preface for *The Wretched of the Earth*. Why did Fanon look for 'authorization' and 'legitimacy' from Sartre, a 'white' philosopher? Here Gordon seemingly transfers his own preoccupations onto Fanon.

The five chapters that comprise *What Fanon Said* are unevenly pitched. The second half of the book, which tackles Fanon's practice of psychiatry and political involvement, often veers into 'biography', the genre Gordon claims to be weary of. However, the sections dedicated to *Black Skin, White Masks* contain a number of interesting insights, owing to Gordon's long-lasting engagement with Fanon's first work. Especially interesting is Gordon's focus on the motif of 'failure' as its theoretical fulcrum. Besides the infamous chapter devoted to recognition ('The Black and Recognition'), he considers each chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* as a different portrait of the black as a failing to be recognized as 'human subject'. He reminds us that Fanon deemed it necessary to leave the philosophical realm for psychoanalysis, which he precisely described as the study of man at the level of its 'failures' (*ratés*). Moreover, Gordon shows that the motif of failure permeates Fanon's analysis of the 'sociogenesis' of the black



individual. A large part of Fanon's analysis of the lived experience of the black is indeed an account of the black man's necessary, or structural, failure to conform to the social and symbolic realm in which he finds himself. Failure is, for instance, determinant in the black's relation to French language. Seeking social recognition by mastering French language, his mastery is ironically turned back against himself, for regardless of how well he speaks French language, he will be considered a masquerade, a 'comedy of errors'. Moving between different forms of relational, social, sexual inscriptions of the subject, the motif of failure enables Gordon to read the Fanonian trope of failure beyond psychoanalysis and to establish a common ground between psychoanalysis and existential philosophy. As Gordon makes clear, this is probably among Fanon's most significant (and still only partially explored) contributions, moving between

the psychoanalytical and the cultural fields, between the individual unconscious and the racial (collective) imaginary, and thereby providing us with a unique conception of subjectivation. This also raises interesting questions regarding the uncanny relationship Fanon draws between psychoanalysis and political action: as Gordon notes, the end point of Fanon's collective psychoanalytical diagnosis and analytical work is externally directed action: 'his counsel is, in short, actional.'

Additionally, Gordon articulates the motif of failure at the level of Fanon's method, pondering his singular form of narration: where the 'black subject', the voice of the text, fails, the theorist and the critic succeed, 'by identification of each failure'. *Black Skin, White Masks*, Gordon claims, proceeds by 'performative contradiction of pessimism'. Reflecting on what he calls a 'metatheory of failure', Gordon shows how Fanon moves between registers in order to create a new framework of intelligibility for his thinking. For Gordon, '[t]he work challenges the viability of any single science of the study of human beings and presents a radical critique premissed on the examination of human failure.' This would characterize the specificity of Fanon's unruly philosophy: drawing an existential portrait of the 'Black' in the negative of Western Reason, by playing the various sciences of Man (*sciences de l'homme*) against one another.

By contrast the aim of Hudis's book is at once clear and unequivocal: to place Fanon back within the Marxist pantheon (Hegel–Marx–Sartre) so as to save him from postcolonial drift. Some readers will appreciate the remarkable conciseness and textual fluidity of his account, which covers, in less than 200 pages, the life and the principal works of Fanon, with particular emphasis on his anticolonial and Third-Worldist political involvement. Yet this is realized at the price of any engagement with other theoretical resources. A good indicator of its methodological naivety is provided in the introduction, in which Hudis explains that the spirit of the forgotten revolutionary was suddenly resurrected in December 2014 by *Black Lives Matter*. In short, the pedagogical format of the book is supposed to legitimize an *ex nihilo* approach to Fanon. Hudis's book is a perfect example of the current anti-postcolonial backlash, which is nowhere near as strong as in the discipline of philosophy itself. Once the issues of 'postcolonialism, difference and alterity' have been swiftly dismissed in the introduction, Hudis feels entitled to explicate Fanon from the quasi-exclusive standpoint of his return to, and variations upon, Hegel.

More precisely, this return to Hegel is focused on a rather crude simplification of ‘Hegel’ to the logic of individual–particular–universal, which according to him constitutes the structural framework of both *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*. Hudis overlooks the fact that Fanon’s reading of Hegel, like Sartre’s and Lacan’s, was importantly mediated by Kojève and his emphasis on intersubjective recognition. Disregarding this crucial detail, Hudis provides us with a particularly poignant example of what Gordon’s criticism focuses upon, explaining that Fanon reinterpreted Hegel and Sartre ‘in terms of his lived experience’. Fanon’s phenomenology of race would amount to integrating a new variable within the pre-established scenario of human emancipation. It is not incidental, then, that Hudis insistently goes back to the infamous (and equally poor) Sartrian 1948 indictment of Négritude as the ‘weak stage’ of the dialectic. Characterizing Fanon’s philosophical view on race through the prism of his response to Sartre, Hudis is bound to assess the role of race from the exclusive scope of this disembodied dialectic: what is the role of race as *mediation* between the particular and the universal? Thus race, or what Hudis rather uncomfortably refers to as the ‘additive of colour’, has to be necessarily characterized as *means* or *end* of the dialectic of emancipation; the idea that race or blackness might simply not fit into this totalizing dialectic is not even posed as possibility. If Fanon was, indeed, a Hegelian (*pace* Gordon), why cannot we think of other ways of inhabiting and subverting Hegel’s logical and historical architecture? Why couldn’t Fanon’s reference to Hegel mean neither identification nor subservient subordination but something else, perhaps something akin to what Gayatri Spivak characterizes as ‘affirmative sabotage’?

It is no accident that Hudis calls upon the predominantly Parisian theme of the ‘barricade’ in order to restore Fanon’s Marxist–Hegelian lineage. In a rather forceful gesture, Hudis seeks to address Fanon from the undisturbed standpoint of nineteenth-century revolutionary classicism. For Hudis is exclusively interested in the Fanonian dialectic of emancipation and in his orientation towards a humanism-to-come. Contrary to Ato Sekyi-Otu’s *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* (1996), which attempted to reactualize Fanon’s Hegelian dialectics from the complex perspective of postcolonial ‘failed’ African states, Hudis’s account is impregnated with an unequivocal historicism and a quasi-religious faith in the emancipatory power of the universal. ‘History’, Hudis argues, ‘is replete with

examples of freedom struggles that lost their way because they took their eyes off the universal.’

Nevertheless, Hudis’s book is accessible and will seduce those who want to situate the Martiniquan revolutionary within the geopolitical context of his time. His account offers a synthetic analysis of Fanon’s role as an anti-colonial and pan-African militant; aspects that tend to be overlooked by the scholars who focus on Fanon’s relationship with Négritude and the black diaspora. Whilst the first part of the book is dedicated to Fanon’s early years and to *Black Skin, White Masks* (chapters 1–3), the second part (chapters 4–6) foregrounds Fanon’s role in Algeria since 1953 and in the broader context of African anti-colonial liberation struggles. Hudis discusses Fanon’s involvement with the Algerian FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) as a journalist and as a representative, interestingly pointing out the importance of the 1956 Soummam conference and analysing Fanon’s journalistic strategy in *El Moudjahid*. He also proposes to read *The Wretched of the Earth* from the point of view of the specific anti-colonial and ‘postcolonial’ conjunctures that Fanon was witnessing, reading his account of the pitfalls of the national bourgeoisie as a critique of Nkrumah’s rule in Ghana and Sékou Touré’s in Guinea. In other words, Hudis helpfully resituates Fanon within the (now remote) problematics confronting Third World Marxists at the time, drawing on the prominent revolutionary role that Fanon ascribed to the peasantry. By doing so, Hudis stays away from any hypnotic obsession with Fanon’s advocacy of violence: for him the latter needs first and foremost to be understood as Fanon’s way of stressing the role of the masses in forestalling neocolonial mechanisms and should at no price be misconstrued in a metaphysical way.

Reading Gordon’s and Hudis’s books alongside one another calls attention to profound divergences between a dive into the self-evident narrative of emancipatory politics and the labyrinthine questioning of epistemological reflexivity. The naive enthusiasm of Hudis stands in ironic contrast to Gordon’s search for epistemological righteousness. For further philosophical investigations of Fanon’s works it would be a relief to leave aside, for a moment, the list of Fanon’s theoretical affiliations, the various ways in which Fanon fits or does not fit into the philosophical pantheon, and instead focus on the internal consistency of his thought: in short, to *philosophize with Fanon*.

**Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier**

# New York City ghosts

David Kishik, *The Manhattan Project: A Theory of a City*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2015. 273 pp., £26.99 hb., 978 0 80478 603 4.

It is not the first time that Walter Benjamin's life has been made into a subject of fiction. Jay Parini's *Benjamin's Crossing, A Novel* was *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year in 1997. A few years later journalist Stuart Jeffries created a stir with his 'Did Stalin's Killers Liquidate Walter Benjamin?' in the *Observer* (2001). More recently, in *The Parallax View*, Slavoj Žižek enlarged even more creatively – without endorsing it, of course – on Jeffries' fanciful hypothesis: Benjamin's murder would have been ordered by Stalin after reading Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. At a time when many former Soviet loyalists were becoming disillusioned with Moscow because of the Hitler–Stalin pact, it was to save his own 'dialectical materialism' from the mortal danger represented by 'historical materialism' that Stalin would have ordered one of his 'killerati' (agents recruited from socialist intellectuals to carry out assassinations) to dispose of the matter.

David Kishik's *The Manhattan Project* is an altogether different, less conspiratorial kind of fiction. Like his predecessors, Kishik rejects the thesis of Benjamin's suicide, but does so in order to imagine an afterlife of Benjamin in Manhattan, where, living under an assumed name, he would have continued to work on a second, New York version of his Parisian Arcades Project. It was here that Benjamin would develop a *pedagogy of the city* based on the notion – to spell out what we take to be the main point of Kishik's book – that there is no 'reality' that is not supported by fantasy. This premiss is not without its strong logic, since, as Jacques Lacan has taught us and as Benjamin had already intuited, 'reality' as such can never be accessed directly; it is always already structured ideologically, or, to put it in another way, contains a void filled with the 'stuff' of fantasy. Not only does this stuff 'support' reality, but it is only by working through it that the subject articulates or learns to express his/her desires. As Žižek would say, we are all, as desiring subjects, 'plagued' by fantasy. To use this thesis to construct a theory of the city is the aim, and the great novelty, of Kishik's book.

Like its Parisian predecessor, the Manhattan Project is based on a manuscript that Kishik claims to have come upon in the New York Public Library. Its code name, Carl Roseman, is the pseudonym

under which Benjamin, after having secured a visa to Spain, would have arrived in the USA. It is also, with a slightly different spelling, the name of the protagonist of Frank Kafka's *Amerika* (Karl Rossman). Once safely in the USA, however, instead of joining Adorno and Horkheimer at the New School for Social Research, Carl Roseman, alias Benjamin, opts to remain anonymous, surviving on a small job in the New York Public Library and carrying on a shadowy existence until his death in 1987 at an improbable age of 95. By following 'the Roseman hypothesis', which consists in suspending 'the proverbial lines dividing reality from fantasy, the text from its commentary, the author from its interpreter', Kishik produces a work that, after Berlin and Paris, adds a third cycle to Benjamin's œuvre – a work in which readers are left in suspense as to who is speaking (Kishik or Benjamin?) and where the 'truth' is told in the guise of a 'lie.' By asking 'what does it matter who is speaking?' Kishik smartly outwits the reader by securing in advance a position as both 'interpreter' of Benjamin and 'author' of the book. As for the manuscript itself on which the latter is based, little information is offered on how it is organized, when it was written, how many 'convolutes' it contained, and so on. Unlike its Parisian predecessor, it apparently included no 'Exposé', suggesting that in his old age Benjamin did not have a faithful friend like Adorno to offer critical feedback and harsh criticism. However, we do know the circumstances under which the manuscript was drafted, the well-tried method of literary criticism called the 'text's voice', with its assumed distinction between 'author' and 'interpreter'. In this way, Kishik produces a dazzlingly layered narrative whose 'author' is a prosopopoeia: what Benjamin 'says' may not be entirely his, but the author is no impostor!

The book's appearance coincides with that of another thick volume by Kenneth Goldsmith entitled simply *Capital* (reviewed by John Millar in *RP* 197), which emulates *The Arcades Project* by offering, in contrast to Kishik, a compilation of quotations extracted from the history of New York City. Goldsmith does not venture to add commentaries to the quoted passages. In a similar way, Kishik conceals the body of notes and quotations on which his book is supposedly based – something also true of the frequent

cross-references between Paris and New York. The reading room of the New York Public Library here replaces Henry Labrouste's Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, where Benjamin spent long hours researching for *The Arcades Project*. Similarly, in taking custody of Benjamin's precious manuscript following his fatal slip on the grand staircase of the New York Public Library, a certain Beatrice Wald replays the role of Georges Bataille, who was for a time the curator of antiquity in the Bibliothèque Nationale.

In the course of forty-five short chapters, Kishik draws from his fictional Roseman file a mine of fulgurating Benjaminian insights and images. The ruling figure of the narrative, foregrounded at the outset, is the idea of the city as text: Benjamin is made to approach the urban setting as a 'book' that must be 'constantly read and interpreted', and his writing is itself 'structured like a metropolis'. Here Kishik invokes Graeme Gilloch's *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (1996), which first characterized Benjamin's city writings as 'city-as-text' and 'text-as-city'. The book's title, *The Manhattan Project*, is the code name given to US atomic weapons research during World War II. As Kishik explains, it must be read against the architectural etymology of the term 'hypothesis': from the Greek *hupo*, or that which is placed under, which could be a foundation, according to the logical or tectonic sense of the word, or a bomb. Further 'ironic twists' refer to Benjamin's supposed 'fascination' with the sheer human density of Manhattan, which recalls Lewis Mumford's (but also Henri Lefebvre's) notion of 'urban explosion': 'because the process that generates a metropolitan centre like Manhattan', Kishik writes, 'is the opposite of the way an atomic bomb detonates'. Rather than send out an explosive spray of particles from a single core to a large area, a city forces more and more disparate elements – ideas, commodities, skills, persons, interests, fortunes, beliefs, desires, practices, aspirations, sensibilities, ideologies, stupidities – to come closer and closer together, to congest into a single limited space.

It would be easy to say that Kishik is a scholar who is haunted by Benjamin's spectres, or that *The Manhattan Project* is a tale of a haunted city. Certainly the book reflects a deep and sympathetic knowledge of Benjamin's life and work and of New York City itself, in whose New School for Social Research Kishik's own intellectual adventure took off (but which, he hints, has now become unaffordable to most people like himself). In fact, however, the book is structured quite clearly around a 'trinity of elemental polarities'

that, according to Kishik, Benjamin used to 'grasp how New York works'. The pairs are reality/fantasy, politics/economics and heaven/hell – polar opposites that, Kishik claims, correspond to Kant's three fundamental questions: 'What can I know?', 'What ought I to do?' and 'What may I hope?' Recall that Michel Foucault also deployed Kant's questions in his seminal essay 'What is Enlightenment?' Underscoring the affinities between Benjamin and Foucault, which Kishik is not the first to note, a section of the manuscript is on 'Urban Revolution', another on 'Other Spaces'. Kishik further suggests that the same trinity would help to better grasp *The Arcades Project* and reveal a 'structure' to its otherwise loose organization.

The architecture of New York City holds a big, if not necessarily good, place in this book. Rem Koolhaas is repeatedly taken to task, and the architectural fetishism of his celebrated *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto* (1978) is unfavourably compared with what Kishik tells us is Benjamin's celebration of 'sheer life'. Against the retro fantasies of Koolhaas, Kishik invokes Italian Marxist historian Manfredo Tafuri's disenchanted view of New York City as the graveyard of every 'utopian ideal of comprehensive public control over the urban structure', a place where the true function of buildings 'is not to produce dreams (as Koolhaas would have it) but to crush (or crash) every single one of them'. Kishik here goes beyond much current architectural theory when he intimates that 'any attempt to restore the lost enchantment of an urban adventure (as Koolhaas and other architects still try to do, though usually in cities other than New York) can be anachronistic at best and opportunistic at worst.' Kishik stresses the positive power of disenchantment, in which the loss of aura of NYC buildings generates a 'subtle shift in the way we perceive the city'. 'When the fetishism of architecture diminishes, when one abandons all hope of treating physical buildings as if they were living, thinking things, it becomes a bit easier to see the real life lived in their shadows. *Forma mentis* turns into *forma vitae*.' Thus disenchantment – as the Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari would have it – is the basis for a 'philosophy' of hope in which knowledge is commitment. Kishik cites Ernst Bloch: 'philosophy will have conscience of tomorrow, commitment to the future, knowledge of hope, or it will have no more knowledge.' Kishik's own philosophical speculations are a good example of this hopeful knowledge.

Central to Kishik's novel and provocative reading of New York is the opposition between 'building'

and ‘sheer life’. This essential polarity is both the strength and the weakness of his argument. For example, it may help to explain why one important notion that was particularly dear to Benjamin remains conspicuously absent in this book: porosity. Benjamin used it first in the piece on ‘Naples’ he wrote with Asja Lacis, but it is latent in most of his city writings. Porosity describes forms of life, as in Naples, where there is not a hard and fast separation between inside and outside. In this sense, it is not surprising that Kishik would end his book with a comparison between Benjamin and Spinoza – between Nature or God for the latter and New York City for the former. Both are ultimate substances, ‘pure immanence’. Echoing Deleuze’s last text ‘Immanence: A Life’, Benjamin is said to ‘wrap a riddle in a mystery by saying that “the *aura* of New York is *a life*, and nothing else”’.

Kishik’s textual interrogation of NYC thus ends with a pantheistic affirmation of the city as ‘a living configuration of forms of life’ and as ‘the dwelling place of the collective, eternally unquiet and agitated’. Such images are reinforced through provocative comparisons, such as the one between the plan of New York City and that of the New York Public Library’s reading room – between the ‘philosophy of business’ of the first and the ‘business of philosophy’ of

the second, whereby you ‘do the right thing and get paid for it’. Here Kishik – for it is his voice we hear towards the end of the book and no longer Benjamin’s – follows a ‘modern brand of pragmatism’, in which New York figures as ‘a corrective to dangerous utopian tunnel vision’. This pragmatic view is sometimes questionable, for example when it pits the state as supreme arbiter against the city as an alternative motor of ‘prosperity’ driven less by class struggle than by competition ‘between new kinds of work versus outdated work’, or when it uncritically celebrates Andy Warhol’s Factory and Jane Jacobs’s neighbourhood activism. It is of little consequence for Kishik that the Factory was strictly a commercial enterprise, or that Jacobs’s militancy promoted gentrification with funding by the Rockefeller foundation – both expressed the living force of the city, the sheer power of the *urban* that in Kishik’s perspective displaces, and even replaces, class struggle as the driving force of history. In this way, Kishik’s much-needed critique of how the architectural fetishes and phantasmagorias of the contemporary city work to veil and deny sheer ‘life’ comes at the cost of a vitalist turning of the urban itself into a kind of mythicized placeholder for an absent politics as such.

Nadir Lahiji and Libero Andreotti

## Pale blue dot

Kelly Oliver, *Earth and World: Philosophy After the Apollo Missions*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, 312 pp., £62.00 hb., £22.00 pb., 978 0 23117 086 4 hb., 978 0 23117 087 1 pb.

On 11 February 2015 the executive director of the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory opened a press conference in Washington with the words: ‘We have detected gravitational waves. We did it.’ The existence of gravitational waves – distortions in ‘space-time’ that Einstein predicted 100 years ago – has finally been empirically proven; they give us, according to Alberto Vecchio, a new ‘broadcasting channel’ into space, enabling us to detect ‘phenomena we have never seen before’. How do we, as ordinary ‘earthlings’, react to that event? Are we excited about the discoveries that lie ahead, and confident in our ability to make ever more sense of the strangeness of the universe? Or does it rather remind us once again of that very strangeness, leading to alienation and maybe even fear? After all, it lies far beyond

the (literal) horizon of human experience to make proper sense of what, for example, ‘dark matter’ or ‘black holes’ (detectable via gravitational waves) are all about.

The potential ambivalence of feelings invoked by the discovery of gravitational waves might be comparable to what emerged in discussions following the publication of the first ever images of planet Earth from the perspective of space. These images, brought home to us by the Apollo missions in the late 1960s, are the anchor-point for Kelly Oliver’s new book *Earth and World: Philosophy After the Apollo Missions*. On the one hand, the images made us reflect on the smallness of Earth: a ‘pale blue dot’ in the vastness of space, fragile and in need of protection. On the other hand, our very capacity to generate these images seemed

to highlight our ability to master, and to expand our control even into, space. Oliver opens the book by arguing that both perspectives are flawed, because they rely on the idea that the images *did* indeed show us the Earth as a ‘whole’, while actually they only reflect the partial view that a human gaze on the world is unable to transcend. Drawing on Husserl, Oliver notes that we need to acknowledge this necessary limitation and consequently leave behind all views of the Earth ‘as a body or a thing’, seeing it instead ‘as the ground for our perception of all other bodies or things’. Distinguishing between *earth* (as ground) and *world(s)* (constructed on the ground), Oliver sets out to ponder the question of ‘how ... we [can] share the earth with those with whom we do not even share a world’. In order to answer this question, she takes us through the works of Kant, Arendt, Heidegger and Derrida to finally, in her last chapter, develop what she calls an ‘earth ethics’.

In the second chapter Oliver turns to Kant, whose work, she argues, is based on a deeply ‘terrestrial perspective’. For Kant, humanity’s relationship to earth is primarily determined by the need to justly divide what by nature is both essential and finite, which leads him to the justification of private property. However, as Oliver rightly points out, Kant’s theory of property ‘collapses under the weight of the demand for universal principled justification’, because any actual division of earth can only be provisional ‘until all nations are united under one universal cosmopolitan law that establishes property rights conclusively’. Oliver also questions Kant’s distinction between human subjects and their earthly possessions. Although she agrees with his understanding of earth as limit-concept, she wants to move beyond him towards a different notion of belonging: one that does not perceive the surface of the earth as static, but that recognizes the dynamic ‘network of relationships’ which cannot be captured by ‘mere geometry or mapmaking’. Instead of possessing the earth, Oliver suggests that we should refigure our belonging to it as ‘companions’.

It is in Arendt’s work that Oliver finds a more adequate conceptualization of that relationship. Arendt distinguishes between ‘world’ and ‘earth’: world is a ‘human artifice’ that we have created in order to protect us from an indifferent earth that limits our movement. Only world can provide meaning, which can be accessed through political rights ‘built in collective action’. While Kant defines politics as that which is limited by earth, Arendt defines politics as that which is ‘born out of the plurality of the earth

and our unchosen cohabitation’. Indeed, as Oliver emphasizes, world(s)-creation is a plural exercise in which we are dependent on others, which implies that we have an obligation towards them: an obligation that involves the proclamation ‘I want you to be.’ However, Oliver is keen to move away from Arendt’s human-centredness by extending her concept of ‘care for the world’ to all earthly inhabitants. Moreover, reconfiguring the relationship of ‘world’ and ‘earth’, Oliver argues that earth is not simply the indifferent place in response to which world (and meaning) is created. Instead it is the place to which we have a unique bond; constituting an ‘ethical obligation ... prior to the possibility of [worldly] politics’.

In the following chapter Oliver moves on to Heidegger, who, like Kant and Arendt, invokes earth as limit-concept, but by contrast to them understands it as that which *enables* experience and understanding. Heidegger’s appreciation of the dependence of all beings on earth, and his reflections on how to inhabit earth well, allow for ‘an ethical turn’. Oliver focuses here on Heidegger’s rethinking of the notion of *Dasein* in his later work, in which *Dasein* no longer encapsulates ‘world-forming’, but rather ‘dwelling’ as ‘caring’. *Dasein* emerges out of the relationship between beings in what Heidegger calls the *Geviert* (fourfold), which presents ‘world’ as the gathering of sky, earth, mortals and divinities (with the latter being absent, their absence manifesting the limits to our knowledge). Earth is thereby folded into world and becomes a central feature of *Dasein* itself. Being human means to be in relation with earth, and ‘cultivat[ing] and safeguard[ing]’ it becomes an ‘ethical imperative’. Oliver wants to embrace this understanding of relationality while rejecting Heidegger’s ‘hierarchies of relative worth’, which manifest themselves in his continuous attempt to set apart the human species.

While Heidegger argues that only human beings can have an understanding of the world ‘as such’ because of the way they can confront death, Derrida maintains that the very idea of the world ‘as such’ is already one of loss: in ‘[t]he reflective moment of the *as such*’ human beings are rendered ‘worldless’, ‘rip[ped] ... from anything that might be immediate experience of, or in, the world’. Contra Heidegger, Derrida defines ethics not as that which is part of the world, but as that which ‘begins where the world ends’. When the world is gone, all that is left is the ‘face-to-face relationship that obligates one singular being to another’. Given the lack of (worldly) ground, ‘[t]he ethical obligation ... is an impossible obligation’

that cannot be comprehended. It is unlike a ‘moral rule’ that can be reflected by a ‘sovereign rationality’. The death that matters is not one’s own, but the death of the other that obliges the survivor not just to carry the other, but the world that has disappeared with the other’s death, as well as one’s own worldlessness: ‘as if without earth beyond the end of the world’. Oliver concludes that ‘by taking up our singular ethical responsibility to every living creature as if to the world itself ... we may hope to learn to inhabit and cohabit the earth.’

In her final chapter, ‘Terraphilia’, Oliver takes her readers through three films released in 2013 (*All Is Lost*, *Oblivion* and *Gravity*) in order to develop further and finalize what she calls ‘earth ethics’. While broadly agreeing with Derrida’s take on ethics, Oliver is concerned that the ‘hyperbolic responsibility to the other when the world is gone does not seem to lend itself to a sense of belonging or community.’ For that sense we need to reflect, she maintains, on our singular yet shared relation to the earth. However, the turn from Derrida’s metaphysics of self/other and singularity back to (material) ‘earth’ and the living creatures that share it feels abrupt. For Oliver, the primary reason for our inability to leave earth behind is the material limit that earth poses to our very survival, as particularly the film *Gravity* (in which an astronaut is stranded in space) illustrates. But this pointing to the need to survive seems to rely on a naturalized and overly simplified understanding of the relation between ‘earth’ and ‘us’, which threatens to undermine Oliver’s conceptual sophistication when it comes to the relation of earth, world and ethics. Oliver rightly suggests that we need a conception of earth that understands how ‘boundaries around species or organisms, peoples or individuals ... are fluid and dynamic’, and how ‘limits are constantly multiplying and exceeded’. Yet in order for her ethics to hold up, we need to maintain some sort of distinction between ‘earth’ and ‘us’, because earth ethics relies on us understanding *our* bond to earth as guaranteeing *our* survival. What grounds this distinction? Is earth made of non-organic matter while earthly ‘creatures’ do live? Or is it situational, whereby we define what ‘earth’ is in relation to concrete situations that (ethically) demand care and protection?

Ultimately, it is Oliver’s tendency to draw upon a phenomenological perspective that grounds both the strengths and the weaknesses of her book. Her reflections on earth as a shared ground that is inhabited by (singular) worlds leads to an ethics that teaches us to

recognize the partiality of our (earthly) perspective and our interdependency. It leads Oliver to call for a loving and caring relationship to earth and its inhabitants, without basing such care in knowledge, recognition and the need to control. Loving the earth should, according to Oliver, not make us draw on a ‘common sense romantic understanding’ of love, which, as she argues, does not acknowledge the extent to which ‘the earth is populated with strange others and foreign landscapes that can be welcoming or threatening, and everything in between.’ This is certainly one of Oliver’s strongest points. As she persuasively demonstrates, it is a romantic understanding of earth, often coupled to the idea of us ‘knowing’ earth, that reduces earth (and ethics) to a manageable object. This understanding is as problematic as the fantasies of mastery and technology-based conquest that are critiqued by environmental movements.

But, at the same time, the phenomenological distinction between ‘us’ and our ‘ground’ is arguably at odds with notions of relationality and (inter-) dependence. Who ‘inhabits’ and what is the ‘habitat’? Who/what bonds (in a unique way) to what/whom? Against Kant, Oliver successfully argues that we have to move towards an understanding of earth as ‘a dynamic living force’ (emphasis added). But her analysis lacks proper engagement with the concept of ‘force’. As Oliver acknowledges, earth is more active and dynamic than those who reduce it to constituting a limit to human activity acknowledge. But what needs more reflection are the consequences of giving such agency to earth: earth destroys lives, earth destroys others, earth constantly destroys and (re)makes itself. Earth actively bonds to *us* – and it also severs that bond.

Thinking more deeply about the earth as force, and of humans existing in a dynamic interrelationship with it – or, to go further, maybe even as *part* of this force – might enable us to arrive at an ethics that is able to dissolve the boundaries between ‘earth’ and ‘us’ that are established by the human gaze. But then, admittedly, the question is whether ethics as such does not implode, given that the fundamental ethical call for ‘care’ and ‘protection’ (which needs *someone* to care) probably could not be upheld. In that sense, the limitations of Oliver’s approach might be necessary ones that allow us to take the notion of interdependence as far as it goes – without giving up the notion of ethics as such.

**Doerthe Rosenow**

# Heaven knows, it's got to be this time

Drucilla Cornell and Stephen D. Seely, *The Spirit of Revolution: Beyond the Dead Ends of Man*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2015. 176 pp., £55.00 hb., £16.99 pb., 978 0 74569 074 2 hb., 978 0 74569 075 9 pb.

As its title promises, this book is a spirited exhortation to think, be and theorize differently. A book that makes radical demands upon us by necessity challenges many widely held positions, assumptions, styles of reasoning and theoretical practices. As a result, few readers will find themselves nodding at every page, but it ought to unsettle and provoke. The book especially presses feminist, queer and political theorists in the Continental traditions to take the project of revolution seriously. Foregrounding climate change, global poverty and the ravages of colonialism and capitalism, Drucilla Cornell and Stephen Seely exhort us to re-centre radical proposals to fight the many destructive forces that govern our age, so calling for a renewed appreciation of utopianism, collective spiritual practices and counter-humanist aspirations. In particular, they urge those embracing naturalism, (new) materialism(s) and posthumanism to cultivate not only alternative bodily practices but also what they call a 'political spirituality'. Taking their cues from the intellectual traditions and discourses of those in the global South, they aim to provincialize (without simply rejecting) feminist and queer theory's preoccupation with the corporeal and material. Bending the stick away from posthumanist returns to nature, Cornell and Seely bring together radical feminism, queer theory, Freudo-Marxism, post-structuralism and even Spinoza with anti-colonial thought in the service of radical repoliticization. In the face of ecological catastrophe, increasing economic precarity and enduring settler violence, they reject most forcefully the anti-political tendencies in queer theory and posthumanism.

The first chapter of *The Spirit of Revolution* calls upon, especially, Herbert Marcuse and Shulamith Firestone to emphasize the erotics of revolutionary transformation. Against libertarian strains in more recent queer and feminist theories, they oppose liberation understood as the unconstrained enjoyment of 'anything goes' sexuality. Correctly in my view, they interpret Firestone not as anti-sex but as a theorist of 'revolutionary love', who seeks the rediffusion of our whole existence with Eros. Engaging with Alexandra Kollontai, Marx and Engels, they emphasize the incompatibility between comprehensively joyful

sexuality and the dictates of capitalist production and reproduction. Cornell and Seely present a vision of revolution as 'the complete deprivatization of the erotic', which demands a redistribution of the sensible as well as of property, wealth and global power. In so doing, they seek to amplify the utopian aspirations of queer theorists such as José Muñoz and women-of-colour feminism in the fight for a 'queer feminist future beyond Man'. They thereby set the direction of the book in opposition to the oppressive figure of the freely choosing, dutifully (re)productive Man towards a new vision of the oppositional, joyfully militant human.

Chapters 2–4 engender 'creolized readings' that bring together European and non-Western thinkers. Dedicated to the Caribbean Philosophy Society, Cornell and Seely's book models itself partly on anti-colonial thinkers who, by necessity, think with the European ideas imposed upon them but strive to transform those ideas, mix them with Africana and Indigenous modes of thought, and press them into the service of decolonization. Their methodology yields fresh interpretations of a diverse range of well-known thinkers in the Western archive. By bringing together Michel Foucault and Ali Shari'ati, Lee Edelman and Frantz Fanon, and Sylvia Wynter and Baruch Spinoza, they challenge the orthodoxies to which the Western thinkers have given rise. While Foucault, for example, has long inspired theorists to focus on bodies, pleasures and practices, Cornell and Seely highlight Foucault's elaboration of 'political spirituality' and his engagement with the thought of the Muslim revolutionary Shari'ati. The effect in this case is not so much to generate an encounter between a European and an Iranian thinker but to expose how the reception of Foucault, especially by Anglo-American queer and feminist theory, ignores the existing involvement of his thought with revolutionary, spiritual and non-Western ideas.

In addition to re-orienting consideration of Foucault towards questions of 'political spirituality', chapter 2 rejects the erasure of his (admittedly complex and ambivalent) involvement with revolutionary and Marxist politics. Cornell and Seely argue that 'the problem of revolution ... remained at the

heart of his thought until the end of his life'. They suggest that Foucault's attention to the revolutionary thought of Shari'ati – who offers a revolutionary vision that, according to the authors, 'goes well beyond European versions of Marxism' – provides an indication of what Foucault's sustained engagement with what the problem of revolution involved. Although forging any precise connection between Foucault's thought and Shari'ati's is a somewhat speculative endeavour, emphasis on Foucault's interest in 'political spirituality' provides a useful corrective. Defined as the 'will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false', they join this idiom familiar to Foucault's readers to the history of efforts to think the profound self-transformations involved in political change. They thus treat the late writings of Foucault on care of the self as deeply political, challenging common interpretations of his late works as evidence of an ethical 'turn' away from his more political work of the 1970s.

The book's next chapter, a blistering critique of Lee Edelman, rejects the controversial queer theorist's presentism as both racist and bad psychoanalysis. They advance a reoccupation of Edelman's psychoanalytic turf by the revolutionary thinking of anti-colonial psychiatrist and liberation fighter Frantz Fanon. They read Edelman's condemnation of 'reproductive futurism', politics in the name of the Child, and filial piety as a parochial, privileged declaration of one who has no need of politics or a vision of the future because he already has everything he needs. If a political striving for reproductive justice can only appear heteronormative to Edelman, it is because he neglects the ongoing struggles of colonized peoples, former slaves, or poor and racialized women in the US prison system subject to forced sterilization, among others. They also undertake a sustained technical demolition of the support Edelman draws from Lacanian psychoanalysis (the accuracy of which I cannot assess). Instead, they mobilize Fanon's diagnosis of the psychosis of colonialism to endorse a revolutionary struggle against the current symbolic and political order.

The final chapter performs perhaps the most surprising creolized interpretation by combining Spinoza and Sylvia Wynter. Whereas Foucault appreciated Shari'ati, and Edelman shares a psychoanalytic framework with Fanon, the site of overlap between Spinoza and Wynter is far from obvious. Cornell and Seely thus stage their encounter in an effort to forge a way 'beyond the dead ends of Man'. If there

is something common among the diverse thinkers they champion, it is a critique of the phallocentric figure of European Man, the ideal of the person as an independent producer who pursues and protects his self-interest (including his family) through rational investment in the capitalist social order. If the authors are unequivocal in their rejection of the norm of capitalized (and capitalist) Man, they nevertheless rally for the insurgent humanism that they find in anti-colonial thinkers such as Fanon and Wynter. While they align their interpretation of Spinoza with my own and affirm the validity of a 'politics of renaturalization', they insist that revolution concomitantly demands the 'reenchanted humanism' of Wynter. Like other feminist and Continental interpreters, they emphasize Spinoza's understanding of human agency as a 'transindividual phenomenon', emerging from the constellation of forces with which each of us is necessarily involved, and from which each of us cannot be separated. They link Spinoza's vision of human agency produced in and through connectivity to radical politics. Aligned with their unapologetic embrace of utopianism and a politics of hope and joy, they draw especially upon the interpretation of Autonomist Marxist Antonio Negri to present Spinoza as a thinker of the insurgent multitude and joyful producer of the commons. In doing so, they press various leftist interpretations of Spinoza to affirm the promise of a planetary, trans-species liberation from capitalism. At this point, they join the tradition of those of us who think with



Spinoza rather than merely about him, going further towards a cosmic political programme than any other theorist of which I am aware.

Cornell and Seely emphasize with Wynter the necessity to preserve humanist aspirations as we carry out our critiques of Man in the name of feminist, queer, ecological, anti-capitalist and anti-colonial thought. They outline Wynter's account of the various 'epistemes' of European Man, influenced by but divergent from Foucault. Wynter articulates an original lineage of the historically engendered truth regimes, or "law-likely" ways of knowing and experiencing the world', against which we can struggle but outside of which we cannot think at all. Thus, while we must challenge the reduction of 'the human' to the European model of Man, such a model ought to be fought primarily with 'new interpretations' of our founding myths and 'new ceremonies', which entail new bodily practices, transforming our modes of being together. Rejecting what they see as Spinoza's opposition to religious ceremony, they call for an alliance between the projects of renaturalization and re-enchantment. While the end of what is generally a radical and provocative book is original and interesting, its concluding appeal for new ceremonies and new interpretations of old myths struck me as rather tame.

Moreover, given that one of Wynter's primary objections is to a naturalistic world-view in which humanity is not exceptional, it is difficult to see how one can reconcile her project with Spinoza's. Wynter laments the reduction of humanity to a natural being, a mere organism like any other. She rejects not only secularization as a form of social and political order, but the loss of an appreciation for how humans are continuous *and* discontinuous with all other living beings. She thereby insists on humanity as a hybrid of *mythoi* and *bios*. While it is possible to interpret Spinoza in a way that aligns with a collective production of 'new ceremonies' and 'new interpretations', as a thoroughgoing naturalist he seems to exemplify one of the most objectionable tendencies of modernity according to Wynter. I applaud the effort to bring Spinoza together with anti-colonial thought, but I am left with many questions about the character of the encounter. Is it a selective and strategic mixing of elements to animate their theoretical and political project? Or must we side with one thinker or the other on the question of human exceptionalism?

Hasana Sharp

## The halo affect

Marie-Luise Angerer, *Desire After Affect*, trans. Nicholas Grindell, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2015. 160 pp., £70.00 hb., £23.95 pb., 978 1 78348 130 9 hb., 978 1 78348 131 6 pb.

*Desire After Affect*, originally published in German in 2007, outlines what Angerer calls a *dispositif* of affect. It explores the three dimensions of the intersecting matrix of desire – affective, sexual and digital – examining them both synchronically and diachronically. Angerer presents the contemporary understanding of affect in terms of its immediacy and functionality within the context of a progression from two things: first, from McLuhan's 'the medium is the message', and second, from psychoanalysis as an 'intermediary' between sexuality and language. Of the two traditions in the thinking of affect – the Silvan Tomkins school of the 1990s, rediscovered by Sedgwick, on the one hand, and the philosophical intersection with neuroscience from Spinoza, Bergson and Deleuze through to Massumi and finally Malabou, on the other – Angerer firmly places her faith in Malabou's meditations on the idea of the plasticity of the brain.

Each chapter of *Desire After Affect* analyses the *dispositif* of affect from a different angle. The somatic turn, the human/posthuman/transhuman debate, neurobiology, sex, the digital and the unconscious are woven together in the attempt to argue for the replacing of the sexual subject altogether in favour of affect, and the uncovering of desire 'after' affect as momentary time lag or temporal gap. In the first chapter Angerer locates the so-called 'affective turn' within twentieth- and twenty-first-century theoretical developments, beginning in a critique of the linguistic turn, the 'ambivalent' position of psychoanalysis with regard to this, and its interesting relationship to the digital, particularly in media theory. 'Affect theory brings a new picture of consciousness, of thought, of mind and of language that no longer accepts division, placing the emphasis instead on the fluid intermingling of matter and nonmatter.' Through a reading of Alain Badiou's *The Century*, she identifies the two traditions informing affect theory as the philosophy of concept (from mathematical formalism to Althusser and Lacan) and philosophy of life (from Bergson to Deleuze). The brief intertwining of these traditions, according to Badiou, result in a critique of both Cartesian rationality and self-reflexivity. As genealogies go,

*Desire After Affect* displays an impressive breadth and depth of scholarship, but the reader is raced along the journey of affect's gestation at breakneck speed without much time for reflection or commentary from Angerer herself.

The wide range of examples from media art on which Angerer draws demonstrates the use of emotions and affects not just in virtual spaces but in 'affective, tactile media art'. She places particular emphasis upon sound in these examples, asserting rightly that too little attention has been paid to sound technologies within this sphere. The focus is on drawing attention to the physiological relation between body and environment, which leads Angerer to define affect (drawing on Deleuze's cinema books) as 'an intermediary zone, relay, or skin contact'. Angerer warns against the use of affect purely as a protective or reactive force against the 'intruders' of meaning and representation.

There is sharp criticism of the straightforward application of Deleuzean concepts such as the virtual to virtual reality or nomadic subjects to cybernerds, or, in other words, attempts to read Deleuze as a 'philosopher of the net'. The critique of overzealous and uncritical applications of Deleuzean thought, and of overly affirmationist thought in general, is a recurring motif throughout the book.

Angerer traces the concept of the posthuman/transhuman through and beyond the modern conception of the human subject and its subsequent critique. She names artificial intelligence, constructivism and cognitive science as areas celebrating posthuman thinking as a liberation from the human subject. Beyond the definition of the human as reliant on the ontological distinction of 'the phenomenon in its appearance and the world as such', Angerer floats the idea of disappearance of the human subject. Through Žižek and others she cites language, sexuality and the unconscious as the three dimensions constituting the inner splitting of the human subject and the subsequent desire for affect. The discussion subsequently moves from Heidegger and Sloterdijk to Foucault, and then through Freud and Lacan to Agamben's bare life. It is the 'doubleness' of language (expressed by Gregory Bateson fifty years ago as the 'content aspect' and 'relational aspect') that Angerer places here as the precursor for the rise of affect as replacing the relational aspect. Throughout this description Angerer maintains a focus on the role of the unconscious in the thinking of both the human and the posthuman. It is through cybernetics and information theory that the concept of the subject as variable is drawn out

here, and finally, with Haraway and Hayles, the materiality of the posthuman or cyber body foregrounded in place of the human subject altogether.

The relationship between psychoanalysis and affect is a complex mixture of estrangement and proximity which is hard to articulate clearly. Angerer describes affect theory as positing 'an unclouded, unbroken relationship between the human being and its environment' and explores this relationship from several angles throughout the book. She reads consciousness between Freud and Bergson as a source for affect, differentiating between Bergson's affective body that connects the body to its environment and Freud's consciousness as a 'system within a system'. Further differentiating, she goes on to outline how Lacan develops the system as language whereas Bergson criticizes language in favour of his own thinking of the image as presentation as opposed to representation. Her discussion of Sylvan Tomkins's affect theory and its critique from Sedgwick and André Green is contrasted with Antonio Damasio, Angerer preferring Damasio's model because of its foregrounding of a consciousness which does not require language to operate.

Angerer discusses sex and virtuality, identifying some important feminist thinkers of the virtual and the digital along the way: Luciana Parisi, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway are all discussed. Angerer makes an important distinction here between Agamben's presentation of bare life as something wild, threatening and Other and Braidotti's celebration of *zoe* as the ungovernable, defamiliarized aspect of subjectivity which is, in Angerer's reading, explicitly sexual. It is Braidotti's thinking here which Angerer believes demonstrates a reclaiming of affect. Discussing a number of diverse feminist performance art works and practices, Angerer eventually defends Lacan's position by declaring it more radical than Deleuze and Guattari's in *Anti-Oedipus*, because (like Agamben) Deleuze and Guattari largely ignore sexuality. This section of the book is less focused than the others surrounding it and there is a sense in places that the thread of argument is lost in the web of citations. The focus returns, however, in her fifth chapter, in which Angerer faces a possible 'extinction of the sexual' in a psychoanalytical sense. She examines the relationship between sexuality and affect through a consideration of Braidotti's version of desire and Parisi's version of sexuality on two counts: first, finding both inadequate due to the gap between their utopian proclamations and a 'drastic real-world remapping of people and geographical spaces', and second,

arguing that this is because they do not separate out desire from the other aspects of their theoretical frameworks. Braidotti is presented as merging desire with a Deleuzean reading of affect, whereas Parisi is presented as allowing desire to mutate into pure energy. In response to these readings Angerer defends psychoanalysis against the critiques of Deleuze and Guattari, pointing out Lacan's sympathetic position towards mathematics and cybernetics in relation to the unconscious and gesturing towards a potential nascent 'biological underpinning' in Freud's thought. She charts the relationship between sexuality and the subject as a kind of impasse, but resists positing language as the object in between these. Whilst the psychoanalytic subject 'does not know what it feels', neurobiology dispenses with the need for a subject for affect and emotion.

Angerer echoes Elizabeth Grosz in identifying what she describes as the 'blindness' in Deleuze and Guattari's thought concerning the sexual body. In her reading of Massumi's affect theory, Angerer suspects that 'against the background of a Deleuzean philosophy desire is equated with affect', which for her

is inadequate. The affective *dispositif* she develops in this book demonstrates, she argues, 'a divide between promise and reality'. For Angerer, desire cannot be equated with the body, nor with language, nor with the life of the organism. Instead she argues for the placing of sexuality within the unconscious, an unbridgeable gap that the affective state can transcend where language fails: 'it is the affective state, radically excluded from the ego, that transposes fear, happiness, excitement and arousal into images that mark the real.'

The 2015 postscript surveys more recent developments succinctly, investigating what the title 'desire after affect' might mean in relation to today's media technologies. Media ecology and Malabou's use of the idea of neurobiological plasticity are the main topics presented as confirming Angerer's presentation of affect as supplanting sex. The temporal gap of reaction – the 'moment of a half-second' – is Angerer's locus of desire 'after' affect, and the conceptual work done to reach this climactic point is impressive indeed.

Helen Palmer

## Birther movement

Alison Assiter, *Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth*, Rowman & Littlefield, London and New York, 2015.  
213 pp., £75.00 hb., £24.95 pb., 978 1 78348 324 2 hb., 978 1 78348 325 9 pb.

In her new book, Alison Assiter faces the challenge of overcoming a conventional interpretation of Kierkegaard as an anti-idealist and phallogocentric thinker. Instead, she presents us with a philosopher who is consistent with German idealism (particularly Schelling), in tune with a contemporary return of ontology, and close to feminism in his thinking of sexual difference. In reading Kierkegaard as an 'ontologist', whose thinking responds to the ultimate constitution of being, Assiter's interpretation aligns with those recently proposed by authors including Slavoj Žižek, David Kangas, Michael Burns and Steven Shakespeare, who similarly situate Kierkegaard in an absolute idealist tradition.

*Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth* proposes a series of 'speculative hypotheses' that, far from being presented as necessary, final or conclusive statements, are freely offered as hermeneutical possibilities justified by some key passages in Kierkegaard's work.

The main hypothesis is a metaphysical one. It lies in a reading of Kierkegaard's thought focused on the category of 'birth'. By birthing, Assiter means the active capacity to generate and give birth, as well as the passive possibility of being conceived, gestated and born. Ontologically speaking, both active/passive senses converge with the idea of 'self-birthing', which is the central concept of the book as a whole: a self-birthing that involves and unfolds its own creative process as an ontological being able to give birth to itself by the freedom of its immanent becoming. In this way, the metaphor provided by the organic function of birthing is elevated beyond its immediate physical meaning to universal significance. Birthing is both the becoming of the ground of existence and the becoming of the existence derived from that ground, mutually involved by a sort of reciprocal action, responding to the immanent circularity of the idealist absolute.

Consequently, it is to idealism, and particularly to Schelling, that Assiter relates back the Kierkegaardian concept of birth. Indeed, when Schelling speaks of ‘the yearning of the One to give birth to itself’, he does not refer to a transcendent and substantial ground, but to an immanent and self-creating ‘unground’, whose original action is birthing itself by itself. In this sense, Schelling’s philosophy can be understood as an ontology of process, of vital becoming, resting on an immanent *Ungrund*, which is always able to be. In other words, the essence of being turns out to be its own creative action, its self-birthing, on Assiter’s account.

Drawing upon this Schellingian inspiration, Assiter thus presents us with a Kierkegaardian ontology that she summarizes in the following hypotheses: (i) Kierkegaard believes in a process system; (ii) he does not think it appropriate to describe this process in ‘logical’ terms but rather in terms that make reference to ‘actuality’; (iii) there is evidence that ‘woman’ is, in some way, superior to ‘man’; and (iv) there are many references to the power of procreation and to birth.

Kierkegaard’s ontology might, then, be summed up for Assiter as a sort of progressive actualism, whose paradigm is to be found in the active and creative energy of the female body. This entails replacing a model of being based on the pure spirituality of phallogocentric transcendence with a self-active and vital materiality, immanent in the becoming of everything. As such, immanence, naturalism and hylozoism all turn out to be determining features of Kierkegaard’s ontology.

Across its ten chapters, *Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth* unfolds its argumentative logic from a number of different conceptual and historical angles. In the early chapters, Assiter welcomes the realist turn of contemporary ontology represented by authors such as Quentin Meillassoux. However, Assiter also objects to the latter’s radical contingentism, which makes the real essentially chaotic and negative. Assiter’s criticism points to the dualistic assumptions of such contingentism, as belonging to an abstract intellectualism according to which everything is always (abstractly) possible. Consequently, she argues, radical contingentism is unable to sustain a universal measure for ethics, so leading to a relativistic nihilism. By contrast, Assiter proposes a kind of realist ontology able to overcome an abstract dualism through the category of the birthing process, consistent with a material and vital criterion for ethics.

In chapters 3, 4 and 5, Assiter focuses on the ethical birth of freedom as it is approached in *The Concept of Anxiety*. Assiter’s hypothesis argues that this work answers to Kant’s inability to explain the origin of evil by means of the Schellingian concept of freedom. There are two fundamental determinations of Schelling’s thought that, according to Assiter, enabled Kierkegaard to overcome the aporias of Kantian ethics. These are the idea of an embodied self, whose natural substrate supports its spiritual evolution, and the ontology of vital and creative process. Both determinations refute the Kantian dualism between spirit and nature as well as his chaotic conception of matter. Against Kant, the *Freiheitsschrift* and *The Concept of Anxiety* argue that the spirit emerges from its natural basis, from that innocent freedom’s dream of its own infinite power, capable of being and not being, of goodness and evil. From the abyss of this powerful dream, freedom awakes as fallen, split, impotent. In agreement with Schelling, Kierkegaard understands the origin of evil to lie in the affirmation of self as the ultimate source of action. At this point, the novelty of Assiter’s reading is to illuminate the meaning of sexual difference at the origin of evil, which is introduced not by Adam but by Eve in collusion with the serpent. The beginning of freedom is a birth, and thus born from Eve – that is, from that female and maternal body yearning to give birth to freedom.

In the second half of her book, Assiter conceptualizes the birthing process as a metaphor for Kierkegaard’s ontology. Here, Assiter brings together Schellingian naturalism with Christine Battersby’s notion of the maternal body. Like Battersby, Assiter considers that Kierkegaard sets up woman at the centre of the scene, and assigns her a paradigmatic role in the metaphysical field as well as in the ethical realm. In Kierkegaard’s writings, woman accounts for the finite, the multiple, the material, the fluidity of a reality in continuous gestation and birthing. According to the paradigm of the mother’s body, all being longs to birth its own power. So, the active energy of maternal creation becomes the metaphor for a natural, spiritual world, and even for God itself, that meta-possibility for all possibility, as well as for the impossible.

Assiter approaches the image of weaning from *Fear and Trembling* as a metaphor for faith, always ‘measured by a mother’s compassionate weaning’ – that is, by God. The mother-child relationship becomes the criterion of the religious relationship between the believer and God. In this way, the maternal metaphor

expresses, on the one hand, the dynamism of the whole nature as a continuous birthing, and, on the other hand, the ethical action of gestating, supporting and nourishing the vulnerable born being. By contrast to a Kantian self-sufficiency and autonomy, the ethics of an always nascent being is to be read as 'a caring ethic' in Kierkegaard's work.

Finally, Assiter ends the book by rethinking the idea of 'revolution', which is interpreted here as a 'possible rebirth' or 'new beginning'. In the context of such an ontology of birthing, the revolutionary defines the essence of freedom as absolute nascent event. In opposition to Kierkegaardian orthodoxy, and its baptism in the name of a transcendent Father God, Assiter thus concludes with a revolutionary Kierkegaard, without any substantialist god, and with an immanent existence in the womb of an *Ungrund*, always yearning to birth itself though its eternal repetition. Assiter's Kierkegaardian absolute knows the labour pains that tear apart human life, nature, freedom.

To extend Assiter's argument a little further, one might also point to its significance for the tremendous phallogocentric metaphor of the damned mother, as a degeneration of the sublime father's creation, later become the helpless and mute handmaid of the lord. This is the other metaphor of birth – one to which Kierkegaard's thought is not alien – that underlies Western philosophy and that has been articulated through a double theoretical and political stratagem: the expropriation and appropriation of the creative energy of the mother's body, along with the nihilistic emptying of the latter, turned into a mere passive and corrupting container of masculine active generation. From the monogenetic theory of a creator Father up to the damned birth of Eve, all of Western thought has violated and impounded the maternal body so as to usurp its birthing energy in the name of the father.

Once this other (phallogocentric) metaphor of birth and the pregnant body is taken into account, Assiter's hypothesis turns out to be doubly significant. On the one hand, it accounts for the resignification of maternal materiality in terms of a self-causal and self-active substratum, and, on the other, it accounts for the patriarchal failure to conceal or empty the mother's body: a body whose creative energy runs away through all the gaps of the system that tried to disable it. When birthing energy is unfolded from its creative materiality, then all fantasies about the paternal womb, fertilizing virility and the labour pains decreed by God fall under suspicion. Whether Schelling or Kierkegaard intend to refer to the

maternal yearning for birthing, or in fact have in mind the pregnant bosom of the Father and his fruitful masculinity, it is anyway the case that the birthing metaphor is only able to unfold its significant ontological and ethical potential in the agony of the patriarchal symbolic. *Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth* is, in this sense, a book that itself marks a rupture with the orthodoxy of existing Kierkegaard studies, drawing out its resonances for contemporary feminisms and new materialisms, and giving birth to the possibility of a new Kierkegaard, born from a contemporary yearning.

María J. Binetti

## Grasp the opportunity

Filippo Del Lucchese *The Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2015. 216 pp., £80.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 978 1 47440 428 0 hb., 978 1 47440 427 3 pb.

Interpretations of Machiavelli reflect the interests of commentators as much as they recapture a set of authentic historical doctrines. Hence when Machiavelli is disparaged for his cynicism, or for his 'evil' disregard for moral conventions, it tells us as much about the situation of Leo Strauss and his followers as it does about Machiavelli. If interpreters of the Cambridge School celebrate Machiavelli as a humane Renaissance humanist and republican, who is steeped in the prevailing and preceding political culture, then we learn as much about their political orientations as we do about Machiavelli's. Althusser and Gramsci imagine Machiavelli as prefiguring their own dialectical forms of Marxism. How are such contrary views to be reconciled or even assessed? Is Machiavelli a figure upon whom subsequent views are simply retrojected? Is he to be taken as a serious political theorist, who has something to say to us about the nature of reality and ongoing political radicalism? Or is he to be seen as putting together miscellaneous thoughts on history and political power in the interests of prevailing political interests and opportunities?

In the context of these questions, Del Lucchese's book is to be admired. It does at least three things. It introduces Machiavelli by providing a clear thematic account of his doctrines, and a close analysis of his major political works, notably of the *Discourses* and of *The Prince*, and it reviews major ways in which his thought has been interpreted. Its most compelling

feature is that it takes Machiavelli to be a serious and systematic political philosopher, with a clear sense of how time and virtue are to be understood, which in turn reflects metaphysical ideas on the nature of reality that can be traced back to Ancient authors. A favoured reading of Machiavelli, put forward by Cambridge School historians like Skinner and Pocock, takes him to be a Renaissance humanist and classical republican. This view is put to one side by Del Lucchese's account, which offers an image of Machiavelli as a coherent and systematic philosopher who does justice to the uncertainties of temporality, and advances a populist form of republicanism. Allied to the metaphysical reading of Machiavelli is a political perspective that takes him to have a clear ideological political agenda, so that the *Discourses* and *The Prince* are not seen to be discrete and circumstantial texts lacking ideological bite. Machiavelli is a republican but not a mild and accommodating one; rather, he is a radical whose sympathy lies clearly with the people. When judgements have to be made on what counts in political terms and how time is to be negotiated, Machiavelli is understood to side squarely with the people.

For Del Lucchese, Machiavelli is, then, a philosopher because he operates with philosophical concepts, such as matter and form, with which Aristotle is associated. Yet, there is a difference. Machiavelli, in Del Lucchese's account, is a dialectical thinker, who imagines matter and form to be interrelated, so that form underlies matter, and matter occasions formative operations. The matter of things matters because they are liable to corruption and not infinitely pliable, even if they can be acted upon



by formative activity. Nature and agency, humanity and natural things are interrelated. Human action is enacted in a naturalistic setting and politics is about acting in the context of what is given. Politics deals with the material world and in turn frames the world for further political activity. The character of politics is here analogous to that of medicine, in that the medical arts offer knowledge and practical skills to enable the body to flourish, while political arts can tend to the body politic.

Nature is constituted and reconstituted through history, and so Machiavelli turns to history to investigate the character of the state and politics. He detects regularity within the processes of historical change. In turning to history to disclose the nature of political bodies, Machiavelli draws upon the Greek historian Polybius. Machiavelli makes use of Polybius' account of political change as enacting a circular change by which forms of regime can be seen to recur in a deterministic pattern. However, Machiavelli rejects the biological determinism of Polybius and introduces chance and contingency to the historical process. In so doing, Del Lucchese suggests, Machiavelli turns to the atomistic philosophical tradition of Democritus and Epicurus and in particular to Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, which he had read in his youth. Machiavelli draws on Lucretius, Del Lucchese claims, to assume a metaphysics that combines determinism with the aleatory randomness of events. In embracing contingency, Machiavelli is seen to combine chance and necessity. Just as Epicurus and Lucretius had tempered necessity by chance, so Machiavelli acknowledges a 'swerve' in reality. In this way Machiavelli incorporates human freedom and the possibilities of radical political action into an overall understanding of reality. Machiavelli recognizes how the opportunities afforded by occasions count against a blunt teleology so that determinism is to be offset by the practice of political *virtù*, which allows for radical action by the people in developing a nation.

For Del Lucchese, then, Machiavelli reworks traditional political concepts against tradition itself. Fortune and necessity are not presumed to be dichotomous. *Virtù* can grasp fortune and operate dialectically to offer political reward. The predisposition to face mutations and variations by practising *virtù* and dealing with what fortune brings constitutes what Machiavelli offers as a philosophical vision of reality and politics. Del Lucchese imagines Machiavelli's *virtù* to be open and democratic, resisting its constriction to elites. Whoever can grasp the opportunity

can operate virtuously. Machiavelli, on this reading, offers a dialectical philosophy that is at odds with what has gone before, though it draws upon philosophical tradition. It is against elitist Platonic politics, Aristotelian teleology, the providentialism of Polybius and a restricted classical republicanism that excludes the people. Machiavelli embraces instead a conflictual structure of reality that allows for populism in drawing upon the Epicurean vision of Lucretius rather than Aristotelianism and classical republicanism.

Reading Machiavelli as a dialectical theorist allows for an appreciation of his realist and transformative political philosophy. Politics can be read dialectically in the past and in the present because supposed universal moral truths do not stand aside from the changing shapes of political realities. Moreover Del Lucchese's reading incorporates a considered appreciation of historic readings of Machiavelli. Machiavelli's dialectical appreciation of agency, change and difference is shown to align with aspects of many subsequent commentaries. Del Lucchese weaves several interpretations of Machiavelli around the story that he tells. Hence he makes sense of Hegel's identification of Machiavelli's nationalism and of Strauss's recognition of Machiavelli's originality, and shows how Althusser and Gramsci can perceive their own dialectical forms of Marxism to be prefigured in Machiavelli. Questions, however, can be asked of Del Lucchese's rereading of Machiavelli concerning, for instance, the influence of Lucretius on Machiavelli, which is crucial for the book's depiction of Machiavelli as a metaphysician. Of course influence is an elusive, tricky concept with which to deal, and what we are offered here does not render the concept any less elusive than usual. We are not presented with evidence of an exceptional and emphatic engagement with Lucretius on the part of Machiavelli. Rather, Machiavelli is held to have read Lucretius early in his life, and key passages in his texts are held to reflect or mirror Lucretius. In Del Lucchese's interpretation of Machiavelli, his instrumentalism tends to be played down along with the influence of classical humanism and Ancient republicanism. Machiavelli, however, does draw upon Renaissance republicanism and he offers sharp and provocative commentary on how a politician can break with moral sentiments. The story that is told by the Cambridge School is not simply wrong even if it is one-sided, just as Leo Strauss has a point in calling Machiavelli 'evil'. Machiavelli is prepared to play a very tough political game in which the innocent might be killed.

Interpretations of classic political theorists are inevitably partial. Texts are shaped by the ways in which they are interpreted. Texts and contexts are neither self-producing nor reducible to the inspiration of a classic author or the force of a set of circumstances. What we can ask of an interpretation is that it offers a stimulating and plausible reading of past texts so that we appreciate how the conceptual world of a past thinker relates to the world with which it is aligned. We also want to get to grips with what a past thinker has to say that is of ongoing significance for political reality and philosophical speculation. In this regard, Del Lucchese's reading of Machiavelli is an exemplary interpretation. It is a highly readable and engaging account of Machiavelli that is both scholarly and plausible. Importantly, it shows how Machiavelli has much to say about the practice of politics and the nature of historical developments in the early modern, and indeed the late modern, world. This is more than enough to be going on with.

Gary Browning

## More amour propre

Peter Sloterdijk, *Stress and Freedom*, trans. Wieland Hoban, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden MA, 2015. 80 pp., £35.00 hb., £9.99 pb., 978 0 74569 928 8 hb., 978 0 74569 929 5 pb.

In his *Philosophy of Mind*, Hegel declares that 'No Idea is so generally recognized as indeterminate, ambiguous, and open to the greatest misconceptions, to which therefore it actually falls prey, as the Idea of freedom, and no Idea is in common circulation with so little consciousness of it.' Hegel's motif aptly applies to Peter Sloterdijk's new book. Sloterdijk's book *Stress and Freedom* is something of a bombastic oddity, which seeks to conceive freedom not as an agent's autonomy, or right to self-determination, but rather as an act of withdrawal from the social. The book, which is based on a speech Sloterdijk gave at the Berlin Speeches on Freedom in 2011, is a short meditation on the interconnectedness of freedom and stress. It is the relation between these two concepts which allows Sloterdijk to argue for an account of freedom as the freedom to flee from the social sphere of human existence. Sloterdijk's aim is to provide an ostensibly innovative conception of individual freedom that is predicated on an immunological conception of society. Society for Sloterdijk is a stress-generating

machine. His attempt, while certainly theoretically interesting, results in a hideous reactionary politics.

The political implications of Sloterdijk's text on freedom are not unlike Heidegger's preoccupation with the fundamental ontological question of Being qua being. One is here reminded of Adorno's reproach to Heidegger in *Negative Dialectics*:

Metaphysical reflections that seek to get rid of their cultural, indirect elements deny the relation of their allegedly pure categories to their social substance. They disregard society, but encourage its continuation in existing forms, in the forms which in turn block both the cognition of truth and its realization.

While Sloterdijk does not encourage the continuation of society in its existing form, he does argue for a conception of freedom which purposefully severs the individual's link to society. For Sloterdijk, rather than seeking to collectively change the material conditions of society, his proposed solution is to construct a concept of freedom that privileges the individual, rather than the collective. Freedom, for Sloterdijk, is the freedom to retreat from the social.

From the outset of the book, Sloterdijk's resentment of collective and shared existence is evident. For example, he defines individualism as 'the life form that loosens the embeddedness of individuals in collectives, and questions the seemingly immemorial absolutism of the shared by assigning to every single human the dignity of being absolutely *sui generis*'. He claims that 'the large-scale political bodies we call societies should be understood primarily as stress-integrated force fields, or more precisely as self-stressing care systems constantly hurtling ahead.' Sloterdijk's thesis is that human societies operate by generating stress on a mass scale. Societies are only able to exist in so far as they maintain a certain level of unease among their inhabitants. Modern media outlets, capitalism's unmitigated productive force, the exploitation of workers, and so on – all of these factors of contemporary social life stress us out. Sloterdijk is confident about this definition of society because he argues that the very stability of society is not guaranteed; a point he takes to be proved by the prevalence of the word 'sustainability' in the dominant cultural discourse. Our obsession with creating a more sustainable way of life is not incidental, Sloterdijk claims; it is rather a reaction to, and a symptom of, the inherent restlessness of our modern world. Hence, societies are to be understood as stress-inducing 'force fields' that surround its inhabitants completely.

Sloterdijk's inspiration for his conception of freedom is mainly found in Rousseau's *Rêveries of the Solitary Walker*. This is the focus of the second section of the book. In this seldom-read text, Rousseau describes his walking experience in 1776–77 on St Peter's Island in the middle of Lake Biel. It is the entry for the 'Fifth Walk' which fascinates Sloterdijk. There, Rousseau gives his contemplative account of experiencing a state of solitude so refined that all earthly and social pressures dissolve and momentarily wither away. Sloterdijk refers to this as the 'freedom of a dreamer in a waking state'. For Sloterdijk, then, Rousseau's experience ushers in a new understanding of freedom, which refers

to a state of exquisite unusability in which the individual is entirely with themselves, but mostly detached from their everyday identity. In the freedom of the reverie, the individual is far removed from 'society', but also detached from their own person as woven into the social fabric. They leave both things behind: the world of collective themes of concern and themselves as part of it. Hence an individual becomes free through the conquest of carefreeness.

This carefree subject, according to Sloterdijk, is one without any objective purpose, creative endeavour or political opinion. It is a subject with nothing to say or do. Sloterdijk's free subject is useless, and that's the entire point. To be useful presupposes some connection to the social dimension of human existence, and Sloterdijk's withdrawn subject flees from this exact connection.

If modern societies are nothing but stress-generators, then Rousseau's discovery is the only form of temporary relief available. Sloterdijk acknowledges that there are two general types of unfreedom: (i) political oppression; and (ii) repression by a reality that is external to the subject. Unsurprisingly, Sloterdijk spends little time contemplating the first form of unfreedom and mostly focuses on the second. He draws upon Lacan's concept of 'the Real' to suggest that the modern social order is inherently oppressive, traumatic and seemingly inescapable, save for the flash of freedom discovered by Rousseau: 'the subjectivity released while fleeing from pursuit by the real – the pure feeling of existence removed from all topics – reached, just this once, the pole of complete freedom from stress.'

Sloterdijk thinks that in our contemporary situation we can neither live in absolute carefreeness as a withdrawn subject nor dismiss Rousseau's discovery. Where the individual experience of withdrawnness

is concerned, Sloterdijk demonstrates a characteristically reactionary attitude towards collective forms of political action. Repeating an all-too-pervasive neoliberal trope, he claims that Rousseau's concept of the General Will, famously formulated in *The Social Contract*, 'was the logical nucleus of the socialist fascisms that dueled against their nationalist rivals during the twentieth century'. He goes on to assert that this only

proves that even distinguished thinkers do not always gain their most far-reaching insights in the right order. Rousseau should have retracted his doctrine of *volonté générale* in light of his experience in Lake Biel. His failure to do so was disastrous for the modern world, in which nothing is as irresistible as a wrong idea in the heads that seem only to have been waiting for it.

What follows this attack on the general will is a haphazard and hasty link between the Reign of Terror and the Chinese and Russian revolutions. Indeed, for Sloterdijk 'the deeds of the Khmer Rouge likewise had undeniable Rousseauist origins', and 'Gaddafi's Libyan socialism brought to light aspects of the phantasm that the will of the whole should be unanimous.'

Analogous to Heidegger's account of authentic Dasein, Sloterdijk claims that the experience of the fleeing or released subject

never maintains the stance of inaccessibility to the real in the long term. As soon as it discovers its freedom, it simultaneously discovers a virtually boundless accessibility within itself to calls from the real. Because of its availability, which reaches a maximum by disengaging inwards, it independently finds its way back into the objective – provided it is not kept within a false I-construct by neurosis, as was the case with Rousseau.

Sloterdijk concludes the book with an appeal to the noble disposition of the free subject. The free subject is noble because it is committed to alleviating the stress of others through virtuous acts of generosity, for 'whoever acts out of freedom revolts against meanness they can no longer bear to see.' This 'meanness' includes both political oppression and the repressive nature of reality. Curiously enough, Sloterdijk calls his theory of freedom a type of liberalism, one that is 'a synonym for generosity'.

*Stress and Freedom* abides by Sloterdijk's philosophical project, his *Spheres* trilogy, in that he advances an understanding of society that is decidedly immunological. Society is not only stressful, but it will continue to create and disseminate stressors. The

only solace from social stress is a form of individual freedom that borders on the ascetic and the aristocratic. But by opposing the concept of freedom as the collective right to self-determination, Sloterdijk's thesis reinforces the most reactionary tendencies of the status quo. Gone are any attempts at restructuring or refashioning the economic order and our social institutions, gone is the demand for universal emancipation by way of altering our material conditions, and, perhaps most dangerously of all, gone is the *idea* of freedom as self-determination, the very germ of radical emancipation itself.

Borna Radnik

## Ugh

Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality: Reconstructing the Second Discourse*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014. 236 pp., £47.99 hb., £18.99 pb., 978 1 10706 474 4 hb., 978 1 10764 466 3 pb.

Rousseau's *Second Discourse* is long and intricate – some would say even tortuous – and first-time readers often get lost. In my experience (having taught the text for a number of years), part of the problem is recognizing the kind of argument that Rousseau mounts, or even recognizing that there is an argument at all, rather than a general polemic against the ills of civilization. A frequent and wholly understandable complaint from students is that Rousseau appears to assert different and even contradictory claims at different points in the text. What exactly is Rousseau saying about inequality? Is the focus of the text inequality or is this only a landmark en route to a more fundamental problem: the possibility of autonomy or authenticity in the modern world? To compound matters, there is the purported influence of the work on figures like Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Adorno and Horkheimer. If the *Second Discourse* is an important source for works like *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, *The 1844 Manuscripts*, *The Genealogy of Morals* and *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, then it should be possible not just to trace this influence but to develop an authentically Rousseauian standpoint to compare and contrast with these seminal statements on modernity. If any text in the canon deserves painstaking reconstruction, then it is surely this one.

Frederick Neuhouser's background in German Idealism greatly facilitates his achievement in Rousseau's

*Critique of Inequality*. (His previous publications include *Fichte's Theory of Subjectivity* of 1990 and *Actualizing Freedom: The Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory* of 2000.) The book is divided into five lengthy chapters. The first, 'Nature Is Not the Source of Social Inequality', addresses in great detail the claim most closely identified with the *Second Discourse*: that inequality is not natural.

For Neuhouser, there are two senses of this. There is nothing, first, in the constitution of nature itself – in the relation between biological needs and the earth's natural resources – or, second, in the character of unsocialized pity and *amour de soi même* that would explain why scarcity is a necessary or widespread feature of human social life.

The second sense famously set Rousseau at odds with the psychological egoism of Hobbes and the tradition departing from him. For Rousseau, there is no intrinsic pride or vanity to human nature that would explain competition and strife. These non-natural passions are, instead, social in origin. However, for Neuhouser, rather than settling matters this serves to open up a deeper line of inquiry, which forms the second chapter: if nature is not the source of inequality, what is? Put differently, if the source of inequality is social and lies in us, what motivates us to create it?

Rousseau's answer to this is, again, widely known and celebrated: the non-natural passion that is the source of inequality is *amour propre* – often translated as self-love or vanity. These translations, however, do not capture the ubiquitous and dynamic character of Rousseau's conception. For Neuhouser, *amour propre* is a fundamental human drive, psychological in origin, which accounts for the general human desire to be recognized as superior in the eyes of others. Human beings create inequalities and consolidate these in institutional forms simply for the sake of having their superior standing recognized. For Rousseau, legal and political institutions like private property and the state are simply objectified forms of social recognition.

Two questions immediately arise here and form the basis of the rest of the book. Having rejected any naturalistic basis for social inequality, Rousseau now appears to be asserting, through the concept of *amour propre*, a natural psychological basis for it – albeit in an expanded, socially mediated sense. What hangs on attributing inequality to this socially mediated nature, rather than to the narrower concept of nature? Second, given this distinction between these two senses of nature, can we distinguish a pejorative and non-pejorative sense of *amour propre*?

The subsequent chapters that deal with these questions are the most innovative and fascinating parts of the book. What becomes clear is that Neuhouser does not reject out of hand Rousseau's approach as teleological, but explores it without prejudging the outcome. In what Neuhouser refers to as the 'normative resources of nature' are to be found the essential (necessary but not sufficient) constituents of the human good, and it is these that make possible the critique of the different forms of social inequality. These include freedom from domination and basic well-being – absence of pain, frustrated desire and unmet needs. The state of nature provides the blueprint for the freedom and well-being that could be ours in a differently ordered society. Freedom and well-being in the state of nature and the well-founded republic are, however, fundamentally different – as the distinction in *The Social Contract* between natural liberty and the moral liberty makes clear. It is what humans could be – in terms of the possibilities of their natural/social existence – rather than what they once were that provides a platform for a critique of an unequal society. The concept of the state of nature prepares the ground by unsettling our basic assumptions about what is fixed in social existence.

Tellingly for Neuhouser, the specification of the normative content of nature for Rousseau 'falls well short' of the more robust sense of internal purposiveness found in Kant's notion of unsocial sociability, in which nature achieves its end behind the back of blood-splattered history, or the unfolding forms of spirit in Hegel. For Rousseau, history and the factors that bring about social change are altogether more contingent than this. According to Neuhouser, Rousseau's expanded naturalism puts him neither with the natural law theorists nor with a thoroughgoing historical contingency. As he puts this, '[a]lthough nature prescribes certain general ends to humans, there is a nearly infinite variety of specific ways in which they can be realized.' The penultimate chapter, 'Judging the Legitimacy of Social Inequalities', homes in on what this critique of modern social institutions and practices looks like. What transpires is a far-reaching and powerful conception of social domination, the routine obeying of a foreign will with its source in economic inequality: 'Rousseau's locating the source of domination in asymmetric relations of dependence enables us to see how there can be widespread domination in the absence of coercion and even in the presence of actual consent (when the motivation for obedience is to secure the cooperation one requires in order to satisfy one's needs).' This

means that Rousseau's critique is far more attuned to the complexity of social domination and the complex forms that this can take (economic, social, as well as political) than the contemporary liberal tradition – exemplified, for Neuhouser, by John Rawls and Phillip Pettit. Whereas Rawls's political liberalism emphasizes the conditions necessary for the free and equal exercise of *citizenship*, the *Second Discourse* points to other social spheres, beyond the political, in which the fundamental interest of *individuals* stands in need of protection by the state. Neuhouser hereby paves the way to a broader application of Rousseau's thought to current debates in moral and political philosophy, beyond that offered by contemporary liberalism, and puts it back at the centre of contemporary debates about social justice.

Timothy Hall

## Wrestling

Chris Hedges, *Wages of Rebellion: The Moral Imperative of Revolt*, Nation Books, New York, 2015. 286 pp., £17.99 hb., 978 1 56858 966 4.

The latest book from radical journalist Chris Hedges demonstrates the passionate, angry writing which won him the Pulitzer Prize, and marked his fifteen years as foreign correspondent at the *New York Times*. There are vivid anticipations of the coming ecological catastrophe, and outrage at the self-serving practices of a powerful elite. In the volume's core sections, Hedges recounts his interviews with a disparate set of 'rebels', sifting their accounts to explore 'the forces and personalities that foster rebellion' and identify 'what it takes emotionally, psychologically, and physically to defy absolute power'.

Who are the rebels? Hedges met Lynne Stewart, the New York former attorney who, in the wake of 9/11, was sentenced to ten years for releasing a statement from her client, the Egyptian Omar Abdel-Rahman; Ronnie Kasrils, the South African communist who had an important role in the African National Congress's armed wing; Mumia Abu-Jamal, the former Black Panther serving life imprisonment for murder, having spent nearly thirty years on death row; Occupy activist Cecily McMillan; environmental campaigner Tim Weis; Jeremy Hammond, who hacked emails from a private security firm and sent them to WikiLeaks; and, finally, Julian Assange. Hedges also reflects on interviews from earlier in his

career, including with a former Wehrmacht major who plotted with von Stauffenberg to kill Hitler, and considers other rebels he never met, including Marek Edelman, a commander of the 1943 uprising in the Warsaw ghetto; Wiebo Ludwig, who used sabotage in his pioneering campaigns against fracking in Canada; Syed Fahad Hashmi, currently imprisoned in a 'supermax' facility after 'accepting a plea bargain' on charges to do with support for al-Qaeda; Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden.

This is, to put it mildly, a mixed set of activists. Their causes are various, as are their positions on such issues as the conditions in which violence is appropriate and 'legitimate' as a means of rebellion. In assuming that there will be common characteristics between the people he's focusing on, Hedges generates one of the book's more frustrating patterns. Presenting his subjects as individuals set in direct opposition to 'absolute power' or 'corporate totalitarianism', their 'rebelliousness' is abstracted from the very different contexts and movements of which they were part. Their actions must consequently result from individual choice, which is resourced by mysterious subjective elements in Hedges's account. Hedges roots these elements in his rebels' 'moral courage', 'peculiar obstinacy', 'fierce independence' and 'profound empathy, even love, for the vulnerable, the persecuted and the weak'. In the final chapter, he develops Reinhold Niebuhr's view that people who defy injustice and repression are 'possessed' by 'a sublime madness' in 'the soul'.

Such explanations reflect Hedges's self-image as a campaigner against the odds, guided by a strong moral sense. Some see his resulting style as moralizing, overblown and self-indulgent. Nonetheless, this can downplay the extent to which Hedges's views are deeply and sincerely held. The theological concepts, such as 'radical evil', which shape his judgements and understanding are rooted in his position as a recently ordained Presbyterian minister – a position he was refused in the 1980s, when an ordination committee refused to accept that his going to El Salvador as a war reporter was a valid form of 'calling'. Sympathetic readers will protest, too, that Hedges does, in fact, provide accounts of the social contexts in which his subjects became rebels. These were various – from Nazi Germany to apartheid South Africa, and the 'liberal democracies' of Canada and the USA. However, in presenting his rebels as lone heroes, Hedges flattens out the significant differences between the systems they fought. This involves emphasizing the current trends of militarization and

increasing surveillance of citizens in Europe and North America. Such trends of course require critique and radical response. But these tasks are not served by exaggeration and caricature, which can perversely credit the currently powerful with more control than they actually have, and which tend to deny the considerable opportunities there are to criticize and organize against oppressive and undemocratic practices. For Hedges, though, ‘no mechanisms to institute genuine reform or halt the corporate assault are left within the structures of power ... the citizen has become irrelevant’. In Europe, we live in a situation of ‘inverted totalitarianism’ which has ‘extinguished’ democracy. The USA is in a ‘post-constitutional era’: a ‘legal tyranny’ is now in place, and the ‘most basic constitutional rights have been obliterated ... judicially abolished’.

Sometimes Hedges qualifies such exaggerations, accepting that the trends which alarm him have not yet quite reached the point of quashing all investigative journalism, organized dissent and independent thought. Nevertheless, the book is overexcited. He argues that we ‘have no choice’ but to defy ‘the formal institutions of government because they do not work’. ‘Appealing to the judicial, legislative or executive branches of government in the hope of reform’ is unrealistic, useless. ‘There is no hope for correction or reversal by appealing to power ... it is only by overthrowing traditional systems of power that we can be liberated’. The choice that Hedges presents, between submission to overwhelming power or individualist rebellion, with little chance of success, is familiar in romantic and anarchist traditions. It risks diverting us from the task of identifying the interstices and contradictions in today’s situations where critique can be turned into action, and it effectively refuses the hard slog of attempting again to build up a counter-systemic movement – a long-term job which involves many more routine moments than ‘sublime’ ones.

The most interesting parts of *Wages of Rebellion* are those where Hedges is least coherent, least certain, and uneven. His attacks on American corporate power and political corruption carry an unstated current of liberal outrage that governmental practice in the USA is not living up to the standards it claims. His pen portraits often suggest the familiar twist in American movies where a character takes a stand against the current ways in which power is being exercised, but only in the name of the ‘real’ values on which that power is supposedly founded. If Hollywood ever makes the predictable blockbuster

about Edward Snowden, presenting him as an all-American hero, breaking today’s law only in order to uphold the truth and the rights on which that law should properly be based, Hedges’s account will have anticipated it.

Hedges wrestles with issues of violence and non-violence, his antipathy to power and understanding of the ‘madness’ which drives some rebels to oppositional violence sitting uneasily with his core moral and religious values. Sometimes he explains the violence of oppressed people as an inevitable reaction to the acts of the oppressors. But at most points Hedges is clear that ‘violence is counter-productive’. Here comes the old bogeyman: ‘violent revolutions always empower revolutionaries, such as Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who are as ruthless as their adversaries.’ Hedges is relieved, then, when he feels able to claim that ‘most successful revolutions are ... fundamentally nonviolent’, and thankful when he can describe the ANC shifting ‘from violence to nonviolent civil disobedience’ – though this counter-position of methods used by the same people for the same reasons at different times again detaches tactics and actions from the context in which they were used, and turns the issue of their appropriateness or otherwise into a question of abstract morals.

A chapter on ‘vigilante violence’ maps the roots of a potential right-wing movement in the USA, anticipating the possibility that in the event of ‘the breakdown of American society’ gun culture could combine with racist, nativist currents to ‘energise ... armed vigilante groups that embrace a version of ... fascism that fuses Christian and national symbols’. This account of potential ‘rebels’ with whom Hedges does not sympathize stands at odds with the rest of the book. It does consider the political content and context of the potential reactionary movement, but, here, there are no interviews exploring the particular ‘madness’ of enthusiasts for the Confederate flag.

In these sections, where Hedges puts aside his certainties and clear sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and actually grapples with problems that confuse radicals today, he is doing what is needed. Identifying our difficulties and showing how unsettling they are is more useful than providing easy answers or inspiring perorations. Nonetheless, if Hedges is going to wrestle with current challenges to the point that he can identify effective strategies for the way ahead, he will have to do better than he does here. We all will.

**Mike Makin-Waite**