God squaddy


Religion is back. This seems to be true not only in politics, where it has returned with a vengeance, but in intellectual and cultural discourse as such. If this is a fact, and if the Enlightenment project of secularization can somehow be shown to have reached its limit, then how should one respond? Is the liberal strategy of containment (within the private sphere, faith, the non-cognitive) the best way of dealing with it, or should it be accepted (can it ever be accepted?) that religion presents us with a source of authority that is *sui generis* and possibly sovereign in relation to other forms of discourse? What, in particular, is the relation between philosophy and theology? Is modern or twentieth-century philosophy, as any cursory look would seem to indicate, overwhelmingly secular, or is there perhaps an unacknowledged entanglement with religion that may be constitutive of what the most sophisticated thinking was and continues to be?

It is the latter alternative that Hent de Vries has explored in his now substantial body of research on the works of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, Jacques Derrida and Theodor W. Adorno – all of whom he takes to represent a kind of ‘working through’ of theological motifs in the register of conceptual, philosophical reflection. De Vries has previously published two acclaimed books on this topic – *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (1999) and *Religion and Violence* (2001). *Minimal Theologies*, while appearing in English for the first time in 2005, was originally published in German in 1989 and may well, according to de Vries, be viewed as ‘an extended prolegomenon, after the fact’ to the other two books.

Extended it is, for at 760 pages this is a huge study of its own. Its subtitle – *Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas* – should be taken in its Kantian meaning: what de Vries is after is how Adorno and Levinas (with Habermas and Derrida, each in their own way, functioning as backdrops to the discussion), in the context of the all-too-familiar man-made disasters of the twentieth century, negotiate and articulate a certain theological impulse, a metaphysical desire, without making ontological or onto-theological commitments. The critique is particularly Kantian in that, rather than rejecting this impulse outright, they seek to acknowledge, explore and analyse it with a view to uncovering a dimension that on a legitimate, although not ‘traditional’ or indeed even fully conceptual, basis can be accepted by philosophy.

In some respects, the fact that this book was written in the 1980s can be felt rather strongly, and de Vries would perhaps have written it differently today. It is, for example, caught up in the then virulent debates around discourse ethics, and de Vries spends more time than I imagine he would have today worrying about Habermas’s attributions, in the notoriously impatient *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), of ‘performative self-contradictions’ to thinkers as distinguished and different from each other as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida and Foucault. Habermas’s more direct engagement with religion was in his debate with Joseph Ratzinger (now Benedictus XI), which took place more than a decade after the writing of this book and is therefore not discussed (See Habermas’s ‘Stellungnahme’ to the issue of ‘Vorpolitische moralische Grundlagen eines freiheitlichen Staates’ in *Zur Debatte: Themen der Katholischen Akademie in Bayern* 34, 2004; and *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta, 2002). However, the more general deficits that de Vries locates in Habermas’s work, and which he discusses in a long warm-up to the analysis of Adorno, are still relevant and important. According to de Vries, Habermas fails to explain adequately how rationality, as embodied in our claims to unconditional validity, can be represented in principles, rules or norms. Indeed, Habermas himself admits that secular moralities stand in need of semantic resources drawn from extra-reflective or extra-philosophical registers – yet these are resources that cannot be accounted for within his own system.

There is a need, de Vries senses, for a responsible articulation of what one might think of as reason’s other. In a (post-Auschwitz) world of closure and metaphysical immanence, apparently leaving such
anti-metaphysical positions as pragmatism and hermeneutics to do the job of accounting for the presuppositions of rationality, de Vries wants to talk about a ‘higher’ and more demanding source of moral and epistemic authority than what current Enlightenment consensus can provide. ‘I would suggest’, he writes, ‘that we could conceive of philosophical theology as the touchstone and guardian of universality, truth, veracity, intersubjective validity, even authentic expressivity in all matters concerning (the study of) religion and, perhaps, not religion alone.’ Such a philosophical theology would have to avoid both positive theology (or ontotheology) and the mere empirical research into the history and practices of religious faith. It would also – and this is more difficult – have to traverse the seemingly exclusive divide between conceptual or reflective articulation of the absolute, on the one hand, and appeals to some form of exclusive encounter with an immediate presence, on the other. De Vries rejects idealism and dialectics, both of which reduce the absolute to its conceptual representation. He also, however, wants to avoid mere gesturing or mysticism. There must be what he calls an ‘irrefutable concretion’, but not in any argumentatively determinable way.

Is such a position – a philosophical theology in pianissimo – available? Is there a third way in these matters? When discussing both Adorno and Levinas, de Vries repeatedly invokes the notion of ‘the trace’. Yet what is a trace of the absolute other (of reason)? How does it announce itself, and why should we accept its bid for authority? What makes it genuine or binding?

As already intimated, de Vries’s way of answering these questions is to offer extensive readings of both Adorno and Levinas (as well as Derrida to some degree). Indeed, de Vries’s orientation is predominantly scholarly and reconstructive. Largely avoiding polemics, de Vries’s book, with its penchant for quotation, reference and interpretation, is a theoretical collage which, rather than playing out positions against one another, seeks to produce what Adorno called ‘constellations’ – complex syntactic relations and similarities that manage to reverberate with one another and generate new meaning. De Vries does this extremely well. He succeeds in disclosing fascinating and deep parallels between Adorno and Levinas, and he brings their works fruitfully to bear on more widespread discussions of the nature of rationality (There is a growing awareness of the parallels that run between these two projects. See, for instance, Josh Cohen, Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy, 2003). However, he also, perhaps unavoidably, downplays some essential differences between the two thinkers.

According to de Vries, Adorno’s dialectical critique of dialectics and Levinas’s phenomenological critique of phenomenology ‘resemble each other formally, to the point of becoming almost interchangeable and collapsing into each other’. By criticizing philosophies of identity (Adorno) or totality (Levinas), they both seek to locate a transcendent dimension that places the subject in demand or, even stronger, as in Levinas, obligates it. For Adorno, the critique of identity-thinking takes place through negative dialectics, a radical self-critique of (Hegelian) dialectics, aiming not to synthesize or unify but to demonstrate the non-identity of subject and object, concept and object, universal and particular. For Levinas, the critique of totality involves a turn from thematizable being to the anarchy of transcendence experienced in the subjection to the Other before whom the subject becomes a hostage. Both of these moves, which de Vries explores in great detail, are governed by a strong respect for the biblical prohibition on graven images, and both seem to involve the use of atheism as a tool by which to purify the absolute and defend it from illegitimate appropriation. Both Adorno and Levinas emphatically reject theodicy: rather than the progressive realization of a universal capable of justifying the existence of pain and negativity, which for both represents a lapse into myth, true history is the redemptive other of progressive history. Interestingly, de Vries even
sees developmental parallels between the two thinkers. Just as Adorno, following Benjamin, started and ended with a very austere programme of philosophical interpretation, which was interrupted (with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) by a middle phase marked by a more affirmative thinking of the absolute, so Levinas (as Derrida points out in the important essay ‘Violence and Metaphysics’) was more rigorous in his thinking of the trace before and after *Totality and Infinity*, the main work from his middle phase.

Yet what about the differences? De Vries does not fail to register that Adorno works with dialectics and Levinas with phenomenology, or that the former is not a religious thinker while the latter clearly is. They radically disagree about art, ethics and the nature of conceptual thinking. In particular, de Vries accepts that whereas Levinas persistently seeks to combat the concept of mediation, Adorno considers it as ‘to a certain extent indispensable for thought, experience, language, and action’. The problem is that de Vries does not fully spell out the consequences of these disagreements. Too often he is satisfied simply to have noted them so as to be able to continue charting their agreements.

I think there is reason to worry about the use to which de Vries puts Adorno in particular. It is certainly true that Adorno occasionally announces a desire to ‘save’ the utopian dimension of positive theology by transposing its categories into the language of negative dialectics. His interest in questions of metaphysics and transcendence is unquestionable, especially after the publication of his far-reaching lecture course on metaphysics (*Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*). Yet, however in tune with the Zeitgeist it may be, de Vries’s downplaying of the significance for Adorno of Marxist categories like commodity fetishism and social critique, as well as of both Weber’s account of rationalization and Freud’s theory of drives and the unconscious, risks disconnecting the great luminary of first generation Critical Theory from the social and political challenges his thinking was faced with. Indeed, my wager would be that the critical impulse animating Adorno’s negative dialectics becomes unintelligible unless the social forms it is meant to criticize are taken into account. Unlike that of Levinas, Adorno’s thinking is intended to be profoundly historical; and just as every philosophical category is meant to be historical through and through (such that truth itself becomes historical and transitory), so is what they respond to historical. Where Levinas offers a transcendent structure that in its aprioricity is supposed to be untainted by history and contingency, Adorno negotiates his negative dialectics so as to restate the risks of critical rationality and politics at a higher, yet fundamentally risky, level. Despite his assurances of its essentially social character, Levinas locates what he means by responsibility beyond the polis in the sphere of the sacred (as does Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, 1996). By reading Adorno theologically, de Vries all too easily affirms the by now common view of Adorno as the other-worldly, potentially conservative metaphysician/aesthete who, having been disillusioned by politics, sought refuge in the beyond (I try to challenge this claim in *Adorno and the Political*, 2005). Now this is intimately related to the issue of mediation. If, as Adorno claims, all categories of thought are mediated, then transcendence is not possible except ‘from within’. The task of philosophy is not to find a transcendent structure that accounts for the subject’s infinite subjection to the Other, but to uncover and criticize identity-thinking wherever and whenever it takes place.

One could develop this objection in a lot of detail. At the end of the day, however, it may not really touch on de Vries’s basic point, which is that theology continues to be of relevance to contemporary thinking and this is how it should be. *Minimal Theologies* is an important book that ought to find a wide readership.

Esben Hammer

It’s still raining


The premiss of this volume is that, since the era of the French intellectual is now over, its history can be written. Editor Julian Bourg writes in his preface that ‘The passing of an era invites re-examination’, and that ‘The early twenty-first century seems an opportune moment for gauging the shape of a historical period that has passed and for taking stock of its significance.’ But what is the nature of the era which is supposed here to have passed? Bourg himself writes that the figure of the French intellectual is a national stereotype of the same kind as the Queen of England, or French cheeses and wines. Is it the stereotype, then,
whose time has lapsed? The theoretical premiss on which the book is based may be flawed if what has passed is indeed a stereotypical view of a reality, and if, as Bourg also seems to acknowledge, the notion of its having waned is also a stereotype. In this light, the claim that the book 'marks the arrival of a new historiographical and generational sensibility' is hyperbolic. At the same time, however, the subsidiary claim that the essays in the book 'are motivated by the impulse to fill the many gaps in our understanding of postwar French intellectuals' is substantiated by some of the essays. A significant contribution is made in the essays by Christophe Premat and Stuart Elden on the generation of Greek intellectuals (Cornelius Castoriadis, Kostas Axelos and Georges Papannaoui) and on Axelos and the journal *Arguments*, respectively. The same period, roughly the end of the 1950s, after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, is the focus of Michael Scott Christofferson's essay on the influence of this event on the Comité National des Écrivains. David Berry and Ron Haas also provide detail on two undervalued figures – Daniel Guérin and Guy Hocquenghem, respectively. These essays offer valuable detail on several specific moments or figures within a fairly large historical context – roughly from the end of the war to the present – but, taken with the other contributions to the volume, they do not fully substantiate the claim to provide ‘new perspectives’, except in the sense of a dispersed plurality of unrelated viewpoints. Indeed, since the theoretical premiss of the volume implies buying into the stereotypical assessment of French intellectual life as a ‘trend’, it disables its titular claim from the start.

The opposition implicit in this assessment, however, between the discourse of the stereotype and something which, without being named, is presupposed as ‘real’ history is problematized once one admits the possibility that the stereotypical discourse itself forms part of the history. François Dosse writes in his careful afterword to the volume (written independently, it seems, from the essays it contains) that: ‘It nevertheless seems to me that an intellectual history that takes seriously the reception of works cannot abandon this dimension [media echoes and the press], which is described or denounced as playing an increasingly central role.’ If intellectual history, now, must include the pseudo-historiographic discourses based on the stereotypical figure of the French intellectual, then it does not entirely suffice to differentiate the ‘true’ history of intellectual activity one might seek in works and their contents from the ‘false’ image of this history contained in discourses about them. Dosse advocates an approach to intellectual history which works both through an attention to the internal content of works – that is, to ideas – and to the ‘external manifestations of intellectual life’, or to ‘networks of sociability’. He refuses the strict opposition between an ‘internalist’ approach to the works themselves and an ‘externalist’ approach which stops at the limit of the work. An intellectual history which attends to the elaboration of ideas within single texts, and within the oeuvres of individual intellectuals, but which is also concerned with groupings, networks, the contexts formed by journals, publishers and institutions, is to be welcomed, and a number of the essays in this volume follow this line. It is worth asking, however, if the pseudo-historiographic discourse is itself now part of the history to which intellectual history must attend? In what contexts does this discourse operate? What institutional and intellectual context could produce the statement that poststructuralist and postmodernist theories were ‘the French version of the Beatles invasion’? Or, more seriously, in what contexts is there a ‘continuing lack of attention to Deleuze and indifference to Serres, Bourdieu, and Badiou?’ There are fault-lines in this volume between the French, North American and European contexts which are belied by the apparent collective consensus of its international contributors.

Theoretically, the volume raises the question of the relation between intellectual history and the history of intellectuals; or, more specifically, what part does the history of intellectuals have to play in intellectual history? About half of the essays are focused on the itineraries of specific figures – Axelos, Guérin, Hocquenghem, Levinas, Raymond Aron, Debray and Marcel Gauchet – the heterogeneity of which witnesses the variety, and perhaps the lack of cohesion, of the individual contributions, while the other essays are focused either on specific events (1956 in Hungary) or polemics (the ‘Treblinka controversy’), or on broader questions. Of the four essays in the last category, Schrift’s essay is concerned to redress the apparent perception (the ‘myth’) of postwar French philosophy as dominated by the clash between existentialism and phenomenology, on the one hand, and the myth of Gallic Heideggerianism, on the other. The suggested revision affirms, instead, the determinant role of the institution of the École Normale Supérieure on the formation of French philosophy, on the one hand, and the current of interest in Spinoza, on the other. William Gallois’s essay on French theory and the economy argues that, while a resistance to capitalism has been a common characteristic of much postwar
French thought, there has been little engagement with the economic reality of capitalism in France, save in the work of Lyotard and Bourdieu, the latter mentioned only in passing. Philippe Poirrier addresses the fortunes of cultural policy in France since 1981, focusing mainly on the importance of Jack Lang and of Fumaroli’s 1991 polemic L’État culturel. The most consequential of these disparate essays is Warren Breckmann’s consideration of the ‘Post-Marx of the Letter’, which offers an account of the poststructuralist reading of Marx, drawing inspiration from Gramsci, by Laclau and Mouffe before briefly contrasting it with the early 1990s deconstructive attention to ‘the political’ of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. Breckmann seeks to draw a distinction between the dynamic post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe and what he sees as the sense of resignation implicit in the notions of the ‘inoperative community’ (Nancy), and the resistance to the metaphysics of the politics of the subject (Lacoue-Labarthe). He then seeks to account for the difference between these two accounts in the different national contexts – British and French – from which they arise. The implication seems to be that the best French post-Marxism is being done or has been done outside France. Possibly – but this would be to ignore a vital current of work in France or in French over the last few years by Daniel Bensaïd and others. This quibble notwithstanding, Breckmann’s essay is a corrective to the uncritical assumption of stereotypical versions of French intellectual history in its attention to the difference of national and institutional contexts within which intellectual work and intellectual figures arise.

However, it is interesting to note that much of the contextualization provided by Schrift as a corrective to the ‘myths’ of the ‘cult of the personality’ and of Gallic Heideggerianism – the history of the institutions of philosophy teaching in France – would be familiar to those who have read biographical histories like Gregory Elliott’s The Detour of Theory, or David Macey’s The Lives of Michel Foucault. Dosse’s proposition of a way between ‘internalist’ accounts of ideas, in books, and ‘externalist’, sociologically driven accounts of the disposition of intellectual contexts, seems only able to offer a weak account both of the history of intellectuals and of intellectual history; weak, that is, in comparison to the richness of biographical accounts, and the theoretical rigour of approaches such as that of Bourdieu in Homo Academicus, or the more theoretical and abstract notion of the movement of ideas proposed by Thomas Kuhn in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. What I am suggesting here is that, while histories of institutions must be an integral part of any account of the movement of ideas in a defined epoch, intellectual history is rooted in the endeavours, and the works, of individual thinkers. It is in the interaction between the itineraries of individual intellectuals and the institutions with which they are involved, and sometimes struggle, that intellectual history is made and can perhaps best be analysed. And this interaction also features the intellectual’s conflict with their time and their mortality, since an intellectual is perhaps always necessarily out of step with his time – untimely, in the Nietzschean sense. In this respect it might be more instructive and productive to attend to the substantial amount of relatively unresearched work produced by Foucault in his lectures at the Collège de France, from the early 1970s until the early 1980s, or the only recently published lectures by Roland Barthes at the same institution, or the unpublished seminars of Lacan, in order to contribute to an understanding of the intellectual history of the last thirty or so years, rather than concern oneself with pronouncements of the end of an era and its historical monumentalization. Moreover – in that the later work of these three figures, to speak only of them, seems imbued with a sense of impending mortality and oriented towards the legacy of their thought, particularly towards the question ‘how might one live’ – intellectual history would perhaps be better served by a concern with the existential imbrication of lives and ideas, rather than by a frozen historicization.

Let us address, then, the proposition that the era of the French intellectual, or of French theory, has passed, and its history can now be written. I shall do so with reference to the recent volume of Angelaki (vol. 8, no.3, August 2003) devoted to ‘French Philosophy Today’, edited by Peter Hallward. Hallward addresses the question in what seems to me a far more measured and careful manner than Bourg, and in a way which is based in a philosophical or at least theoretical method. Reviewing the recurrent tropes of discourse about French philosophy, Hallward concludes that this gives a picture of ‘a despondent branch of learning defeated by its unsustainable ambition and subsequently rearranged by needs external to its own, needs borrowed or imposed by government, pedagogy, science, history’. Dialectically, he wagers that there is just enough truth in this image of French philosophy to rule out its simple inversion, and that French philosophy is consistently going about its business as it has always done according to its own rules and method. Against the four tropes which he identifies in the doxa-driven discourse – complexity, subversion, eclecticism and exhaustion – and which bear witness to a far more
accurate and acute analysis of the discourse of the ‘end of an era’ than that in *After the Deluge*, he proposes, as the presuppositions of his collection, a number of principles crystallized around the term *persistence*: innovative work is being produced, dynamically and inventively; there is a ‘stubborn commitment’ (my stress) to the tasks of philosophy; there is a persistent attention to locate an unfettered, or *simple*, principle of singularity; this persistence is at once contemporary, in that it is happening now, and non-contemporary, in that it continues in the same orientation as ancient philosophies or theologies. The interviews and articles in the *Angelaki* volume (with or by Christian Jambet, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Clément Rosset, Guy Lardreau, Michel Henry, Alain Badiou, Monique David-Ménard, Bernard Stiegler, François Laruelle, Jacques Rancière, Daniel Bensáïd and Michel Serres) bear witness to an active intellectual and philosophical life which is not despondent, neither in mourning nor melancholic.

*Patrick ffrench*

**Walking with bobcats**


In her analysis of the various generic excursions performed by lesbian writers in the later twentieth century, Patricia Duncker notes: ‘Personal narratives, *Bildungsromane*, life stories, are both important and frequent in Lesbian writing. They represent the search for definition, and the search for a way to inhabit the word “Lesbian.”’ The habitation of a word seems non-sensically to cross the boundaries of material existence and linguistic signification; by implication, it suggests not least that the identity ‘lesbian’ must be understood in spatial as well as affective and materialist terms. Spatiality is implied in another account of what it means to be lesbian by the novelist Anna Wilson, who argues:

I remain other than Woman; there remains a distinction between what the world expects of a woman’s view – and what I see … If it seems important to retain my sense of difference, to guard *the oblique angle* from which I see the world, what does it mean that I write as a lesbian?

Wilson’s apparent question is shored up by the assertion of lesbian difference. She records the lesbian as a position, a space, which functions at an ‘oblique angle’ to dominant female experience and, moreover, one which must be celebrated at the same time as being protected from assimilation. For both Duncker and Wilson the question remains of how to define this ‘space’ of the lesbian.

Perhaps no theorist has done more to further our understanding of the cultural, material and representational space occupied by the lesbian, in audacious and continually generative terms, than the French theorist Monique Wittig. Wittig, who described her own political and philosophical approach as ‘materialist lesbianism’, endeavoured to produce an embodied and affective theorization of the lesbian via the lived practice(s) of inhabiting the space of the lesbian within dominant heterosexual culture. For Wittig, the lesbian denoted a cultural space always already outside the boundaries of hegemonic culture. In her essay ‘The Straight Mind’ (1980), she makes one of her most seminal pronouncements: ‘it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for “woman” has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and homosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women.’ Developing this argument further in ‘One is Not Born a Woman’ (1981), Wittig extends the strong sense in which lesbianism, as *practice*, exists as just that ‘oblique angle’, to which Wilson refers: ‘lesbianism provides for the moment the only social form I know in which we can live freely. Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man.’

Wittig’s formidable theoretical challenge has been poorly met by further engagement from anglophone critics and theorists. The collection under review here does the very important job of presenting and assessing Wittig’s contribution to studies of gender and sexuality and critical philosophy. As its editor, Namascar Shaktini, argues, one of the most central functions of this collection is its accessibility to anglophone readers. To date, the only English-language book to examine Wittig’s work in any depth is Erika Ostrovsky’s *A Constant Journey: The Fiction of Monique Wittig* (1991). It is, of course, difficult to separate out Wittig’s fiction from her non-fiction. Wittig herself regarded the generic boundaries between fiction and theory as spurious, and strove throughout her career to produce all kinds of new linguistic and conceptual
attacks on the patriarchal language system within which we function. In the light of this, the collection commendably examines Wittig’s ‘radical critical perspective on gender’ in all areas of her work, like Wittig herself, refusing to privilege theoretical writing over fiction or drama.

Wittig’s own voice appears in the collection in different guises; three of her own essays open the book. First, she appears as political activist in her manifesto ‘For a Women’s Liberation Movement’. This manifesto, published in the leftist monthly *L’Idiot International* in May 1970, has never before been published in English. Introduced by Shaktini, who was also one of its signatories, the manifesto articulates the key Marxist feminist framework through which Wittig chose to think about gender and sexuality: ‘We, from time immemorial, live like a people colonized within the people, so well domesticated that we have forgotten that this situation of dependence doesn’t go without saying.’ The two essays that follow the manifesto, ‘Some Remarks on *Les guérillères*’ and ‘Some Remarks on *The Lesbian Body*’, present Wittig the novelist commenting retrospectively on her textual strategies in both texts. In her essay on *Les guérillères* (1969), which was published in 1994, Wittig identifies herself as ‘critic’ returning to a completed text. Compellingly she conjectures upon her play in this text with the pronoun *elles* (the linguistic subjectivity never allowed for in the gendered spaces of standard French). Her essay on *The Lesbian Body* (1973), another retrospective critical account, was commissioned for the collection in 2001. This novel was written, Wittig argues, into a representational lacuna in dominant culture:

With *The Lesbian Body* I was confronted with the necessity of writing a book totally lesbian in its theme, its vocabulary, its texture, from the first page to the last, from title page to back cover. I was thus located in a double blank. The blank that all writers have to face when they begin a book. The other blank was of a different nature.

The ‘other blank’ is, of course, the absence of a vocabulary and register in which to speak of lesbian subjectivity and experience. There were, Wittig tells us, ‘no lesbian books except Sappho’. (She had not yet at this point, she remarks in parenthesis, encountered the work of Djuna Barnes.) Wittig is typically performative and polemical. These comments are made not to negate or denigrate the other lesbian authors who have written since the time of the infamous Greek poet, but rather to lay blame and attack the dominant heterosexual culture – the world of the straight mind – which negates and denigrates the lesbian.

The evocative photographic images of Wittig collected among her writings in this section remind us that Wittig’s activism always went hand in hand with her theorizing of the political and the cultural. One in particular, taken in August 1970, shows Wittig staunchly holding her banner by the Arc de Triomphe, at the first publicized action of the MLF (Mouvement de Libération des Femmes) which she organized. Wittig’s banner reads ‘Un homme sur deux est une femme’ (one man in two is a woman). Shaktini, herself pictured in another photograph being arrested by the police at this demonstration, records the confusion this banner
created: ‘The point, however, went over the heads of the police who arrested us. The one who booked me … looked at my passport and said, in French, ‘You American women think that half the men in France are effeminate.’ The linguistic acuity of the banner, and the misreading of it by certain spectators, epitomizes the complexities of Wittig’s critical endeavour and the sometimes confused interpretations of her work. This collection engages with all facets of Wittig’s passionate endeavour, in its fictional and non-fictional turns. Its aim is to retrieve Wittig from the multiple misreadings of her work as essentialist, humanist or separatist, and to reinvigorate the as yet unanswered problem to which Wittig always attempts to attend, which is, as Linda M.G. Zerilli puts it, no less than ‘the problem of freedom as a political phenomenon’. To some degree, the decision to organize the critical readings offered by Wittig scholars into three different conceptual bundles – Critical Approaches, Theoretical Applications and A New Generation of Readers – seems arbitrary and speaks to the difficulties of isolating single strands in Wittig’s work. Each of the critical essays, in fact, stands in its own right as a rigorous and honest attempt to engage with Wittig and her work, in all its complexity.

In her essay ‘When Lesbians Were Not Women’, Teresa de Lauretis considers the effects that meeting and reading Wittig had upon her own decision to pursue the ‘project of lesbian theory as distinct from feminist theory’. Wittig’s influence is importantly theoretical as well as personally inspirational. Her delineation of the lesbian subject as ‘the subject of a cognitive practice based upon the lived experience of one’s body, one’s desire, one’s conceptual and psychical dis-identification from the straight mind’ opens up a conceptual space into which de Lauretis can insert her own theorization of the figure she defines within her own schema as ‘the eccentric subject’. De Lauretis digs Wittig back out of the ‘dump of surpassed and discarded philosophies’ into which Judith Butler so unfortunately ‘tosses’ her in Gender Trouble (the book which, de Lauretis notes, ‘brought Wittig to the attention of nonlesbian and nonfeminist readers’), countering the criticisms of essentialism which are so often levelled against Wittig. Her essay convincingly demonstrates the ‘epistemological valence’ of Wittig’s lesbian; in acknowledging her own intellectual debt, she points to the strong echoes of the nuanced and suggestive figure of Wittig’s lesbian within the bodies of contemporary lesbian and queer theory. In ‘Universalizing Materialist Lesbianism’ Diane Griffin Crowder considers the ways in which Wittig’s lesbian might subversively function as a universal. Wittig’s ‘re-visionary’ texts push the reader, however temporarily, into a space of Otherness and difference, which has huge political and educational potential. In this sense, it is not that the straight reader can see sameness in these texts and thus regard lesbian experience as somehow mappable back onto the dominant heterosexual frame, but rather, and much more radically, that the straight reader might be both enticed and forced into the warp of a different mindset and world-view, which will profoundly alter the ‘straight mind’:

It is not, as Ostrovsky asserts, the fact that straight readers can see her work as potentially heterosexual that makes it universal. Rather, it is that all readers, of all sexualities, come to inhabit a new space in which the perspective of the lesbian writer becomes their perspective, at least for the duration of the textual journey itself.

Wittig’s aim to push this radical potential in as many different generic directions as possible is evidenced in the many discussions of her fictional work in this collection. One important addition here is Jeannelle Laillou Savona’s analysis of Wittig’s only published play, Le voyage sans fin (The Constant Journey, 1979). Introducing the play to an anglophone audience, Savona details its historical and personal context. Wittig’s lesbian rewriting of Cervantes’ The Adventures of Don Quixote for the stage was undertaken at the same time as her partner Sande Zeig, a trained mime, was improvising on the theme of Quixote, whilst developing her own techniques as a performer. Photographs of Zeig in the 1985 Paris production of Le voyage sans fin punctuate Savona’s essay. Typically, the play refuses generic dramatic structure, comprising a ‘montage’ of fifteen short scenes. In both its revision of a classical text and the transgressions of traditional stage action, Savona argues that Wittig attempts ‘a process of lesbianization’. Yet the very word, Savona notes, is never used on stage; the lesbian moves from noun to verb, becoming a radical, transgressive action upon social and theatrical traditions. Savona’s analysis of the text and its performance concludes that The Constant Journey represents a remarkable attempt to eradicate the heavily genderized traditions of the Western stage. It dares to impart to the classical narrative of Quixote a fresh feminist significance and an uncompromising lesbian vision that is meant to shake spectators by forcing them to question what they tend to consider their most ‘natural’ human characteristic: gender.

The collection closes with a fictional dialogue between the author, Marie-Hélène Bourcier and Man-
astabal, the fantasized figure of the guide from Wittig’s novel *Across the Acheron*. The dialogue details stories from the often bitter and contentious beginnings of the MLF, and the emergence of ‘French feminism’; it interweaves solid political and theoretical explication with gossip, humour and fantasy. This ‘queer fantastic text’, Shaktini notes, ‘departs from the academic rigor of the previous twelve chapters’; yet such an ending to the collection is suitably Wittigian. The figure of Wittig who emerges from this fantasy – as from this collection of essays – is larger than life, politically and intellectually indomitable. Manastabal recounts a story of Wittig in the Arizona desert:

People around here say that they have seen two bobcats guarding Wittig’s door during the night. It seems that Wittig is not afraid of them. I heard that some nights, when she cannot sleep, she walks with them to the end of the desert.

Joanne Winning

Am I bovver’d?
Do I look bovver’d?


Didier Eribon has already published a biography of Foucault (1989), and now, in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, he revisits Foucault’s life and work, in Parisian and Californian intellectual milieux. Here he stresses the centrality of resistance in Foucault’s work. He disputes the implication, in *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, that twentieth-century images of gayness may be understood as a tactical reversal of dominant, straight discourse (‘reverse discourse’), and repudiates Foucault’s conception of the role of late-nineteenth-century psychiatric discourses in the constitution of modern homosexuality. Foucault’s theses here were experimental, not a bid for a new orthodoxy, Eribon says. He reassesses the precursors and followers of Wilde, especially Symonds, Pater, Carpenter, Proust and Gide. Of course, these men have been much worked over, but Eribon still finds plenty to say about their discovery of distinctive subjectivities, out of a complex array of developing possibilities.

If Eribon’s tendency is to deny a significant rupture at the end of the nineteenth century, he is equally concerned with continuities between modern gay life as Foucault experienced it in California, and the situation around 1900. We may wonder, Eribon adds,

if what Foucault is presenting as a new system of relations does not fundamentally resemble some extremely traditional gay ways of life: multiple sexual encounters that sometimes lead to friendships, circles of friends composed of former lovers and their lovers and former lovers, male sociability, links between men of different ages and different backgrounds, visits to gay male bars, cafes, and restaurants. This does not seem far distant from the way many gay men led their lives in the twentieth century.

In conventional gay historiography, that is a bold view. The Stonewall riot, relative legalization, lesbian and gay activism, the AIDS crisis – all this is rendered unimportant when set alongside ongoing patterns of sexual encounters and forms of socialization.

The effective project of Eribon’s book, though he does not say it in quite so many words, is a reassertion of the lived concept, *gay identity*. The argument takes a positive and a negative direction. For the positive, Eribon stresses the continuity of recent gay subculture and the lives of gay men in the first half of the twentieth century, drawing on literary evidence and George Chauncey’s historical research in his book *Gay New York*. It has been necessary throughout for gay men to seek the opportunities and anonymity of the city; we are still to be found in artistic and sensitive occupations. Such continuities have been proposed also by Neil Bartlett in *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*, and Rictor Norton in *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual*. Whether this emphasis is correct depends on how you add up the evidence. Eribon’s claim that gay men still inhabit distinctive friendship networks, bars and cruising grounds seems right. However, there are changes as well. Two are most commonly remarked since the 1970s: the ability of gay men to appear ‘masculine’, and (perhaps as a consequence) a readiness to look for liaisons among other gay men, instead of prizing (apparently) straight types. This proves important theoretically and politically, because it prompts a separation of gender identity and sexual object choice, leading to the current engagement with issues in transgender.

The negative aspect of Eribon’s case for ongoing gay identity involves the supposition that gay men must, inevitably, constitute themselves in response to stigma, shame, and *insult*. This is Eribon’s leading argument; the one that appears most controversial. What gay men
have in common is an experience of stigma at the foundation of our selfhood. Eribon’s argument is that even before we experience ourselves as gay, the sex/gender system is occupying our minds. Combining Althusser and Butler, he stresses how insult penetrates and infects the most vulnerable parts of the self. He denies that this position is essentialist; gayness is a social construction which can be refused, like any other construction, if that is what the individual wants to do. However, it sounds hard to shift, and rests, without much deliberation, on the ancient stigma of effeminacy.

A problem with Eribon’s treatment is that he draws a good deal upon Proust and other dead white men. He gives no serious attention to the gay boy and man currently aged under thirty-five. It is possible that many of those younger people do have a different experience. If ‘gay’ is still an insult, it may also be a contested space; the gay boy today has some scope to answer back. He may have some plausible role models; his stigma may be manageable. He may have inherited a new subculture whose parameters are reflected, approximately, in Gay Times. The articles and advertisements in that glossy monthly suppose a fascination with sexual enhancements (from drugs, toiletries, mechanical devices and, above all, pornography), performers and producers in the music business, and expensive holidays and apartments. Books are noticed through extracts from the blurbs, and feature those emanating from the Gay Times publishing house. Whether gay youngsters socialized into this subculture are much exposed to, or troubled by insult, is a question for sociological enquiry. It is possible that the dismissal of insult correlates with the arrival of complacency. Eribon’s Insult should be read for its commitment to positive action, beyond the enticements of poststructuralism and the market, and for its fair-minded linking of history and current political possibility.

The terms of discussion thus far must seem merely liberal to Lee Edelman. In No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, in energetic and determined prose, he condemns the dominant ‘familial ideology’ (in the USA) and ‘the regulatory fantasy of reproductive futurism’. By futurism he means that we can work toward a better future; attention to (the production of) children is supposed to guarantee this. The child has become ‘the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention’. The queer, meanwhile, is associated with disillusionment, sterility and death. Edelman finds ample instances of this in current rhetoric. For elaborate elucidation he draws on Dickens’s A Christmas Carol (Scrooge versus Tiny Tim), George Eliot’s Silas Marner and Hitchcock’s The Birds. He tangles with Baudrillard (‘The Final Solution’) and Butler (Antigone’s Claim), finding their ideas liberal. The world view behind this analysis is uncompromising. Hitchcock’s North by Northwest is read to expose compassion as an illusory and ineffectual offshoot of futurism. When Thornhill, at the end of the film, appeals to Leonard to save him at Mount Rushmore under the monumental glare of the presidents of the United States, his attempt is futile. Leonard knows that love is a form of aggression and sympathy a kind of manipulation.

Some queer readers may suppose, nonetheless, that there is a place for us with children and the future. Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals may bear offspring and take part in the rearing of them; they may contribute distinctly. This may be an end in itself. The future, meanwhile, though it must include cross-gender coupling, may be focused on other goals too, such as the development of freedom, equality and justice; we might add artistic accomplishment and the scientific study of nature. Such aspirations may be equally experienced as good in themselves; many people are prepared to die for them. But to Edelman, such negotiations are futile; they buy into heteronormative ideology. We might turn the argument around, however: perhaps reproductive futurism is capturing and abusing other political aspirations and they should be reasserted.
The linking of queerness and death may sound like a typical instance of Eribonian insult. The difference is that Eribon believes we can work on our stigma – not, to be sure, to a point where it might evaporate, but sufficiently to enable a productive political and personal commitment. Edelman binds his sense of political futility to psychoanalysis. Lacan’s placing of the (alleged) death drive as a consequence of the Symbolic figures ‘the negativity opposed to every form of social viability’. ‘The realization of the subject’s authentic presence in the Child’, meanwhile, is only ‘imagined as enjoying unmediated access to Imaginary wholeness’. ‘Queerness, by contrast, figures, outside and beyond its political symptoms, the place of the social order’s death drive.’

Yet there is for Edelman a perversely positive potential. ‘Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might do better to consider accepting and even embracing it.’ Since there can be no future good in the order of the Symbolic, it is better to match its foundational negativity with ‘a constant no, … a refusal of the coercive belief in the paramount value of futurity.’ So we may even achieve ‘an access to the jouissance that at once defines and negates us’. So the negative becomes a positive.

Edelman’s ideas overlap with those of Leo Bersani and Jonathan Dollimore, and also with Judith Halberstam’s belief that queers work on a different time frame from that of heterosexuals: not birth, marriage and childbearing. It is enough for a trend: I see a reassertion of a defiant anti-assimilationism, rendered ineluctable through an attempted embrace of the so-called death drive. These ideas were circulating well before the election victories of George W. Bush (Mandy Merck has linked them to HIV and AIDS; a good deal of the rhetoric adduced by Edelman arises out of the abortion controversy). However, their prominence today may correlate with the shameful and indeed fearful violations of human rights in Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. On 7 November 2004 the Observer newspaper reported from Washington on Bush’s re-election under the headline: ‘Gay community fears new era of intolerance. Equality campaigners are in despair at the rise of the homophobic right.’ (It is assumed that Bush will pack the Supreme Court with conservatives, threatening sexual dissidents.) Eribon, from this perspective, appears as a spokesperson for ‘Old Europe’, still looking for respect, transparency, social reform and international decency; not bombing and shelling civilians indiscriminately, and achieving some success in the realm of LGBT rights.

### Equality is simple


Despite their violently divisive effects, the consequences of the American and French Revolutions were incorporated early on into standard historical accounts of the emergence of the ‘West’ as a distinctively modern, liberal and democratic part of the world. The revolution that led to Haiti’s independence from France in 1804 was neither acknowledged nor remembered in the same way. If you search through recent histories of the French Revolution by people like François Furet or Simon Schama you will find little or no trace of the ‘colonial question’. Haiti doesn’t get a mention in Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution*, and is acknowledged only in passing even in Eric Hobsbawm’s *Age of Revolution*. Yet it was in Haiti, rather than the USA or France, that the revolutionary slogans of liberty and equality were universally applied, via the unconditional abolition of slavery.

The central thesis of Sibylle Fischer’s compelling and impressively detailed book is that hegemonic conceptions of egalitarian modernity in Europe and North America (and in those creole Caribbean countries who conceived of their national independence in terms of an inclusion in this modernity) could only emerge through the disavowal of attempts, most notably in Haiti, to extend equality to issues of colour and race. There is no clear place in conventionally ‘enlightened’, nation-centred accounts of ‘modernity as an unfinished project’ for so-called peripheral struggles against international slavery and its modern substitutes. The same historical narratives in which most Caribbean and Latin American countries are said to make slow but welcome steps towards liberal modernity are used to explain why Haiti is apparently doomed to remain what Samuel Huntington describes as ‘truly a kinless country’, the ‘neighbour nobody wants’. Hegel’s abstract account of mastery and slavery offers Fischer a paradigmatic instance of this more general trend: his text retreats into ‘silence and obscurity at the very moment when revolutionary slaves might have appeared on the scene’.

Fischer makes much of her useful distinction between the pure repression involved in associations of historical experience with ‘unrepresentable’ trauma, on the one hand, and the more convoluted, more oblique
machinations of disavowal on the other. The bulk of her three-part book consists of closely argued analyses of somewhat random or ‘accidental fragments’ of the nineteenth-century literary and cultural history of Haiti and its immediate neighbours (Cuba and the Dominican Republic) in which such disavowal acquires some discernible though often elusive form. Havana’s leading newspaper never so much as referred to the revolutionary sequence in Haiti, from its beginning in 1791 right through to 1805. Aponte’s trial and execution in 1812, subtly subversive wall decorations painted by black artisans, the unclassifiable rhetorical excesses and oblique political implications of Plácido’s poetry, the tortuously evasive antislavery narratives of Avellanedá, Villaverde and their contemporaries – these are some of the materials that Fischer sifts through in order to understand how subsequent Cuban representations of blacks and mulattoes served to recognize them only as virtually unrecognisable, to admit them only as inadmissible (most typically as objects of forbidden or incestuous desire).

The second and perhaps most compelling part of *Modernity Disavowed* deals in more systematic fashion with counter-revolutionary and anti-Haitian ideologies in the country most directly affected by 1804 and its aftermath: the Dominican Republic. Against the threat of Haiti’s ‘French’ and ‘black’ egalitarianism, and in denial of their population’s own largely African ancestry, pro-independence Dominican writers and intellectuals concocted a far-fetched but remarkably effective Hispanist–indigenist fantasy, through which they portrayed their nationalist struggle as sanctioned by a fusion of native American purity with early Spanish (Columbus and Las Casas) goodwill. In keeping with this general logic of disavowal, Haiti itself only enters the frame of Fischer’s book in its third and final part, which is mainly dedicated to close readings of the ambiguously universalist language used in the new country’s several early constitutions so as to enshrine, within modern republican frameworks, the principle of racial equality. According to Fischer, the eventual failure of these attempts is itself a symptom of the fact that such a principle cannot be expressed, in such a framework, without omission and distortion.

Perhaps the most curious omission however, in a book that is so directly concerned with Haitian revolutionary agency, is that of any involved discussion of the revolution and of the revolutionary actors themselves. Fischer’s perfectly legitimate concern is with the representation or misrepresentation of this revolution in the subsequent century, but the fact that she includes no discussion of the revolutionary sequence, nor of the actual circumstances that led to the end of slavery in 1793, creates the impression that Haitian writers and intellectuals were themselves somehow complicit in this same disavowal. Fischer notes that ‘in the years immediately following independence, writers [sang] the heroic deeds against the French’, but declines to name or analyse the work of these writers. Instead, the only Haitian literary text she considers in any detail is a minor play, *La Liberté générale, ou les Colons à Paris*; it was performed in Cap Haitien in 1796, and deals with the intrigues of the colonial lobby in Paris as it sought to resist the Jacobin law of February 1794 confirming the general abolition of slavery. On the basis of somewhat scanty evidence, Fischer tentatively reads the play as a ‘post-mortem recuperation of Brissot’s project’.

This is a revealing moment in Fischer’s book. Brissot, a leading Girondin and founder of the Société des Amis des Noirs, was one of Robespierre’s main adversaries in the French Assembly. Fischer suggests that the relative marginalization of Brissot in both anti- and pro-Jacobin histories of the French Revolution is a symptom of the fact that ‘the irreducible social heterogeneity and transnationalism of the cultures of antislavery were no more convenient in the European metropolis than they were in the plantation zone.’ Against Michel-Rolph Trouillot (and C.L.R. James), she claims that Brissot was one of the few revolutionaries ‘who had gone so far as to write in support of the armed rebellion in Saint Domingue’. Unusually, however, in so thoroughly documented a study, she cites no evidence of this support (other than a footnote which refers to his position *before* the rebellion), and she neglects to mention the complicity of Brissot and his faction in the Assembly’s call for the immediate suppression of the slave uprising. Despite Robespierre’s own notoriously slow conversion to the cause of abolition, James surely had good cause to dub Toussaint and his collaborators ‘black Jacobins’ rather than ‘black Girondins.’

The more important point at issue here is Fischer’s emphasis on an oblique and irreducible *complexity* as the primary concern of her analysis. The dominant methodological metaphor of her wide-ranging introduction is that of a ‘landscape’, a ‘transnational’ and primarily cultural ‘landscape of heterogeneous facts, practices and ideas that to this day remain separated by disciplinary boundaries’ and nation-centred historiographies. (The exact sense in which a war that was begun by Toussaint as an intra-national or pro-French conflict and then won by Dessalines as an inter-national or anti-French conflict might be called ‘transnational’
is never adequately explained.) The consequent stress on ‘interstitial’ and ‘radically heterogeneous’ movements, on interdisciplinary convolution, on ‘radical anti-slavery [as] a shadowy, discontinuous formation with a rhizomic, centred structure’, etc., not only echoes the well-worn formulae of conventional postcolonial scholarship. It also obscures the essential simplicity of the principle at issue, i.e. the immediate clarity that (no less than undeniable contextual intricacy) is properly fundamental to any affirmation of equality. All things considered there is remarkably little trace in Fischer’s book of the subjective orientation of those who took up arms, in Haiti and elsewhere, in defence of precisely ‘self-evident’ principles and rights – an orientation which sits rather uncomfortably, perhaps, with her own concern for archival complication and elaborate hermeneutic speculation.

On the other hand, this same concern cannot by itself illuminate the precise relationship between the forms of ideological disavowal that interest Fischer and the severe economic and class constraints that have shaped so much of the history and influence of independent Haiti. Of course, Fischer is perfectly aware of the long shadow cast by the plantation system that Dessalines and subsequent Haitian leaders inherited from France. But for all its often dazzling critical finesse, her book does little to engage in detail with the sort of issues raised by Marx’s well-known critique of the French Jacobins: both political agency and socio-economic structure are left largely to one side here, in favour of the delicate, almost therapeutic work of cultural reconstruction.

Peter Hallward

‘Differently placed’


A few years ago a friend of mine risked attending a New Labour Women’s Conference. The only speaker was Charles Clarke. In conversation afterwards he asked her what she was writing her PhD on: ‘Class’. ‘That’s rather an old-fashioned topic’, he replied. This, of course, is in accord with the spirit of the times. The end of Soviet communism is deemed to have produced the end of socialism and any form of collectivism. Neoliberalism reigns supreme. Now we are apparently all individuals who in the paradise of postmodernism are free to shape and reshape our social persona according to personal whims.

Meanwhile – no surprise – out there in society inequality is increasing. Yet, while it has become fashionable to discuss discrimination on grounds of sex and gender, and race and ethnicity, class is the category which ‘dare not speak its name’. My own view is that the rejection of the concept of class is itself a class ploy, for it thereby pushes some inconvenient issues off the agenda. Class, anyway, has become an embarrassing subject; it is now easier to talk about sex. At the back of our minds we know that class positions are undeserved; they are largely a matter of luck. Thus class ‘is morally problematic because of its arbitrary relationship to worth, virtues and status, and this is why it is a highly sensitive subject’. In this context it is reassuring to learn from Andrew Sayer that, ‘after many years of neglect, there have recently been signs of a revival of interest in class, especially regarding how it is subjectively experienced.’ Sayer’s book is welcome for its reminder that class has not gone away and that social placing not only determines our opportunities and ways of life but also provides a whole repertoire of norms structuring our relations with those who are differently placed. Here we are told not of the disappearance of class but of its ubiquity; of how our speech, clothing, food, consumption patterns, child rearing and leisure pursuits are among society’s class markers.

This is a philosophical book on class in which there is hardly any mention of Marx, although many points of fundamental disagreement can easily be deduced. For example, Sayer clearly rejects the highly reductionist view that takes values, ethics and morality as part of a superstructure that is fully explained by material interests deriving from social location. Times have changed and the book’s starting point is Pierre Bourdieu. Central here is Bourdieu’s key concept of *habitus*, which refers ‘to the set of dispositions that individuals acquire through socialization’. Sayer, however, goes beyond what he calls Bourdieu’s predominantly ‘amoral Hobbesian framework’ to examine people’s normative agenda. The replacement of Marx by Bourdieu is indicative of Sayer’s main focus, which is micro rather than macro: class encounters at the individual level rather than that of the overall social structure. For him income and wealth are not the only issues. He also deals with many of the behavioural and psychological adjustments that are made and is sensitive to the consequent stratification in people’s ‘capabilities to engage in ways of life they have reason
to value'. There is much on the culture of class; how assumptions, attitudes and mores are all coloured with implicit social rankings. If democracy is about all being treated equally, equal respect and equal voice, then, irrespective of our formal political institutions, it is clear that our wider culture is still pervaded by counter-tendencies. This book, among other things, indicates what would be required to take equality and democracy seriously. Apart from Bourdieu, Sayer is clearly also strongly influenced by Adam Smith’s ‘focus on everyday relationships’ and R.H. Tawney’s concern for how inequality disfigures ordinary life.

What we have here is not just description, though that alone would be a service, for Sayer wishes to go further. This is a critique, for he explains how class disfigures human relations; it produces a situation where the dominant treat others with contempt and so the dominated become of reduced concern in terms of equal opportunities and equal respect. Margaret Thatcher is said to have ‘positively oozed class contempt and condescension’. In answering questions from those she saw as inferior she ‘would tilt her head to one side patronizingly with a withering look as if talking to a disobedient child’. For Sayer it is unacceptable that class contempt has not become taboo in the same way sexism, racism and ageism have. It is clear that the book is written from an egalitarian standpoint, though one that is realistically aware of the obstacles to overcome. What, then, can be done?

Sayer wishes to uncouple the ‘posh’ from the ‘good’ and the ‘common’ from the ‘bad’ so that qualities are valued for their intrinsic rather than their status credentials. Though he challenges current neoliberal discourse, he thinks that there is no prospect of a transition to a fundamentally transformed society. The travails of socialism have apparently demonstrated the impossibility of doing without markets, but Sayer still has a strategy to ‘substantially reduce class inequalities’. This would involve, among other things, more progressive income and inheritance taxes, ‘a liveable minimum wage’ and greater sexual and racial equality. For those who denigrate what is in effect capitalism with a humane face, Sayer responds by claiming to call for what is realistically possible rather than what is fully satisfactory.

This book is based on a combination of moral philosophy and sociology which involves numerous digs at the latter. Sayer complains that ‘normative thought has been largely expelled from social science, and ghettoised in political and moral philosophy’. Values have come to be associated with the subjectivity from which all science should be distanced. In consequence social science has attained the worst of both worlds. It has failed to become value-free whilst failing to understand lay normativity. Sayer believes that social science wrongly elevated itself above the masses, imagining itself able to see what ordinary people couldn’t. In contrast he claims to take lay concepts seriously,
Heidegger, Lyotard and Arendt. It is driven by questions about the place and possibility of ethics in a postmodern epoch, but also by questions concerning whether there is such an epoch, or whether some kind of modernity still holds sway. Throughout, the question of ethics is given a political context through an inquiry into the role of ethics as independent of strictly political and economic ways of judging social issues. As such it can be read in part as a powerful phenomenological rejoinder to consequentialism.

The style of the book is rather dry and academic – in the sense of lacking economy and variation. This is not in itself a flaw. The refusal to draw final conclusions, summarize, simplify and apply to abstract cases is a reflection of the thesis that any such direct and measurement-based communication fails to reflect its own insufficiencies with respect to ethical questions of difference. However, when compared to its source texts, Visker’s work lacks the search for aesthetic forms of writing that express the limits of communication by making us feel them, rather than straightforwardly stating them. What the book gains in accuracy, it may lose in appeal to non-specialists.

For researchers on ethics and the works of Levinas and Heidegger, this book is an important response to critical accusations of ethical failure or incoherence. Visker sets out the thesis that ‘Ethics is not politics’ better than most interpreters, because he combines close and very thorough interpretation with a wide-ranging engagement with secondary material as well as older debates and reflection on new directions. He also draws out the consequences of this thesis with great care, not so much in terms of political action, but in recommendations with respect to the limits of normativity and consensus-based politics.

Visker’s reading of Lyotard’s work on the differend and the sublime is a good example of the balance and care he brings to interpretation. He is at pains to refute the accusation that Lyotard falls into contradictions when attempting to communicate that some things cannot be fully understood in language. This is because incompleteness in communication is essential to all forms of language. So Lyotard’s claim is not that some things cannot be said, but that each time we say something there is a necessary lack – including in his own statement about this insufficiency and in accusations raised against his position.

Lyotard’s ethical challenge is then translated into a claim about the necessity of a certain kind of violence in language and about the ethical obligation to bear witness and take account of this violence in expression. If politics is to accept that we must continue to reflect upon and fight against injustice, the ethical moment is

Michael Levin

Differendschrift


This book is a detailed and subtle investigation of the relation of ethics to politics in the works of Levinas, Heidegger, Lyotard and Arendt. It is driven by questions about the place and possibility of ethics in a
to sense and respond to the inevitable raising of new injustices in any political act:

In other words: the purpose of ‘bearing witness to the differend’ … is not so much to cure us of the bad habit of forgetting this injustice, but rather to ‘sensitize’ us to the fact that we forget, that we are – so to speak – cursed with an ontological illusion which not only lets the void, out of which every phrase arrives, become obfuscated by this new arrival, but also makes us forget this forgetting by seducing us into seeing ourselves as the authors of these phrases, as the ones who ‘use’ language.

I have some reservations about Visker’s framing of debate in terms of the idea that there are political and ethical challenges specific to our times. This comes out in his mistaken view that Lyotard is concerned with modern and postmodern epochs, rather than interrelated aspects of works that can be seen as both modern and postmodern. These would then be ideas and processes that operated in artworks, but that did not allow them to be assigned to particular historical moments. We could speak of a preponderance of postmodern works at a particular time, but this would be open to review and reinterpretation, dependent of the issues and questions tackled alongside those works.

Visker considers questions of ethics and difference and also about the difficulties of pluralism, primarily as revealed in twentieth-century politics and philosophy (though there are also excellent discussions outside this time-frame, notably a highly original discussion of Heidegger in relation to Kierkegaard). This leads him to define difference and plurality in terms of rare events and sensations, whilst also wishing that these were more broad and open. It also leads him to reflect on ‘our age’s fascination with an ethics of the Other’ whilst ascribing a necessity to this fascination. This explains his ambiguous relation to Lyotard’s work on the sublime. It is praised from an ethical and political point of view, yet also criticized for narrowness with respect to feelings and for its triggering of a passivity that seems to bar political action.

Setting aside these minor qualms, this book takes phenomenology further in its relation to contemporary problems in ethics and politics. It reflects on this relation with great acuity and provides us with carefully thought-out boundaries and recommendations as to the ethical legacies of Levinas and Heidegger. It shows the ‘inhuman condition’ in which we find ourselves to be much more complicated and ethically demanding than in the analyses offered by overly complacent neo-humanists and overly joyful postmodernists alike.

James Williams