

## DJ rottweiler

Theodor W. Adorno, *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2006, 691 pp., €48.90 hb., 3 5185 8385 9.

The reception of Adorno in Britain and America has largely focused on *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, late works which accepted the tragedy of an ongoing betrayal of Marxism in the Soviet Union and an ongoing capitalism in the West. Hence those Adornites who emphasize optimism of the will rather than pessimism of the intellect (i.e. political revolutionaries) have had to reanimate Adorno's dialogue with Walter Benjamin. The publication of *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory* should give this constituency succour. Written between 1938 and 1941, mostly in English, these texts show Adorno responding to Benjamin's famous artwork essay (published in 1936, in French, in Max Horkheimer's journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*). If for nothing else than restoring the crucial role of Benjamin in developing Adorno's thought, their publication – as volume 3 in fragments appended to Suhrkamp's *Collected Adorno* – is to be welcomed.

It's easy to understand the problems mainstream academics have with Adorno. Every sentence is written against those who would master fields of knowledge belonging to one side or the other of a split between subject and object. A sentence like 'The objective structure of society induces in the social critic doubts regarding the ultimate reality of certain subjective phenomena', cannot be parsed by anyone who accepts institutional demarcations between science and art, politics and sociology, psychology and literary studies or analytic philosophy. Adorno calls for 'the consistent abolition of the idea of things in themselves', a dialectical missile sourced from Hegel's *Logic* and aimed at the Neo-Kantianism which provides the theoretical foundations of non-Marxist sociology. In practice, the way institutionalized knowledge deals with such affronts to its rigid separations is to treat Adorno – like William Blake or Gilles Deleuze – as a 'primary text', its own 'thing-in-itself', which may be studied for an eternity because it stands outside the tightly controlled rationality of any particular discipline. However, Adorno anticipated such easy relegation to the status of natural object, and studied his texts with alluring traps for expertise-via-myopia.

It has become a cliché of interpretation that Adorno was 'not as keen' as Benjamin on the culture industry, less enthused about its possibilities, more critical of its authoritarian aspects. This notion that one might have a subjective evaluation of something as ubiquitous and unavoidable as the capitalist media is completely inimical to their approach. It also ignores the historical actualities underlying the pair's differences (in Benjamin's case, the possibility of a revolutionary, class-based fightback against Nazism if certain Stalinist illusions were smashed; in Adorno's case, the totalitarian nature of bourgeois democracies at war). The cliché presents separate moments in a dialogue as if they are supra-historical 'options' rather than part of a cumulative assault on error. If nothing else, *Current of Music* makes clear – as left-wing interpreters of their dialogue have long insisted – that Benjamin convinced Adorno that there was no point in resuscitating a pre-industrial culture ('aura'). That error was left for the existentialists and Heideggerians, who are duly excoriated.

Adorno writes in English; the introduction, footnotes and other scholarly apparatus here are all in German, though they were originally written by an American, Robert Hullot-Kentor, temporarily replacing Rolf Tiedemann, editor of the *Collected Works* (to whom this volume is dedicated). This weave of German and American scholarship reflects Adorno's position as a key figure in denazification and reconstruction in Germany after the Allied victory in 1945 (having become an American citizen during the war, he only took up a German passport again in 1955). Bizarrely enough, given Adorno's formidable reputation, *Current of Music* could also make a screamingly funny screwball comedy.

Adorno placed great emphasis on his need to be comfortably off, and made sure Horkheimer had secured him a plum job before he and his wife Gretel embarked for America. Adorno's post involved assisting Paul Lazarsfeld on the Princeton Radio Research Project, housed in a deserted factory building in Newark. Lazarsfeld was one of the principal founders of empirical sociology in the United States, but also a classical

music enthusiast. Hullot-Kentor calls him an ‘academic tycoon’, and, certainly, he had no qualms about selling his methods (questionnaires, focus groups) and results (statistics and graphs) to commercial interests. We’re not told, and so are forced to imagine, Lazarsfeld’s reactions on hearing that Adorno was researching the ‘hear-stripe’ (the buzzing sound a radio makes when it’s switched on) because, due to compression and timbral flattening, the musical content of broadcasts was irrelevant; or that authentic music would be played by manipulating this ‘hear-stripe’ and not on musical instruments at all; or that the conducting of classics by Toscanini was no consolation for a farmer ruined by falling prices; or that commodification meant ‘the ideal of Aunt Jemima’s ready-mix for pancakes’ had been ‘extended to the field of music’. This to a pioneer of market research hoping for sponsorship from Maxwell House Instant Coffee! Lazarsfeld should have been played by Henry O’Neill and Adorno by Harpo Marx: a laugh a second, not a dry seat in the house.

In the development of Adorno’s ideas, *Current of Music* stands midway between the phenomenology of his doctorate on Husserl and the indictment of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). He calls for a ‘physiognomy’ of radio, really a phenomenology: scrutiny of the power relations and unconscious fantasies involved in radio listening. He presents three pages of ‘axioms’ for a scientific sociology of music, which both summarize Marx’s *Capital* and contain a critique of war capitalism and its ‘free-market’ window-dressing comparable to Lenin’s. Due to the limitations of ‘Marxisms’ as defined by reference to the later history of the USSR, few care to discern this axiomatic Marxism in Adorno’s work, even though it provides the endoskeleton for all his livid analyses and vital epigrams. But, as these pages demonstrate, it’s there. The ability to summarize *Capital* in this succinct manner could not have arrived without a great deal of work, both on Adorno’s own part and in conversation with colleagues like Benjamin and Horkheimer. Those who would smuggle Adorno into a pluralistic pantheon of ‘continental philosophers’ thus have a problem. Whereas theory today is about ‘problematizing’ discourse and accentuating its distance from the material world, Adorno believed that the categories outlined in *Capital* supersede philosophy – and that to carry on philosophizing without them is to indulge in vacuous jargon. He was concerned to provide answers rather than problems: ‘In our approach we try to combine sociological, psychological and technological aspects because we believe that they are only “aspects” of our society and, in the last

analysis, that they may be reduced to fundamental categories of our society.’ Of course, Adorno does not read like an orthodox Marxist. Every sentence reflects on the psychological or subjective implications of his social statements. However, this was because he was proposing a Marxism that would be faithful to dialectics and would resist regression to a neo-Kantian sociology that thinks it has achieved scientific rigour when it describes a ‘thing-in-itself’ unblemished by ‘subjective’ intention.

From Popular Front intellectuals to captains of industry, the liberal dream was that classical music on the radio could ‘raise’ the cultural level of ordinary Americans. (It should be pointed out that before World War II, most music broadcast on US radio was classical music of varying degrees of lightness; jazz was introduced during the war years, and blues and rock’n’roll only in the 1950s.) Adorno showed how and why this project of cultural betterment was risible. Starting from a phenomenological rather than musicological analysis, he argues that, over the radio, string orchestras lack the bite, the message to the body, which might make the music speak to new and uninformed listeners. The great symphonies – when heard live, full of reflection on individual emotional response and collective responsibility – become a dreary, classy-sounding wash, like muzak in a fancy restaurant. In a tirade against Walter Damrosch’s ‘Music Appreciation Hour’, he excoriates the snobbish cant about ‘greatness’ used to dress this tepid fare. Damrosch describes Beethoven as successful and well-to-do; Adorno details Beethoven’s financial troubles, including his arrest by the police ‘because of his ragged appearance’. He similarly attacks ‘theme recognition’ (music appreciation as a spelling bee); it has no place in a genuine response to music, which is to experience something unknown. Adorno’s attention to the musical material gives him a weight lacking in most Left approaches, which are usually a matter of morals. He points out that flutes and percussion come across on the radio ‘over-distinct’; a fact that was also registered by the revolutionary composer Edgard Varèse, who organized music appropriate for electronic mediation by abandoning strings and using percussion, wind and brass.

There was no need to wave flags. Adorno’s Marxism is part of his grain of thought. Perhaps the musical terminology renders the following quotation opaque to those who conceive Marxism as a brand of ‘economics’, but the following is simply a rewrite of a famous adage:

Any given piece of music may be regarded as the resultant of two forces, namely, some pre-given

form – however sublimated its pre-giveness may be, as in the case of modern music – and the concrete, subjective intention of the specific composition.

The adage of course is that ‘people make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing’. This understanding of musical composition as a historical act – like Marx’s understanding of the commodity as a product of labour – is polemically contrasted to the idea of music as property, as a badge for the upwardly mobile, as treasure to be ‘appreciated’. Marx’s observations about value and property are brought to the very heart of aesthetic experience, something ‘Marxist’ art history – bewitched by the commodity nature of art objects, their imagined transcendence of time and place – rarely succeeds in doing: ‘because we can only hear music out from our own situations’ (my translation). Adorno did not want to raise the cultural level of the masses by teaching them high-flown concepts: he wanted to bring to consciousness visceral responses which listeners deem ‘natural’, but are really sedimented history. The ‘political’ or ‘economic’ Marxist can dismiss this focus on music as a diversion, but they will be repeating diatribes against artistic freedom and experiment that occurred in the Soviet Union just as workers’ power, internationalism, women’s rights and all the concrete achievements of Bolshevism came under attack in the Stalinist Thermidor.

In his polemic against the kind of analysis musicologists call ‘Schenkerian’ (and everyone else calls those deadly dull lists of successive scherzos and rondos in classical sleeve notes), Adorno writes: ‘every work has a concrete, inner form which lies so-to-say under the husk of official form and which is actually more important’ (my translation). Adorno is using music here to talk about (1) the singular personality in everyone trapped under standardized conventions (Adorno’s Freud), and (2) the new possibilities of power – the soviet – held back by current relations of production (one of the Marxist axioms listed earlier). Music is what allowed him to think Freud and Lenin simultaneously. For students of Russian history (rather than consumers of fashionable theory) such a correlation is neither bizarre nor perverse, as Martin Miller shows in *Freud and the Bolsheviks* (Yale University Press, 1998). Adorno’s emphasis was prescient. In the 1960s, music became the prime commodity to articulate mass utopian longings in the West – and hence carried an anti-commodity logic. The existence of similar mass movements in the USSR and China (even if suppressed, or redirected into a top-down ‘Cultural Revolution’) proved to anyone sensitive to

music as subaltern culture that these regimes were not different from capitalism in either psychic structure or economic power relations.

Adorno understood the sexual component of all musical response. This makes his ideas shocking to liberal common sense. It allows him to evade the sense of proving himself to the cultural authorities that makes Edward Said’s musical writings unconvincing. Perhaps the following may sound like an interpretation of poetry rather than a reasoned philosophical argument, but it’s to such boundary-trashing that Adorno ineluctably leads. As usual, Adorno reaches his peak in explaining the revolutionary import of Beethoven. He has been inveighing against the way in which the compression of sound in radio – reducing symphonic music (a concert hall phenomenon) to something listenable in a private living room – travesties his music, when he writes:

The Beethoven tension obtains its true significance in the range from Nothing to All. As soon as it is reduced to the medium-range between *piano* and *forte*, the Beethoven symphony is deprived of the secret of origins as well as the might of unveiling.

Perhaps you need to be a Freudian (or a Benjaminian, or a stand-up comic) to understand the enormity of Adorno’s words: ‘the secret of origins’ is nothing less than the *vagina*, while ‘the might of unveiling’ is nothing less than the *phallus*. Beethoven is *fuck music*, and that’s why the petty-bourgeois philistines can’t really take it, why they flee the twelve-tone music of those who have heard his call.

It may diminish the titillating crescendo of this review to add that Adorno also castigates ‘Music Appreciation Hour’ as ‘preposterous and hypocritical’ for ‘teaching *Tristan* without mentioning adultery’. For Adorno, such censorship is ‘gerontocratic’ because it doesn’t ‘recognise children and adolescents as people’. This is the politics of Bertolt Brecht’s *Kuhle Wampe* at large in pedagogy, just where it belongs; all because Adorno understands that radical education is as much about destroying stupidity and falseness as much as it is about conveying knowledge. Given Adorno’s arguments, it’s possible to see how an education in music via listening to classics on the radio (in my case, Radio 3 in the late 1960s) gives a sense of apartness and closure which is highly ideological, something only exposure to ultra-modern ‘noise’ rather than ‘music’ (in my case, cellist Siegfried Palm playing Bernd-Alois Zimmermann) can smash. Adorno’s ability to slip out of received argument and observe what people actually *do* is exhilarating. He writes, for example, about ‘knob-twirling’: the way a hi-fi buff achieves ‘perfect’

reception or reproduction of some revered classic, then switches off the set because actually he's bored. The buff should have been producing his own electronica! Adorno's anecdote carries the subversive thrust of an observation by Henry James or Sigmund Freud, demolishing seemingly self-evident truths ('such-and-such a percentage of the population love classical music') with a single closely observed fact (and it's also a perfect sketch of my father in the early 1960s). People are no longer faceless inhabitants of statistics, but frustrated individuals with real reactions and real desires. Adorno's psycho-politics insist that people are secretly terrified by 'ubiquity-standardisation' and require opportunities for self-expression if they're to flourish. (How this radical sympathy for the victims of alienation could be called 'elitist' remains one of the mysteries of Cultural Studies.) When he analyses the listener letters to the 'Music Appreciation Hour', he complains that they parrot back the cant about 'greatness' fed them by the presenters: 'their behaviour might be compared with that of the fanatical radio listener entering a bakery and asking for "that delicious, golden crispy Bond Bread".' This is satire on American consumer society as canny and demotic as a paragraph in a Philip K. Dick novel.

The reception of Adorno in Britain has been dogged by a timidity and literalness that is profoundly depressing. Because he writes about Beethoven and Schoenberg, he's taken to be a conservative totally out of sync with the uses made of modern media since the 1960s. *Current of Music* proves the opposite. It is a polemic against a middlebrow culture of 'distinction' sponsored by Damrosch, and in favour of broadcasts which could really alert the ears. Unfortunately, the academic discussion of rock and pop over the last decades has been dominated by the likes of Simon Frith and Dick Hebdige, whose youth sociology reprises the errors of Lazarsfeld: the misguided notion that something has been scientifically achieved because a commonplace has been granted statistical *gravitas*. Their sociological positivism – the equation of pop with what sells – misses the critique of mainstream pop implicit in countless subaltern music genres. Adorno's sense of the struggle involved in making great music – of Beethoven's war with his sponsors, his desire to make something extraordinary happen in his audiences – burns out of his text, and speaks to anyone who knows what music really can do. The missing part of Adorno's argument, and one which phalanxes of research students should be encouraged

to pursue, is how rock musicians did indeed learn to play on the 'hear-stripe'.

Before this can happen, one must understand that Adorno broke new ground precisely because he restricted his analysis to what he knew, which is the ground of tradition. He only knew music as the score, which means he discounts improvisation, and has no concept of the power of recorded nuance (see David Cunningham, 'Notes on Nuance: Rethinking a Philosophy of Modern Music', in *RP* 125, May/June 2005). He can only hear jazz variation as a 'worrying' of the written notes, one that always returns to the ordained. He doesn't understand how the unwritten process of syncopation initiates a musical aesthetic



of active response (dance) that breaks with passivity (muzak). However, his lack of finger-popping hipness does allow him to diagnose a central tension in swing, one that finally exploded in bebop and free jazz. His diatribe against versions which make tunes their own as 'pseudo-individualization' requires the dialectical twist he makes in his concluding remark on jitterbugs – 'to become transformed into an insect, man needs the energy which might possibly achieve his transformation into a man' – because note 'worrying' is how jazz achieved, in John Coltrane, music to equal Beethoven's. The point is not to adopt Adorno's preju-

dices, but to make judgements based on his devastating critique of a moribund classicism. At a time when iPod/downloading has created a culture of atomistic listening to isolated 'tracks', his insistence on *context* – the need for segues and interrupts to counter musical positivism – suggests avenues for intervention (as Culturcide and Negativland have already shown).

Once you accept that there is a counter-principle to mere popularity (or units measured for their ability to return a profit), Adorno's concept of the 'hear-stripe' is highly suggestive too. If you listen to Captain Beefheart's *Safe As Milk* album (1966), you hear a studio engineer say 'the following tone is a reference tone, recorded at our operating level'. The tone then dips in pitch, indicating that someone has slowed down the tape on which what we're hearing was recorded. This is not someone constructing an image of symphonic grandeur, it's direct and dirty play with the tools of reproduction. On the song 'Electricity', Beefheart pays homage to the socialized energy that powers rock. It features an electronic instrument called a theremin blurring pure sine waves all over the

'music'. Beefheart was making explicit and polemic what the Chess brothers in Chicago had discovered when they recorded Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf: there *is* an aesthetic appropriate to modern mediation, but it was invented by descendants of those whose sweat and blood provided the raw capital for the English industrial revolution. It's called the blues, and in various underlit guises – free jazz, harmolodics, funk, dub, improvisation, hip hop – it's been harrying pop positivism for the last hundred years. Anyone studying such musics – and no one can find this material without doing something like 'studying', even if it's more to do with second-hand record shops, eBay and downloading than the university library – badly needs the musical Marxism of *Current of Music*. Just as the best music demolishes your previous concepts of musical pleasure, so Adorno's rough treatment of all you hold dear is what's required to make you think for yourself. The book to read while playing your CDs of Stefan Jaworzyn's *Ascension*.

**Ben Watson**

## Disorientating

Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2006. 232 pp., £50.00 hb., £12.99 pb., 0 8223 3861 0 hb., 0 8223 3914 5 pb.

'What does it mean to be orientated?' This is the question that opens *Queer Phenomenology*, a book by turns dazzling and disorientating, and provides its philosophical *raison d'être*. And the answer to that question is: many things, for 'orientation' is here taken in the broadest sense imaginable, mined for its etymological subtleties, marshalled as metaphor, but also read literally as a statement about the arrangement of persons in relations to objects (and other persons) in the world.

Three main meanings of 'orientation' dominate in the book: first, one's orientation in space and one's (spatial) relationship to objects and others; second, sexual orientation, particularly homosexuality; third, racial genealogies and the idea of 'the orient'. Gender also gets a look-in, in Ahmed's discussion of work spaces and domestic spaces, but it is not accorded a chapter of its own. As becomes clear, these apparently distinct meanings of 'orientation' are, on Ahmed's reading, necessarily imbricated, so, for example, she sets out to investigate the idea that sexuality might have an impact upon 'how we reside in space'. This suggests that her overall purpose is to examine the

relationship between the spatial and the social (and social designations and categorizations such as gender, race and sexuality), and thus to consider the *politics* of spatiality in some broader sense. The question, then, is not only 'what it is to be orientated', but what the significance and what the effects of our disparate orientations might be: how one kind of orientation (sexual or racial, say) can serve to position (orientate) us in particular ways within society, a positioning which both expresses and curtails the sorts of social power and agency available to us as individuals. Her assertion, however, that 'social differences are the effects of how bodies inhabit spaces with others' is troubling. For surely such 'social differences' are not *only* effects but also causes. In fact Ahmed's own argument requires a complex reciprocity of the social and the spatial in a manner not reducible to any neat causal relationship, and the temporal ordering that this implies.

Setting aside this question of causality, one can certainly concede that the ideological nature of the spatial arrangement of persons (and persons to objects, and so on) is incontrovertibly visible in the non-neutrality

of spatial distinctions such as left and right, east and west, which, in their hierarchies of value, reveal the normativity of both social and spatial orientations and of those orientations' inextricability. Such orientations invoke, in turn, some idea of the 'line' to be followed – the correct route, any movement away from which constitutes a 'deviation' (a description with, again, both social and spatial connotations). But there is something of a deviation in Ahmed's own argument here – a sly movement from spatiality to *directionality*, upon which her argument hinges. This, then, is a further meaning of 'orientation': the directions in which we are headed, the ways in which we are (or are not) facing, the manner in which we are 'directed'. To be 'directed' in this last sense is equivalent to a kind of Foucauldian regulation, raising questions of agency and control. A further question is *how we come to be orientated* in certain ways and not others.

In Ahmed's use of 'directionality' we can see her influences writ large. As these are myriad, they are worth some consideration. In her introduction she signals her debt to queer geography, corporeal feminism, critical race theory, Marxism and psychoanalysis, in this way acknowledging her own 'directedness' and her refusal of a more orthodox (i.e. 'straight') philosophical orientation. But it is the word 'phenomenology' which perches so uncomfortably there on the front cover, beside its unaccustomed neighbour, 'queer', the very pairing of them a kind of calculated affront, promise and challenge, all at the same time. Ahmed confesses (or rather boasts) that she is no ordinary or conventional phenomenologist, yet she takes phenomenology as a jumping-off point here, wielding periodic references to Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, the idea of 'directionality' itself harks back to Brentano's conception of the intentionality of mental states, the 'directedness' of consciousness upon its objects. Most simply this can be understood as the 'aboutness' of mental states, that they are always 'about' something (fear of something, desire for something, and so on) and it is in this sense that they 'intend' some object. Although phenomenology is sometimes read as encouraging a kind of idealism, it is intentionality that guarantees the 'worldliness' of consciousness for the phenomenologist, its connection to the world.

From the phenomenological argument that consciousness is 'intentional' (directed towards objects), Ahmed concludes that 'consciousness is also embodied, sensitive, and situated', arguing that bodies too 'are directed in some ways and not others'. Yet this move from talk of consciousness to talk of bodies

is not warranted by Brentano's original thesis about intentionality, and, while it may be warranted by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of bodies, Ahmed doesn't argue this explicitly. Furthermore – useful as it is, in so many ways – I'm not sure that intentionality can be either reduced or expanded (take your pick) to provide the basis for such a wide-ranging exploration of orientation. As it stands, Ahmed doesn't provide any discussion of intentionality – but then she never said that she would 'do right' by phenomenology, only that she would *queer* it. This 'queering' seems to constitute, for the most part, a *critique* of phenomenology: at each stage she criticizes the phenomenological approach for the way in which it 'brackets' (as perceptual/phenomenal 'background') social factors like race, gender and sexuality. So, in the first chapter she identifies how Husserl's dismissal of the domestic world beyond his writing table serves to exclude or cover over the feminine labour which makes possible his occupation as philosopher; in the second chapter she gives a reading of the heterosexual matrix which shows that its treatment as 'background' naturalizes a set of cultural choices and covers over the 'work' that goes into orientating people in particular, heteronormative ways; in the third chapter she argues that 'the racial and historical dimensions are beneath the surface of the body described by phenomenology, which becomes, by virtue of its own orientation, a way of thinking the body that has surface appeal.'

These 'Marxist' (in her own representation of them) accusations against phenomenology are most evident in the first chapter, where she argues that phenomenology erases the material and economic conditions of philosophy – the matter and labour upon which it depends – along with the 'signs' of an object's particular history. Objects are 'cut off from [their] histories of arrival' in phenomenology, and presented instead as 'given'. 'Matter' takes 'form' – but the process of that taking form is elided. Yet if phenomenology has only 'surface appeal' and lacks the necessary 'worldliness', then why choose it as the theoretical framework for an argument that aims to look beyond and behind the *appearance* of race and sexuality in order to establish their historical and cultural contingency? In seeking to evolve a phenomenology that takes account of matter and history, Ahmed arguably ends up with something that is not phenomenology at all.

In fact the more obvious and pertinent influence in the discussion of directionality is Judith Butler. Witness the following claim:

Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us,

as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition.

In her emphasis on performativity and repetition in the establishment of sexual identities (in Chapter 2), and in her discussion of the different materialization of black and white bodies, where the former lack the 'motility' of the latter (in Chapter 3), Ahmed is clearly building on Butler's work in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. If Ahmed differs from Butler, it is only in her choice of spatial descriptions and metaphors, as her argument returns frequently to this idea of 'orientation', in the senses already outlined. Thus she shows that sexuality is often described in terms of directionality (inclination, tendency, orientation), where heterosexuality equals 'straightness' and homosexuality constitutes a 'deviation' or 'aberration'. Ahmed's consideration of the ways in which homosexual desire is brought back 'into line' (for example via representations of it as gender inversion, or via the practice of butch/femme) is engaging, but adds little to the work already done by Adrienne Rich (on compulsory heterosexuality), Butler (on the heterosexual matrix) and Judith Roof (on the heteronarrative). What all have in common is an investment in 'queerness', but here 'queerness' takes on the particular (spatial and directional) meaning of *disorientation*. We might ask, then, finally: *what does it mean to be 'disorientated'?* Which is another way of asking what queerness means and what it can do for us. Ahmed claims that to 'make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things', and, despite her earlier assertion that '[t]his is not about the romance of being offline or the joy of radical politics (though it can be)', it seems that we are indeed dealing here with the politics of disorientation. Her parenthetical comment indicates both her indecision (is it a politics or isn't it?) and her tentativeness (is she advocating disorientation or isn't she?).

More charitably, this tentativeness may be a product of the contested nature of 'queerness', rather than a stylistic or argumentative flaw of Ahmed's thesis. As she proceeds to wrestle with the paradoxes and complexities of 'queer' as concept and category in her conclusion, its very utility is put into question. It doesn't help that she is using 'queer' in two distinct, but related ways: the first capacious to the point of meaninglessness ('as a way of describing what is "oblique" or "offline"'); the second ('to describe specific sexual practices') precise and exclusive. The distinction is indicative of a problem that runs throughout *Queer*

*Phenomenology*: a certain unacknowledged slippage between metaphorical and literal uses of her terms of orientation. To be heterosexual is not to be literally 'straight'; to face your writing table is not the same as facing your future; lives don't 'follow lines' in the way that bodies do, and so on.

There is, in any case, a danger in all such discussions that queer will become a kind of value in itself, radical simply in its opposition to what is 'straight' (conservative, logocentric, patriarchal), and so perpetuating a 'logic' of otherness, irrationality, deviance, confusion or – here – disorientation. This is evident, for example, in Eve Sedgwick's positing of 'queer' as the refusal of straightforward, stable signification (in *Tendencies*) and it is an argument (following Foucault and traceable also in Butler) which links 'straightness' to intelligibility, and intelligibility to regulation. Ahmed's stated awareness of the dangers of an uncritical queer-enthusiasm actually weakens rather than strengthens her argument, because it makes her unwilling to use queerness as a ground for action. 'Queer commitment', as she figures it here, is merely 'a commitment not to presume that lives have to follow certain lines in order to count as lives, rather than being a commitment to a line of deviation'. A commitment 'not to presume' is barely a commitment at all; but then the very idea of (a commitment to) a line of deviation is problematic, because the line that begins as a deviation always seems to end as a kind of conformity (or 'straightness') of its own once it becomes, in Ahmed's terms, 'a line to be followed'. Nevertheless, it would be good to have some line to follow here, something to align oneself with.

As Ahmed represents it: 'My project in this book has been to show how orientations are organized rather than casual.' This is, of course, another way of saying that they are cultural rather than natural; thus her emphasis on orientation and directionality doesn't 'queer' phenomenology so much as it 'phenomenalizes' an already constructivist queer theory. Is such a project worthwhile? Certainly, but only if it has the courage to commit to and explore the politics of disorientation. It's telling that Ahmed avers that 'In calling for a politics that involves disorientation, ... it is important not to make disorientation an obligation or a responsibility for those who identify as queer.' Without such an obligation, Ahmed's disorientations can't amount to anything as concrete as a politics, and queerness will remain a deconstructing device, too easily assimilated and redeployed by the structures it seeks to unpick.

**Kaye Mitchell**

# A bad book

Jason Powell, *Jacques Derrida: A Biography*, Continuum, London and New York, 2006. ix + 262 pp., £65.00 hb., £10.99 pb., 0 82649 001 8 hb., 0 82649 449 8 pb.

Is there any need for a review of a book that hardly demands serious attention on any other count than that it is the only English-language book claiming to be a biography of Derrida so far published? Perhaps not. Still, there are certainly negative reasons why a book such as this might demand some comment. The publisher suggests that it is appropriate to 'lower/upper level undergraduates' and 'general readers'. Since these are precisely the kind of readers who are at the mercy of bad information, they are also precisely those to whom scholarship owes a particular duty of care. Yet, not only is this book punctuated by careless conceptual, descriptive and historical errors that could generate serious problems for *any* such readers; it is inadequate to the task it claims to address.

From the introduction onwards, it's fairly clear what this book is not. What is far harder to discern is what it *is* in any productive sense. It has features of a conventional biography, in that it refers to some of the things Derrida 'did', but it has none of the empirical bases usually associated with such a genre. There is no archival work, no reference to correspondence or the press, and no primary interviews. Most of the biographical matter is plundered from other critical (and not so critical) accounts of Derrida's work, with a resulting lack of detail. Unlike the film by Dick and Kofman (2002), it has no sense of what Derrida did for breakfast. Thus, when Powell says that a 'whole and coherent study' of Derrida's life and thought 'is as yet lacking', it still is. While the book may retract from providing such a thing, by recognizing its own lack of access to the letters, this lack can only, as Continuum's own blurb for the book states, present Derrida as 'a mystery' – quite an achievement for a biography. It also retracts from parity with its object, stating that a 'truly complete' biography would require 'several volumes, especially if it were to accept Derrida's own demanding standards of reading' – though the Preface does claim 'a sketch of a biography that would be complete, given the work on and knowledge of Derrida's life then in print', and 'a continuous narrative of Derrida's life'. These pre-deconstructive notions of finality and unity become merely offensive, where, somehow ignoring the infamous issue of Nietzsche's umbrella, Derrida's death is taken to mean that the *œuvre* is 'complete ... at least'. In fact, by no means all of Derrida's works

in print at the time of the book's writing are referred to, indexed or compiled by Powell's book.

If there are thus immediate problems with the biographical part of the book, such material still accounts for less than half of its volume. The *œuvre* is itself an object of Powell's attempt, which also has features of a monograph on Derrida's thought. In the sections of the book which cover this aspect, the lack of an empirical dimension is mirrored by an almost complete lack of interest in the theoretical aspects of its own work. There is no consistent attention to the methodologies, concepts or critical issues of biography, autobiography or life-writing in general, nor any genuine attention to the concepts of archive and memory in Derrida's thought. Significantly in this regard, *Archive Fever* (1995) gains scant mention, and *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive* (2003) gains no reference at all. (Although it is perhaps more indicative of the disparity between the book and its object, rather than being simply indicative of Powell's general attitude towards Derrida's autobiographical inflections, that there is this comment on *Memoires of the Blind* (1990): 'The whole text ... is littered with references to himself in quite unuseful ways for the writer of a biography.' This recognition of the object's resistance to the labour of the book is queasily ironic, given that the book pitches itself against the resistance to deconstruction associated with analytic philosophy.)

In what Powell offers in place of such methodological considerations, there are two basic understandings of the development of Derrida's thought apparent in the book (if 'understanding' is not to overstate it). First, and though it only receives sporadic attention, is Derrida's growing interest in religion. While this attention appears to be received mostly from Caputo, it is also part of a specific trend in thinking about Derrida which itself requires rather more circumspection than it gains here. Second, and this is particularly important given the biographical claim of the book, Powell describes Derrida's wax and wane in a way which seems indebted to a fundamentally Romantic teleology. (Noting at several points Derrida's 'weakening powers', Powell questions whether the ageing Derrida was frightened by the modern world.) Although a traditional biography might not be expected to take account of the way

in which deconstruction threw into question the very notions of *œuvre*, time and telos, a book which claimed to offer a summary of the development of Derrida's thought might certainly be expected to encounter *in some way* such issues of periodization and transition. Such immunity to questions of history and historicity is particularly problematic, and while there are many other problems with this book, the errors connected to issues of temporality are indicative of its overall cast.

At a basic level, there are several problems also generated by what appears to be ineffective editing. For example: in a discussion of Derrida's 'Force and Signification' (1963), the book cites the following: 'As in Hegel, the philosophical, critical, reflective consciousness is not only contained in the scrutiny given to the operations and works of history. What is first in question is the operation of the consciousness itself.' Aside from some typographical deviations, relatively minor in comparison to the ensuing wrench, the Bass translation reads: 'What is first in question is the history of this consciousness *itself*.' The point, roughly, is that whereas consciousness may be posited through its reflection upon history, what is first in question is a historical reflection upon this consciousness in its reflection upon history. Powell's 'translation' simply returns to the previous position, essentializing rather than historicizing, in a manner that is particularly bad given that the object of Powell's discussion is authorial intentionality and recognition of the Other.

Such errors may be merely careless, but there are others which cannot be excused as mere faults of transcription. Although the book pitches itself as providing a historical backdrop to Derrida's life and work, it fails at points to comply with the minimal standards of such scholarship. Here, for example, is Powell's description of Althusser's contribution to 'post-Marxism': 'Only in 1960 did Althusser introduce "scientific" Marxism into the ENS, and in 1961 began giving his "young Marx" seminars in which he considered this early Marx as more radical and more scientific than the Marx of *Capital*.' Althusser of course thought quite the reverse – considering the early Marx prior to the epistemological break to be humanistic, and therefore ideological; the later, 'mature' Marx, to be effectively structuralist in terms of the serious economic analyses, and thus non-ideological, and indeed scientific.

These (very basic) errors are compounded by clumsy descriptions of Derrida's thought that impact upon one of the only consistent themes to define the book: an opposition between 'heart' and 'machine', subtended by the usual binary associations – presence and absence,

personal and impersonal, life and death, originality and repetition. There is a consistent sense throughout the book that Powell cannot but side with the organic here: Derrida's 'messianic faith' is positioned against the 'dead' and 'machinal', which is elsewhere described as 'pernicious'. This not only appears to forget the rather important 'without messianicity' qualification, but also forgets the idea of the prosthetic production of the human, as explored, for example, in the recently translated *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* (2000). Since this is one of the few consistent oppositions to run through the book, it might be thought to inscribe autobiographically the individuality of the author, yet its mechanical repetition (let alone the implication of its regressive humanism) is at once the enunciation of a cultural, and indeed historical, voice. Such an opposition is embedded in the book's general sense of the importance of deconstruction:

Derrida proves or gives reasons for ... the obvious or machine-like process of life and death, the way in which so much can be predicted, the way in which so much is known, that there is no mystery.... This means that it is very rare that a 'real' event ever takes place. In such a technological world (and deconstruction is also an attempt to reform technology), most existent things are therefore just specters of what they could be, and we must wait the truer coming of things.

There are a number of problems with descriptions such as these, particularly for 'general readers'. Derrida's thoughts on the event include a questioning of 'happening' as such, in which the tension between punctuation and diffusion asks us to consider, for example, the event of poverty. Whether poverty has not 'happened' in some sense seems to be to limit the radical questioning of deconstruction. Powell's attachment to a 'truer coming' implies a regressive desire for something which would lie beyond difference – and such a desire might be noted in the moments where Powell elides the tensions of deconstruction by his own hierarchizing of binaries. The assertion that 'deconstructive ontology' involves 'the psychoanalysis of the subject in its individuality, rather than its universality', for example, elides the necessary tension between particularity and generality. If deconstruction for Powell appears to offer an impossible promise of the future resolution of such complexity, there is also a lack of recognition of deconstruction's complex history of relation to the Idea in the Kantian sense – an ideality which may be infinitely deferred, but to which culture may strive asymptotically. (As Powell puts it: 'Derrida's ideal existence of things is not precisely "ideal"')

... but is a ... genuine event, which, however, has been indefinitely deferred.’) Bennington’s precision in terms of this philosopheme in the essays ‘Derrida and Politics’ (1989) and ‘An Idea of Syntax’ (2000) would be helpful here: for at least part of deconstruction’s difference to this philosopheme is that in each moment of aporia, which encounters a ‘madness’ of decision, the possibility of justice is given alongside the possibility of injustice. In this complexity, deconstruction is radically political, and though politics is infinitely protracted, in the sense that it cannot be finally resolved, it does not fall simply within the terms of the Idea: although this would have to be read next to Derrida’s thoughts on the delay of thought in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003). It is also endlessly singular, so that it happens in each moment – *now*.

As these examples should indicate, Powell succeeds in neither speculative nor empirical terms; nor is there a productive relation between the two aspects of the book. Rather it is defined by awkward caesurae between plainly biographical and weakly critical paragraphs, between which no productive meaning emerges, synthetic, differential or otherwise. The book fails to function either as a remotely useful or accurate introduction to Derrida’s thought, or as a traditional biography that could be helpful as a basis from which to understand the world that changed around, and was changed through, deconstruction. Hence, if the publisher’s blurb refers to the ‘unnecessary apologetic tone that reveals more about the author’s milieu than Derrida’s recognized importance to the discipline of philosophy’, this recognition of Powell’s terribly limited knowledge of the state of Derrida’s position within the academy is correct. The book pitches part of its necessity in the negative response to Derrida on the part of analytic philosophers, but there is no impression of drifts, trends or conditions within the contemporary academy. And there are a number of things that the author should be very apologetic about indeed.

In addition to those things indicated, the book is made up of simple errors and badly articulated comparisons that are not clearly delimited at later points, thus demanding a great deal from the introductory reader. Some of these would require too much unpacking to explicate. For example: the central ‘philosophical’ thesis that Derrida is ‘basically Heideggerian’ and ‘basically Platonistic’. Many other errors are too numerous to catalogue here, though it might be mentioned that the trace ‘is’ Heidegger’s *Riss*, *différance* has a ‘true proximity’ to Lacan’s *objet petit a*, and, more horribly, the trace dismisses ‘any’ reference. While there are moments where *différance* is more or

less adequately described, many attempts to qualify deconstructive ‘purity’ are nonsensical in their metaphysical articulation. Here, for example, *différance* appears, grammatically, as lack: ‘the truest essence of language, *différance* (the absence within presentness)’. These are errors which have been rendered obsolete for some time and which should require no further parry. Finally, it is perhaps Powell’s own citation of Derrida’s comments on the 1993 reprint of Wolin’s Heidegger book that might best provide the reader with terms by which to ponder his contribution to Derrida scholarship: ‘Derrida called the collection of documents weak, simplistic.... It was “a bad book” ... “execrable”.’

Sas Mays

## Shelter from the storm

Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays Volume 1*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006. xiv + 230 pp., £40.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 0 521 85437 7 hb., 0 521 67061 6 pb.

Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays Volume 2*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006. xii + 239 pp., £40.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 0 521 85438 5 hb., 0 521 67062 4 pb.

These are important volumes by one of the most thought-provoking of contemporary philosophers, collecting together some of the main papers from the latest stage in MacIntyre’s long career, specifically the period 1985–99 – that is, after *After Virtue* (1981) and, as he puts it, ‘after I had recognized that my philosophical convictions had become those of a Thomist Aristotelian’. (An earlier collection, *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, appeared in 1971; *The MacIntyre Reader*, edited by Kelvin Knight, 1998, is a useful selection covering all periods of his work.) MacIntyre arrived at this conviction only after a complicated intellectual journey. He started his academic career teaching philosophy at Leeds and then Oxford. He was a member of the Communist Party in the early 1950s, but left just before Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. He flirted briefly with Trotskyism. Then he contributed to the *New Reasoner* (a precursor of *New Left Review*) and helped to create the New Left. However, he soon abandoned active involvement in left politics. After a bruising confrontation with student radicals at Essex

University, where he had become dean in the late 1960s, he left for the USA where he has lived and worked ever since. In traversing all these different positions, what is striking is that MacIntyre has not simply repudiated his earlier views and replaced them with newer ones. He has continually incorporated insights and ideas from each so that his philosophy has been extended and enriched through the changes. The publication of *After Virtue* established him as one of the most original and influential contemporary moral and social philosophers. That book appeared to sum up his position. However, these volumes demonstrate that he is still thinking actively, and developing and changing his ideas.

The articles collected in them cover the main areas of MacIntyre's work. This has been wide-ranging. In the first volume there are essays on the explanation of action, on the nature of truth, on problems of relativism, and on the nature of philosophy and the commitments it involves. There are also important pieces on the interpretation of the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas. One is reminded that, apart from his work in philosophy, MacIntyre has also made a major contribution in theology. There is an interesting discussion of the roles of philosophy and religious faith in an essay about a recent papal encyclical on this subject, *Fides et Ratio*. This is also one of a number of essays in volume 1 in which MacIntyre defends his Thomist reading of Aristotle. The encyclical upholds the autonomy of philosophy and MacIntyre's Thomism is only one among the many different positions taken by contemporary Catholic philosophers. This should be known more widely. It refutes the mutterings that one hears from time to time to the effect that Catholics cannot be genuine philosophers since their commitment to the Church comes first for them. A fundamental tenet of MacIntyre's philosophy is that theory and practice are inseparable. Values and ideas of the common good are always rooted in social practices. This approach inevitably raises problems of relativism. In the preface to the first of these volumes, MacIntyre describes how the impact of the work of Kuhn and Lakatos in the early 1970s provoked him into working out his ideas on this issue. There is a series of highly illuminating essays in the first of these volumes dealing with problems of relativism whose republication is particularly welcome.

The essays in the second volume deal mostly with issues in ethics and political philosophy. This has been the main area of MacIntyre's work. MacIntyre is highly critical of the academicism and irrelevance of most contemporary philosophical work. What is



refreshing about these pieces is MacIntyre's engagement and commitment. Although he is not actively engaged politically, his work has little of the academic and scholastic quality which is present in so much contemporary philosophy. He is a powerful critic of modern society who wants his work to have an impact. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argued in an Aristotelian fashion that values are always rooted in social practices. In premodern society, in which there is a relatively unified and cohesive community, there are shared ideas of the common good and shared standards by which to arbitrate moral disputes. In the modern world this unity has been fragmented and destroyed. There are no longer common values and hence no basis for resolving disputes or grounding a shared idea of the common good. In these essays we can see how MacIntyre has been developing and extending these ideas. The Enlightenment, as he describes it, rejected Aristotelianism and tried to found ethics on a conception of universal reason. Such reason is supposed to provide a basis for individual autonomy and moral understanding. This is most clearly expressed in Kant's philosophy, interestingly discussed here in the essay 'Some Enlightenment Projects Reconsidered'. But, MacIntyre argues, the Enlightenment project has 'failed'. The institutions which are supposed to embody the ideals of the Enlightenment – a legal system of individual rights, the free market, liberal democracy

– in fact undermine genuine liberty and democracy. In the world of the market and business, money and purely instrumental values hold sway. National politics are dominated by a powerful political elite, often subservient to corporate interests. Moreover, the reconciliation of moral disagreements is impossible because modern social life has been compartmentalized into different spheres, insulated from each other and each governed by its own social norms. In this situation rational moral discussion and debate cannot prevail.

These ideas have some similarities with Habermas's view that in modern society public communication has been 'systematically distorted' and that this is destroying the possibility of rational moral deliberation. However, for Habermas (as for Kant) rationality is a universal and inherent human capacity. It is a distinctive feature and, I think, a great strength of MacIntyre's position that he insists that reason and values are always rooted in particular social practices and institutions. We can always ask the questions 'Whose justice? Which rationality?' (the title of MacIntyre's 1988 book). According to MacIntyre, rational discussion and debate can flourish only in small-scale communities, not unduly dominated by money and powerful political forces. Following Aristotle, his model is the ancient polis. In the modern world, the picture is bleak: such rational communities survive only in a few embattled groups in which 'social relationships are informed by a shared allegiance to the goods internal to communal practices, so that the uses of power and wealth are subordinated to the achievement of those goods'. The academic world, fishing clubs and family farms are his favoured examples. I have little experience of the last two; it seems to me that he has a rather rosy view of the first. Regrettably, the influence of money and power are increasingly determining life in the academy, particularly under the impact of the RAE.

What is to be done? MacIntyre does not try to map out a way forward. However, the limitations of his Thomist Aristotelianism become evident when this question is posed. His philosophy is defiantly untimely, but is that a virtue? Even as Aristotle was writing the polis was being superseded. The scale of social organization has gone far beyond it. Though small-scale communities continue to exist, they tend increasingly to be located within a larger social context. Because of this MacIntyre is often accused of being a backward-looking and conservative thinker. He angrily rejects that criticism and recognizes an inevitability to the modern social order. However, he despairs of the possibility of significantly changing it for the better.

The only hope, he concludes, is to create and defend rational communities as enclaves, preserved and protected against the destructive forces of the capitalist market and the bourgeois nation-state.

Plato had a similarly bleak picture of the possibility of rational action in the society of his time. To portray the plight of the philosopher in an irredeemably corrupt society who cannot use his philosophy for the good, he invokes the image of a man sheltering behind a wall from a violent storm (*Republic* 496d). In using this image, Plato holds out the hope that the storm may abate and that philosophy may one day be influential in society. MacIntyre is more despairing. He seems to believe that the market and the corrupt politics of the nation-state are inevitably going to dominate. He has no thought of any other possibility. The storm will not abate. He dismisses his erstwhile hope that the market and the capitalist state might be restrained or even overcome in a single line: 'Marxist politics have failed.' And this is not replaced by any other vision. The only possibility left, it seems, is to try to preserve and protect moral values within the embattled enclaves of small rational communities. These communities may well provide a more fertile soil for the creation of shared values. However, such communities are also often limiting, stifling and oppressive. The widening out of social horizons and social relations, and the plurality of moral perspectives that have come with modernity, have been for many a liberating phenomenon that has provided greater opportunities for people to develop and flourish. A more complex picture of modernity is needed, in my view, which allows for a better recognition of the contradictory impact it has had.

For there is clearly also a negative side to modern society. The market and the state have indeed grown to be all powerful and, at the moment, there appear to be no forces capable of challenging them. The persistence of conflicts and contradictions in the world, however, give grounds for hope that this situation will not be permanent. It is true, of course, that the Communist politics of the last century 'failed', but the lessons to be drawn from this deserve a more complex and thoughtful response than MacIntyre seems prepared to give. Is the present state of things really the 'end of history', as MacIntyre seems to accept? Is MacIntyre really right to abandon all hope of radical social change? Is it not possible for us to organize our lives better than we do at present? These are some of the questions that these latest instalments of MacIntyre's thought-provoking work raise.

**Sean Sayers**

# Imaginary anarchisms

Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-colonial Imagination*, Verso, London and New York, 2005. 255 pp., £14.99 hb., 1 8446 7037 6.

'There was a time', wrote the anarchist Peter Kropotkin, 'when man imagined the earth placed in the centre of the universe...' We all know the story – Freud tells it, too; the 'centre' was displaced (by Copernicus, by Darwin, by Freud himself), and our conception of ourselves with it. Yet this is not the whole story, said Kropotkin; the terrestrial centre was merely replaced by the sun, that 'central body' whose 'powerful attraction governs our planetary world', but this vision, too, suffered time and change. As astronomy came to posit 'infinitely tiny bodies that dash through space in all directions with giddy swiftness ... the centre, the origin of force, formerly transferred from the earth to the sun, now turns out to be scattered and disseminated. It is everywhere and nowhere.' The implications of these words, written in 1896, for a European civilization that comfortably posited itself as the reigning centre of an expanded world were considerable.

As if to echo Kropotkin, Benedict Anderson's new book on anarchism and the anti-colonial imagination opens by invoking the spectacle of a 'glittering canopy of stationary stars' that are, despite their appearance of stability, 'actually in perpetual, frantic motion, impelled hither and yon by the invisible power of the gravitational fields of which they are ineluctable, active parts'. Starting from this image, Anderson thus proposes 'to map the gravitational force of anarchism between militant nationalisms on opposite sides of the planet' at the end of the nineteenth century, tracing the frantic movements of the anarchist idea across continents and oceans, from Barcelona to Havana to Manila. This was the smaller world that had recently been brought into being by the new communications technologies of 'print capitalism' – the very same technologies that midwived the distance-spanning 'imaginary communities' of nationalism that were the subject of Anderson's most famous work. Here, we encounter Italians in Argentina, New Jersey, France, and the Basque homeland; Puerto Ricans and Cubans in Haiti, the United States, France, and the Philippines; Spaniards in Cuba, France, Brazil, and the Philippines; Russians in Paris; Filipinos in Belgium, Austria, Japan, France, Hong Kong and Britain; Japanese in Mexico, San Francisco and Manila; Germans in London and Oceania; Chinese in the Philippines and Japan; Frenchmen in Argentina, Spain and Ethiopia. And so on.

If such breathless rhetoric moves you, you may be willing to keep reading, in Keatsian fashion, without irritably reaching after fact and reason. But we should perhaps stop to ask exactly *what* is being 'mapped' here? For Anderson is not speaking of any actual anarchist 'influence' – something which might be subject to a quantifiable kind of scrutiny – but of more tenuous, shadowy connections, perhaps more figurative than literal. Some might well demand to know the exact ontological claims that are being made on history at this point: what exactly is this 'force' of which Anderson writes, and how could it have exerted itself, for instance, on a figure like José Rizal, the nineteenth-century novelist often credited with having helped to invent a 'Filipino' national identity, who never publicly identified himself as an anarchist, associated with anarchists, nor certifiably read any anarchist authors? One recalls Adorno's impatience with Benjamin's lack of a properly historical-materialist concern for the causal mechanisms connecting phenomena to one another. For what constitutes these 'affinities'? And what can we really conclude from them?

In his review for the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Jim Richardson submits Anderson's book to the test of a good old-fashioned positivist historian – what is its thesis, and what is the evidence provided? – and dispenses with it in a few paragraphs, after which he has some four thousand words left to flog the dead horse. What is the thesis? It is the vague assertion that anarchism exercised some important influence over anti-colonial revolts in the Philippines and Cuba around the end of the nineteenth century. What is the evidence? A shoddy assortment of the 'circumstantial', the coincidental and (worst of all) the 'unquantified', littered with anecdotal items of 'tangential relevance' and bits of (horrors!) 'literary criticism' proffered in place of substantial argumentation.

Of course, Anderson could have written something far more robust if he had focused more on protagonists such as Isabelo de los Reyes, a significant figure in the nascent Filipino revolutionary movement of the turn of the twentieth century, who had in fact become personally acquainted with Spain's single most famous anarchist intellectual, Francisco Ferrer y Guardia, in the notorious prison of Montjuich in Barcelona, and who really *did* read Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin and Malatesta. As for Cuba, home to one

of the largest and oldest anarchist movements in the Western hemisphere, there could indeed have been a story to be told, only it would not centre on Anderson's own protagonists: José Martí, who was at best sympathetic to anarchism and at worst, as Anderson acknowledges, actively hostile to it; or the Puerto Rican revolutionary Ramón Betances, who was 'by no means an anarchist' even if he associated with them in France and Spain.

Certainly the bigger picture that emerges from *Under Three Flags* could have been drawn by more conventional means. Histories that specifically trace the dissemination of anarchist discourse from the cosmopolitan hub of Barcelona into colonies of the declining Spanish empire around the time of the *fin de siglo*, such as Iris M. Zavala's *Colonialism and Culture* (1992), are, after all, not especially new or controversial. Anderson could have played it safer by sticking to the terrain explored by works such as Kirwin R. Shaffer's *Anarchism and Countercultural Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba* (2005) or Arif Dirlik's *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* (1993). There really were some vigorous anarchist movements in East Asia – only they came a bit later (just getting under way after the Russo-Japanese war in China and Japan, and only after the 1919 revolt against Japanese occupation in Korea, culminating in a guerrilla war in 1931), and were not so much in the Philippines itself. The connections between anarchism and anti-colonial nationalisms are indeed fast and thick in all of these instances.

There is another road not taken here: it might, for example, have been genuinely interesting – to mention another person from the sidebars of Anderson's narrative – to read an account of how someone like ('this remarkable woman') Louise Michel's political development was informed by her witnessing of the Kanak revolts on New Caledonia, the penal colony where she and so many other revolutionaries were sentenced for their participation in the Paris Commune. Like Isabelo de los Reyes, if for different reasons, she too became intensely interested in the folklore of the subaltern, publishing a compendium of *Legendes et chants de gestes canaques* in 1885. It was around this time that the French anarchist movement also began to engage much more directly with the issues of empire – an anti-colonial turn that, as Patricia Leighton has shown, would decisively colour the work

of *anarchisant* artists such as Alfred Jarry, Hugo Ball and Pablo Picasso. However, these more concrete, conventional kinds of history are evidently not what Anderson has set out to do.

The French sociologist Daniel Colson has recently attempted something comparable to *Under Three Flags*. His *Trois essais de philosophie anarchiste: Islam, histoire, monadologie* (2004) is a sprawling work that builds affinitary bridges between, among other things, Sufi mysticism, Leibnizian philosophy, the strange temporality of the fairy tale (with its characteristic invocation, 'once upon a time'), Hannah Arendt's treatment of the difficulties attending an 'intimate history of revolts and resistances', and his two favourite thinkers: Deleuze and Proudhon, apparently representing the twin historical poles of the anarchist tradition. Weaving between these disparate elements in Colson's book is the motif of 'the histories of the defeated', something akin to what Benjamin called 'the tradition of the oppressed': discontinuous histories, a tradition not really handed down in any material or traceable way, but in which, nonetheless,

the Spartan slave revolts, the Ismaelians of 12th century Persia, the Chinese Yellow Turban Taoists of the second century BCE, and the Czech Hussites of the 15th century could immediately recognize themselves, as could the Communards of 1871.

Colson's breathless tone is clearly reminiscent of Anderson's – yet Colson's narrative is less prone to the positivist dismissal: all he is concerned to show here is that these protagonists *potentially* had something in common, that they would have been able to 'recognize themselves' in one another. The affinitary relationship is conceptual or philosophical, not at all *historical* in the positivist sense. As Colson recognizes, the 'histories' that connect these 'breaches in official history' are so ephemeral, from the standpoint of positivist historiography, that they seem to melt away as soon as one tries to name them, to 'bind them together with the threads of language in a public context, allowing them to communicate among themselves'. This is a radical philosophical speculation about the nature of history and identity. Unfortunately, Benedict Anderson's own philosophical intelligence, which was so clearly on view in *Imagined Communities*, is missing from *Under Three Flags*, an exciting but flawed account of the mobile, unstable world of 'early globalization'.

Jesse Cohn

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