Trend lines and frontlines


Geopolitics and political economy are registers that the recent revival in the fortunes of radical political thought has largely evaded or sublimated. The tendency has been to turn away from state power to explore the resources of subjectivity, and to emphasize lines of resistance over structures of accumulation. Articulating the economic and the international has also proved easier said than done, as testified by the spectrum of positions on the role of oil in the invasion of Iraq. A deficit of historical understanding and political orientation marks the present. This is the predicament that Balakrishnan’s *Antagonistics* seeks to diagnose and to counter.

Intended as a ‘chronicle of the second decade of the post-Cold War status quo’, this collection, comprising review essays written between 1995 and 2008, plus a new essay on ‘Machiavelli and the Reawakening of History’, is driven by the conviction that the Left requires a disabused cognition of the political and economic fields, as well as a rethinking of rupture and foundation. In keeping with the vow of oppositional sobriety that has marked the second series of the *New Left Review* – of which Balakrishnan is an editor, and in which all of the chapters were originally published – we are told that neither the readability of the conjuncture nor the possibility of a global antagonism are in any way given. Today, it is ‘as if the same logic that neutralizes the power to build new hegemonies is generating dimensions of disorder and change beyond intelligible totalization’. Rather than a mere failing of the collective intellect, disorientation might be written into the nature of things.

With the waning of mass subjects, whether revolutionary or reformist, able to bend the complexity of the social into unified trajectories of change, the ‘essential question of whether a politics oriented toward the long-term tendencies and limits of capital is still possible’ is also left in abeyance. Political thought and practice cannot attain totality, lost amid temporal cadences and spatial differences that they can neither master nor synthesize. Althusser’s maxim that materialism means not telling yourself stories seems to have served the *New Left Review* as a regulative idea for the past while, and Balakrishnan’s project explicitly partakes in the journal’s ethos and direction – indirectly summarized as a ‘combative but clear-eyed pessimism, orienting the mind for a Long March against the new scheme of things’. But, despite the invocation of Schmitt’s idea of ‘neutralization’ as the atmosphere of the present, there is also a sense that the volatile character of this new scheme of things, indexed to the current crisis, is also a kind of occasion – provided that, following *The Prince*, we face up to the idea that an occasion might be ‘a near complete absence of what we would call an opportunity’.

Between the Schmittian prelude and the exploratory Machiavellian conclusion, *Antagonistics* surveys a number of efforts to totalize this interregnum, both longitudinally (the *longue durée* of socio-economic formations and international hegemonies) and vertically (in terms of our current political predicament). The book is divided into two sections, ‘Concepts of the Geopolitical’ and ‘Reflections on Politics’, attesting to the uncertain relation between the intra- and inter-national. The objects of Balakrishnan’s attention are of disparate importance and varied political provenance, but there seems to be a premium on books of great scope and ambition – that is, on attempts to totalize past and present. We are thus presented with critical evaluations of works ranging from Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* and RETORT’s *Afflicted Powers* on the anti-capitalist Left, to Philip Bobbitt’s *Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* and Azar Gat’s *War in Human Civilization* on the imperial Right, passing through the centrist equivocations of Habermas and Bhikhu Parekh’s *Rethinking Multiculturalism*.

Throughout, Balakrishnan writes with poise, fluency and considerable erudition. His passing praise for Gat’s ‘pleasantly old-fashioned historical literacy’ reflects his own (and the *New Left Review’s*) admiration for cultures of scholarship and modes of writing of a more classical stamp than is usual in a postmodern academy driven by ‘impact’, the blind
accumulation of citations, and a hostility towards inquiries with long gestation periods. The patience and precision evidenced by several of the essays are counterbalanced by calibrated and bracing derision. At times, the stinging rebukes (of Bobbitt’s ‘astonishingly ignorant assertions’ on Prussia or Gat’s ‘neo-social Darwinism’) are strong enough as to make one wonder if the trouble was really worth it. The assurance with which Balakrishnan dispatches his targets, and the insights he produces in the process, make one wish for a book that would preserve the problems posed by Antagonistics while relegating many of its interlocutors to the endnotes.

Balakrishnan’s contention that ‘political commitments grounded in thought can be distinguished from opinion and ideological attachments by their capacity to subsume the authentic insights of opposed conceptions of the world’ is commendably mature, and his suspicion of an ‘over-politicized’ reason for which partisanship trumps rationality is legitimate. But, for all the tributes to the grand visions of the authors he reviews, there is a sense that the ratio between subsumption and dismissal weights in favour of the latter. While we’re happy for a reviewer to levy criticisms without erecting counter-arguments, a certain frustration is generated by the repeated sequence of generous estimate, devastating criticism and promissory gestures of futurity – best captured, in the last line of one of the essays, as ‘negations that do not yet have a name’.

The structural limits of a collection of reviews are most obvious in the second half, which, for all of its merits, feels distinctly occasional, covering the Jünger–Schmitt correspondence, Sheldon Wolin’s study of Tocqueville and Niethammer’s uninspiring musings on collective identity, among others. Unlike the treatment of geopolitics and its histories, it does not amount to anything like a survey of contemporary reformulations of the political. Balakrishnan’s barbed allusions to the Left’s deficit of realism, to the vanishing of any sense of strategy and to the evacuation of Leninism make one hanker for a frontal engagement with recent thinking of politics (somewhat at random, Alain Badiou’s Metapolitics, Wendy Brown’s Regulating Aversion, Jacques Rancière’s Hatred of Democracy, Enrique Dussel’s Twenty Theses on Politics or even Michael Walzer’s Passion and Politics would have made interesting foils for Balakrishnan’s polemical reason). Instead, the second half of the book, save for a glancing treatment of Althusser’s Machiavelli, is mostly a tale of Western depoliticization and the pallid heritage of social democracy. Its verve and elegance do not compensate for the feeling that little here makes a contribution to reviving the thinking of politics, especially if the latter is to be understood as ‘a sphere in which strategic projects directed at enemies take shape’.

Balakrishnan’s contribution lies in the interrogation of the geopolitical, which takes up the first half of Antagonistics. His apprenticeship with Perry Anderson, Robert Brenner and Michael Mann lends Balakrishnan’s vision a temporal and spatial scope often missing from contemporary political thought. Though the medium of the review imposes its obvious limits, his sensitivity to the secular trend as well as the sudden kairos is rare, and exempts him from the historical provincialism that narrows most theories of the political to unique temporal and territorial frames. It is fitting that Gramsci’s tutelary spirit is repeatedly invoked. It is undoubtedly present in the principle that ‘a measured, historically comparative reflection on the prospects for a rational transformation of the order of human things has been the sine qua non of any intellectually consequent opposition.’ Historical comparison and attention to overarching tendencies are in part what allows Antagonistics to question some of the more apocalyptic, if motivationally expedient, rhetoric around political violence in the present. As Balakrishnan writes, ‘the suggestion that war is the constitutive power of modern politics – discernible in both [RETORT’s] Afflicted Powers and [Hardt and Negri’s] Multitude – amounts to little more than a slack metaphorics, detracting attention from a sober assessment of the capacities and limits of military power in the present conjuncture.’

So, it is a little perplexing (though maybe marketing considerations could be blamed for this) that the subtitle of Antagonistics places it in an ‘age of war’. Balakrishnan in fact disputes this notion historically (noting the demobilizing effects of consumerism on the populations of advanced capitalist countries), economically (underscoring America’s military dependence on a fragile capitalist order) and strategically (doubting the effectiveness of imperial force in policing the excluded). Emphasizing the ‘structural crisis in the relations between capitalism and geopolitics’, he goes so far as to impugn the very feasibility of the central categories of politics and historical sociology: war, state, revolution and modernity, ‘a narrative category that no longer comprehends the military, economic and cultural vectors of the latest phase of capitalism’. The political translation of this impasse is less convincing. Balakrishnan asks: ‘what does “anti-war” mean when the phenomenon of “war” itself has been dissolved into
a nebulous region of arbitrarily classified, asymmetrical violence? I suppose the answer would be ‘the attempt to eliminate or curtail a nebulous region of arbitrarily classified, asymmetrical violence’. There are numerous criticisms to be made of the anti-war movement, namely its inability to capitalize at a critical moment on mass support and move beyond voicing disapproval, but its opposition to molecular and endemic imperial police actions was persistent, and in fact anticipated by opposition to the murderous ‘pre-war’ sanctions on Iraq. The New Left Review’s own editorial line on the occupation, one of intransigent anti-imperialism, does not seem to have wavered because of the mutations in the legal, logistical and ideological parameters of warmongering.

In this respect, and in light of Balakrishnan’s commendable concern with the possibility of totalization in the present, it is somewhat baffling to see little engagement – save for a discussion of RETORT’s unspoken reliance on Rosa Luxemburg – with the recent resurgence in the fortunes of imperialism as a combatively totalizing concept. The claim of ‘a near-universal tendency on the part of Marxists to understand the relationship between capitalism and war in terms of a systematic logic’ goes untested in the absence of an engagement with the writings of David Harvey and Ellen Wood, among others, whose accounts, whatever their limitations, cannot be so easily taxed with simply subsuming the contingencies of the geopolitical under a monolithic logic of accumulation. An engagement with this literature would also have allowed Balakrishnan to specify the articulation between two pivotal claims made in Antagonistics: first that capitalism is devoid of a geopolitical logic; and second that it is

the evolution of capitalism alone that provides a long-term developmental account of the successive socio-economic transformations that determine the relative wealth of nations, and the field of selection in which different strategies of state formation, including ones based on the attempted suppression of capitalism, come to be tested.

This second formulation hints at a retooling of historical sociology for the study of the relationship between the economic and the political, and within the political itself between the geopolitical and the intra-national, with revolution (or some yet nameless negation) a precarious parallax between all of these. Deepening this suggestive line of inquiry – especially the idea of a strategic ‘field of selection’ – might also permit a more precise account of the very separation between the political and the economic, which is both formative of capitalism and constantly undermined by the incessant military endeavours to make the world free for trade. How does the relative autonomy of the ‘event structure’ of geopolitics square with the Leninist lesson that ‘the massively uneven development and violently cyclical pattern of capitalist economic development make any future euthanasia of military-diplomatic statecraft highly unlikely … the definitive separation between of the political from the economic never takes place’? Further investigation of these questions, and of the ominous enigma concerning the effect of the economic downturn on our geopolitical configuration, will require more direct surveys of the aforementioned ‘field of selection’ – something that Balakrishnan has already undertaken in his recent ‘Speculations on the Stationary State’ (New Left Review 59) and its augury of ‘a period of inconclusive struggles between a weakened capitalism and dispersed agencies of opposition, within delegitimated and insolvent political orders’.

That Antagonistics concludes with an unlikely pairing of Beckett’s imperative to ‘fail better’ and Machiavelli’s reflections on the link between corruption and the transcendence of the present order testifies that, despite his suspicions of the current tendency to ‘over-politicize’, Balakrishnan too cannot evade the painful hiatus between structure and agency (or between tendency and strategy). The only mediation to be had is provided by the rot at the heart of the system.

In the earliest of the essays collected here, on class and nation, Balakrishnan asks: ‘In the context of a modernity defined by agonistic individualism and impersonal forms of social power, can agency be exercised by large-scale collectivities?’ The imperative not to tell oneself stories might demand silence on this count. Yet it is obvious that without some prospect of recomposition of a collective agent, of some class formation, however anomalous, the Left’s only relationship to strategy will be alienated and contemplative, reduced to registering the strategies of its adversaries (who are never short of class consciousness) in the pages of the Wall Street Journal and Foreign Affairs.

It is to be hoped that the lines of research traced in this collection of polemics will converge into an independent effort at totalization, even if the historical moment is refractory to cognitive mapping. In many ways, Antagonistics is inspired by the Weberian project to complement Marx’s economic materialism with a political materialism and a military materialism. Forging a strategic materialism, with Machiavelli and Gramsci, will doubtless prove an even more difficult, if essential, task.

Alberto Toscano
A special form of outer darkness


In underground science laboratories buried deep below the surface of the earth, astroparticle physicists have been hard at work trying to detect dark matter, a strange, non-substantive substance thought to be ‘the invisible glue’ of the universe. Tellingly, however, when a chief scientist for one of the largest of these detection projects was recently pressed as to how much dark matter his state-of-the-art instruments had actually found, he quickly repeated a confession made over and over again by physicists: ‘None.’ Meanwhile, at the edge of the Franco-Swiss border, the scientific world anxiously awaits results from the world’s newest and largest energy particle accelerator. At 27 kilometres in circumference, requiring the collaboration of 10,000 scientists from over 100 countries, and a total cost of £4.4 billion, physicists anticipate that the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) provides our best opportunity to disclose finally the nature of the ever-elusive dark matter. However, if the final result of this extended manhunt once more comes to nothing, one should not judge this failure too harshly, for the inherent problem of finding dark matter lies with its enigmatic nature: it constitutes over 85 per cent of all matter in our universe, is seemingly responsible for the behaviour of the other 15 per cent, and yet behaves nothing like physical matter; it neither absorbs nor emits light (hence its invisibility), nor does it appear to engage much with physical matter. Yet the existence of dark matter must be posited even to account for the manifest structure of our cosmos, since there’s simply not enough physical matter otherwise to explain its observable behaviour. We know that there exists an ‘other matter’ operating alongside and influencing ‘normal matter’; it’s just not exactly clear what the nature of this ‘other’ to the ‘is’ is?

Freud arrived at a comparable enigma when puzzling over his derivation of a special form of dark otherness accompanying the phenomena of consciousness (even if, as Jean Laplanche observes, he was constantly forgetting the radical consequences of his own insight of a subject decentred from itself). In his ‘Papers on Metapsychology’, Freud justifies:

It is necessary [to posit its existence] because the data of consciousness have a very large number of gaps in them; both in healthy and in sick people psychical acts often occur which can be explained only by presupposing other acts, of which, nevertheless, consciousness afford no evidence.

Far from representing some hidden kernel or inner opacity at the locus of the subject, for Freud, on the contrary, the unconscious is a kind of transparent darkness that must be posited to account for the lacunae that burst forth from within consciousness itself.

Although reared in the Cartesian tradition of ‘clear and distinct’ self-awareness, modern mind sciences take as unquestionable the (Freudian) leaping point that not everything available to consciousness is exhaustive of the totality of the mind’s contents. And yet, today, no prominent neuroscientist (with the exception of Mark Solms) openly acknowledges this Freudian heritage, rather preferring either silently to proceed along with his or her ahistorical search for neural correlates of consciousness, or to issue offhand dismissals. There is an obvious irony in such disavowals: the very commensurability of the mind sciences is grounded in a preservation of Freud’s general observation of the subject qua consciousness decentred from itself; it’s just that neuroscience views his more specific ontology of unconscious psychical processes – repression, condensation, displacement, and so on – less as a relic of ‘folk psychology’ than as a sort of ‘voodoo-psychology’. A less obvious irony, however, is the recurrence of a debate within modern consciousness studies that first occurred within the work of none other than Freud himself. If Laplanche is correct that Freud’s Copernican insight (e.g. an excentric decentrement, the external alienness of the unconscious, the radical alterity of the enigmatic other) constantly risks re-assimilation by his own Ptolemaic (recentring) counter-revolution, it’s no coincidence that this intra-Freudian polemic returns under new guise in debates between his prodigal progeny, Thomas Metzinger and Alva Noë, around the meaning of a decentrement of the subject from the phenomenological experience of consciousness.
Decentrement is indeed a strange if not wholly nebulous matter. Today, it’s a ubiquitous catchword of postmodern cultural studies, but is also employed by Badiou’s Lacanian-infused theory of the body (when taking the former as its object of critique); it’s a conclusion of Einstein’s theory of relativity, but also the pivot point for quantum mechanics; it’s a baseline assumption of modern consciousness studies, but as these intra-discursive polemics – and now the basic dispute between Metzinger and Noë – demonstrate, there is more than one way to decentre the subject. Decentrement, yes, but decentrement of whom, to where, and relative to what?

The Ego Tunnel, consisting of seven chapters, and including interviews with three prominent neuroscientists and an introduction to Metzinger’s self-model theory of subjectivity (SMT), unambiguously stakes a claim in answer to this question. (In his acknowledgements, Metzinger implies that the book is intended as the popular version of a more technical argument presented in his earlier Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity (2003), but the author’s encyclopedic knowledge of modern consciousness research flows so effortlessly through the text that it nonetheless convokes an air of rigour and profundity such ‘reader-friendly’ books often lack.) However, understanding both the broader philosophical implications of SMT and the novel methodology developed by Metzinger to access what he calls ‘the puzzle of consciousness’ (i.e. how consciousness can arise in the physical object of the brain) requires some clarification of his central ontological thesis – that ‘there is no such thing as a self… [N]obody has ever been or had a self.’

Now, if by saying this Metzinger were merely suggesting a revision of the folk substantialist notion of an invariant essence marking the self-identity of the subject, such a platitude would be a bit late in arriving. After all, from Hume and Kant to Nietzsche, Sartre, and beyond, one legacy endowed us by modern philosophy is the illegitimacy of a belief in the self as substance. But Metzinger’s claim is both more original and more radical than the assertion that the self is an ephemeral product of reflection, a contingent linguistic construction, or procedurally oriented flux of becoming. In fact, when the author introduces the core concept of his SMT – labelled ‘the phenomenal self-model’ (PSM) – he evidently conceives it less as a contestable assertion, or merely one more speculative theory of the subject open to debate and critique, but than as a philosophical truth derived from cutting-edge research results in neuroscience.

What, then, does the neuroscientific data on which SMT relies tell us about subjectivity? To begin with, it tells us that the conscious brain is ‘a reality engine’. Inside consciousness you might experience, for instance, the visually rich image of apricot-pink rays of sunlight shining from behind a majestic amber mountaintop. But ‘[a]t there, in front of your eyes, there is just an ocean of electromagnetic radiation, a wild andraging mixture of different wavelengths’, most of which perpetually remain inaccessible to your conscious model of reality. ‘What is really happening’ when you’re consciously experiencing a sunset ‘is that the visual system in your brain is drilling a tunnel through this inconceivably rich physical environment and in the process is painting the tunnel walls in various shades of colour.’ Of course there exists a world outside the subject, but the conscious experience of it is an endogenous event. ‘In principle you could have this [same experience of a sunset] without eyes, and you could even have it as a disembodied brain in a vat.’ The philosophical conclusion follows: consciousness is a representational space, containing virtual objects from a simulated world, carved into your ego tunnel by the neural network in your head.

But there’s more. If neurophilosophy is correct when it delimits the minimally sufficient conditions for consciousness as (a) a unity of attentionally available mental information (globality) that is (b) phenomenally experienced as an island of presence in time (presentationality), the puzzling fact remains that the subjective experience of consciousness is perpetually marked by (c) an irreducible introspective deficit, a sort of ‘in-built blind spot’ of the representational processes that the mind uses to experience the world phenomenally (transparency). One never actually experiences consciousness of self as a consciousness of the representational processes the mind uses to model the world, but only ever experiences the self as directly experiencing the world, as such. Metzinger argues that the transparency of such subpersonal processes is what gives rise to the phenomenal experience of selfhood (PSM): but the key here is that it’s just that – it’s merely phenomenal. As it turns out, even the phenomenal experience of oneself as a self is no more than a hallucination produced by the brain’s non-phenomenal, representational processes; one’s very sense of selfhood results from auto-epistemic closure in a system too complex to understand itself. This is why Metzinger invokes the metaphor of an ‘Ego tunnel’, ‘[an] ongoing conscious experience [that] is not so much an image of reality as a tunnel through
reality’: not only is the tunnel itself virtual, so too is
the existence of the self perceived as inhabiting it.

Like Freud before him, Metzinger seeks access
to the enigma of subjectivity by way of investigat-
ing deviations from ‘standard’ conscious experiences:
drug-induced hallucinations, out-of-body experiences,
various meditative states, phantom limb and alien hand
syndromes, schizophrenia, and so on. Few exceptions
to the ‘ordinary’ experience of consciousness are left
untouched by Metzinger, who derives from them an
overall conclusion of threefold subjective decentrement,
First, the subject is decentred from a direct engagement
with the world outside; that conscious experience (e.g.
the smell of sandalwood or vision of a sunset) can be
neurally induced indicates that the subject does not
directly experience the world, but merely simulates
a phenomenal engagement with virtual objects in a
virtual world. Second, the subject is decentred from
ownership of its body: the phantom limb syndrome,
out-of-body-experiences, and the rubber hand experi-
ment (whereby the visual image of the repeated stroking
of a rubber hand induces the sensation that it’s one’s
own hand) betray the fact that the phenomenal experi-
ence of bodily ownership is virtual, in so far as it can
be artificially simulated or transferred to non-bodily
objects. Lastly, the subject is decentred from agent: the alien hand syndrome, schizophrenia, and
recent neurological and psychological research point to
the existence of a subpersonal entity that supervenes
on the experience of agency, implying that the inner
experience of intentionality is retroactively bound by
the mind to the representation of any given action.

Metzinger combines an appreciation of the basic
questions constituting the history of philosophy with
a mastery over recent advents in neuroscience and
virtual technology. No serious theory of the subject
can afford to fail to confront his methodology founded
on the transparency of the self (i.e. PSM), his openly
reductionist commitment to finding a global neural
correlate of consciousness, and the philosophical thesis
wedged between the two – namely, that because con-
sciousness is ‘an exclusively internal affair’, the subject
is simultaneously decentred from itself as a self and
recentred back (as a virtual object) in the neural
network of the brain.

Similarly to The Ego Tunnel, Alva Noë’s Out of Our
Heads was not specifically written for the neuroscien-
tific community, and cites a series of fascinating studies
from which interesting philosophical conclusions are
drawn. Yet Noë’s aim is to rethink the very foundations
of the neuroscientific paradigm on which Metzinger’s
SMT stands. This means that both philosophers often
cite the same studies, but provide radically different
interpretations of each, proving once again that there’s
more than one way to decentre the subject. Noë’s basic
position is that there’s a self-imposed myopia inherent
to the standard neuroscientific approach to conscious-
ness, in so far as it paradoxically grants the existence
of a historically evolved, environmentally embedded
organism who engages with the world (as Bataille put
it) ‘like water in water’, and yet proceeds to reduce its
own theoretical aperture to a series of physiochemical
processes in the brain. As Noë points out, this is a
dead end, not just because there’s nothing particularly
special about individual neurons or their electrochemi-
ical behaviour (brain cells are pretty much all alike);
and not just due to the fact that – as research studying
neural activity in the visual cortex has repeatedly
shown – the link between conscious experience and
neural correlates is more or less plastic; but even more
fundamentally, because consciousness itself is no less
that an ongoing, active engagement with the world.

So, if after years of painstaking experimentation,
and meticulous deployment of expensive cutting-edge
technology in the service of neuroscientific research,
we’re still stuck puzzling over the enigma of conscious-
ness without having made any significant progress, this
results from the simple fact that we’ve been searching
for it in the wrong place. Contrary to the ‘unquestioned
assumptions’ of neuroscience, ‘the brain is not the
locus of consciousness inside us because consciousness
has no locus inside us. Consciousness isn’t something
that happens inside us: it is something that we do,
actively, in our dynamic interaction with the world
around us.’ To equate the brain to consciousness as a
stove to the generation of heat, or as the stomach to
digestion (Noë calls this the ‘gastric juices conception
of consciousness’), is to mistake a necessary condition
for a sufficient one. Contrary to Metzinger’s SMT, the
brain is not ‘a reality engine’, and consciousness is
not ‘an exclusively internal affair’; the brain can no more generate consciousness on its own than a musical instrument can play itself. Rather, consciousness is ‘always already’ decentred from the brain, embedded in a broader environmental context, permeating the mere ostensible boundaries between brain, body and world. In short, ‘we are out of our heads’.

At first glance, then, the polemical poles here seem clear enough. On the one hand, from neuroscientific studies depicting the mind’s representational processes as transparent, Metzinger theorizes a decentrement of the subject from anything whatsoever, but then incidentally imports a Ptolemaic counter-revolution into his SMT by recentring the subject qua consciousness back to the brain as locus. Transparency no doubt is, as Metzinger puts it, ‘a special form of inner darkness’, but his presumption that because this darkness appears to be internally generated, the subject is as well, reduces the interactive complexity of subjective embodiment in and with the world outside. Descartes made this philosophical error nearly four hundred years ago, and Metzinger makes it again today. On the other hand, by virtue of the fact that the subject qua consciousness is every bit as situationally extended as it is an internal set of neural processes, Noë seeks to inaugurate a Copernican revolution in consciousness studies by substituting, or at least supplementing, a neuroscientific approach to consciousness with a biological one. Yet laudable though this may be, the reader can’t help but feel that Out of Our Heads is lacking something. For example, we may agree that, yes, consciousness is a matter of situational, active embodiment, and yes, the subject is always already decentred out of our heads and on to the world. But beyond such vaguities – preliminary trivialities already established in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception – Noë is notably silent about how to proceed, as if he’s merely left awestruck by the enigma lays not so much in what exists that we cannot observe, but rather in what must exist that we cannot observe, such that what we do observe can even exist. For, like astrophysicists buried deep inside the earth in search of dark matter from outer space, we are still trying to get onto the next step.

Benjamin James Lozano

Bioethics unbound?


What do we want? ‘Responsible non-foundational bioethics.’ And when do we want it? ‘Now.’ In Bioethics in the Age of New Media Joanna Zylinksa argues that new forms of post-human life urgently demand new forms of bioethical thinking that are able to break with the ‘inherent humanism’ that is the largely unexamined underbelly of existing bioethics. The latter is traditionally a field of inquiry constrained, in theoretical terms, to moral philosophy, and in disciplinary terms to medicine and particular forms of sociology. As a field the judgements it makes are notably expansive: framed in deontological, universal, utilitarian or otherwise systemic terms. By contrast, in Zylinksa’s hands bioethics becomes an inquiry into the contemporary forms and constitution of ‘life itself’, a post-human endeavour and a bid to generate a vast expansion of the bioethical terrain. Constraint here arrives in relation to the ethical judgements offered or the (bio)ethical ‘recipes’ generated: simply, there is none. Zylinksa sets out to develop a bioethics without content where no prescriptions can be offered or totalizing generalizations made: a singular ethics that can only be continuously made anew through decisions taken in relation to specific events.

Avowedly, then, the concern is not with defining what is, or isn’t, ‘right’ about a series of biodigital developments and in their potential ‘applications’ within contemporary societies; nor is one system of ethics being proposed to take the place of another – although a new framework is being sketched out. The attempt is rather to ‘shift the parameters of ethical debate’ as such (my emphasis). The focus is life itself, bios and zoe, or what is termed here the social
and molecular. For Zylinska, recent developments in biodigital technologies not only call into question established definitions of what constitutes ‘human’ or ‘ontological status as skin-bound sovereign beings … their kinship with, and dependency on, other species and material forms’, they also undermine what is defined as a ‘pervasive’ theorization of culture as a bulwark or ‘a system of defence of humanity against technics’.

In response to these developments Zylinska makes three key theoretical moves. First, and in relation to recent thinking on technology/technics, comes a break with what is (rather loosely) defined as the humanist presumption of a relationship of terminal division between humans and non-humans (the latter defined as the machines-and-other-animals who are now standard characters in the technoscience lexicon). In place of this comes a post-human analysis leaning on (Heidegger and) Derrida/Steigler’s accounts of technics on the one hand, and Foucault/Agamben’s theorizations of biopolitical life on the other. The wager is that the relationship between technology, culture and ethics can be rethought, and the potential of technology reassessed in a more open way, if attention is paid to what Steigler has termed the co-evolution of human and the technical. Co-evolution is understood as ongoing (taking specific biodigital forms) but also as an originary process. Steigler’s sense of ephiphylogenesis, ‘whereby the human is able to develop, indeed becomes unbounded, “through means other than life”’ (as Robert Sinnerbrink summarizes it), is thus used by Zylinska to generate a new genealogy for the human, whose ‘singularity’ is still to be recognized, but who is to be radically repositioned.

The second move is away from an ethics derived from moral philosophy and applied practice and towards the ‘first philosophy’ of Levinas and his conception of ethics as relations. ‘Towards’ is the key word here since Zylinska, having nailed her colours to the Steiglerian mast of the originary technicity of the human, clearly has to question the Levinasian insistence on the irreducible humanity of the Other as that which produces a demand in response to which a decision might be taken, and in doing so generates the conditions of possibility for ethics. In a world where those Others might include (Kac’s) green flop-eared art bunnies of bio-digital provenance and where humans partly made with new materials might be said to mount an appeal that is not purely human either, some other way of thinking the relation of alterity – the demands it might make and the forms of responsibility it might entail – is required. Evidently the other kind of alterity invoked here is that produced through the technical constitution of the human: we could perhaps say that this is a relational bioethics that proposes to take account of the différencé that technics makes.

The third parameter shift Zylinska performs is to argue that bioethics needs to intersect with cultural and medium theory. The new materials contributing to contemporary co-evolution take specifically digital form. In his comments on the General Intellect, Virno famously argued that information had transformed the ‘whole world of life’, and in so doing terminated an economy based on value and a politics based on recognition. Bioethics argues, in a parallel vein, that information technologies ‘modulate’ co-evolutionary processes and instantiate new forms of life. And while the goal here is not to derive a political response but rather to rethink ethical frameworks, these too are viewed as necessarily located beyond an economy of recognition – or representation. Thus when Zylinska argues that bioethics needs to be explored in the context of contemporary media culture this might be taken as a comment on the proximate location of narrowly biopolitical debate (e.g. on questions such as cloning, abortion, surveillance or gene therapy), on the media’s constitutive role in the ongoing construction of various categories of identity (e.g. of legitimate or non-legitimate bodies), and as a comment on the necessity of taking account of the degree to which digital communication structures our place in the world and our relations (our proximate distance or intra-activity) with and from each other. Mediatization is key to the project of rethinking what might constitute an ethics of contemporary life.

Consonant with the centrality awarded to the media, an appropriate starting point for Zylinska’s inquiry is to be found in a critical rereading of the disciplinary history of bioethics through the work of Van Rensselaer Potter and cybernetics. The latter was one of the two early developers of bioethics but was later overshadowed by the Georgetown School. The media focus generated through this reading continues, but with the totalizing claims of first-wave cybernetics moderated substantially, in a series of case studies designed to ‘perform the proposal’ of the book. These include a chapter on the management of life, exploring the distinction between self-performance and self-construction in blogging sites, which are taken as examples of what might constitute instances of ethical or non-ethical narcissism. Zylinska is concerned to recognize the rarity with which decisions (constructions rather than performances) are taken in these overtly technical-social forms of engagement, but also
to make the case that decisions can still be made (i.e. identity does not inevitably reduce to the execution of the programme in informational contexts), and so the necessary conditions for ethical life remain.

Elsewhere, an exploration of the bodies of ugly ducklings turned to swans (in a chapter on the eponymous extreme makeover TV series) considers a certain slippage between the operations of technology and of the culture industries. For Zylinksa an opening emerges when (or because) audiences turn down the invitation to align their bodies with those better-managed offerings viewed on screen. This both underscores Zylinksa’s strikingly hopeful view of contemporary technology and distances her somewhat from Steigler’s demand for a politics of memory as a necessary countermeasure to forms of digital colonization (for instance as it emerges in Echographies). For this reader, the refusal to pass judgement, and/or the desire to avoid systemic critique (either of the normative pressures valorizing various forms of augmentation or of the biopolitical economy of makeover TV), here threatens to collapse into something close to its reverse: an overt alignment with bio-technological ‘advancement’ in general, as an ethical project.

This optimism is modulated in a further chapter considering the bioethical implications of the trope of the ‘secret of life’ in relation to the reconfiguration of genomics and work on the human genome project. Zylinksa’s argument is that the ‘secret of life’ formulation not only reflects an understanding of life as informational code but was itself a ‘significant episode’ in the colonization (marketization) of the ‘private realm of the flesh’; which is to say it played a part in the increasing inclusion of bare life in the political realm. In particular, attempts to crack the secret of life operated to conceal some vital questions about new zones of ‘life’ (zoe and bios and their intermixing) ‘via the scientific rhetoric of revelation and transparency’.

Bioethics has much to recommend it. It might be said that Zylinksa is tilting at an easy target – since it is widely acknowledged that the critical focus of bioethics has been lamentably narrow – but this would be unjust. Zylinksa identifies a need and performs the necessary task of deconstruction with panache. Certainly the key proposition of the book, which is the need for an ethics fit for contemporary ‘humamachines’ (a term first coined by Mark Poster) who must make ethical decisions as singular individuals, in hybrid environments, from which they are never completely separate, is compelling. If the (non-systemic) model developed by Zylinksa in response to that need is more unevenly delivered, that isn’t entirely surprising given the multiple scales and registers at which the work operates. It is, however, sometimes frustrating. In particular the redoubled invocation of alterity/connection that relies on Levinas and on Steigler, and that is given as central to the (conditions of possibility for) bioethical life as well as to (the conditions of possibility for) bioethics itself as always already technical, is provocative, but it is offered as a proposition rather than being more fully elaborated here.

Finally, Zylinksa states that her aim has been to explore ‘the transformation of the very notion of life in the digital age’. Yet the intractable questions arising in this work cohere less around ‘life’ than around questions of ‘the human’. Virtually banished early on, in a kind of revisionist zeal, the figure of the human returns increasingly often towards the end of the book as the inevitable bearer of responsibility, and in those moments when responsibility is taken. Moreover, this human often reappears somewhat shorn of its technical supplements, of what suddenly look like its mere prosthetic attachments. A question to be developed further here, then, is what kind of (ethical) decisions I may be able to take, what kind of responsibilities I take on, being always already – but also always specifically and only partially – constituted as a technical being?

Caroline Bassett
Tightly knit


Since Foucault’s cautionary note about the ‘entry of life into history’ as the beginning of an era of biopower, biological and political existence have become ever more closely entwined. Biotechnology, biosecurity, bioterrorism, bioethics, biovalue or even biosex are just some of the new codes that specify the imbrication of the biological with the social, cultural and political. Melinda Cooper’s book thus joins a series of recent reflections on the role of life in the conjunction of contemporary biotechnology with neoliberal apparatuses of power.

Like other writings on biotechnology and capital by Eugene Thacker and Kaushik Sunder Rajan, Cooper’s approach brings together Foucault’s work on biopolitics and Marx’s analysis of capital. While taking up Foucault’s insight about the co-constitution of biology and political economy, she challenges his critique of neoliberalism, proposing an understanding based on the speculative drive and the financialization of everyday life. This reformulation of neoliberal capitalism underpins the overall theoretical argument. If one were to put the analytical approach in a nutshell, ‘displacement’ might be the right word. The possibilities and utopian drives of the life sciences are displaced into the exploitative project and manifold violence of neoliberal capitalism. For Cooper, life as increasingly constituted in the life sciences is life that can regenerate itself ad infinitum and is thus essentially prone to becoming the matter of capitalist reproduction and accumulation.

Displacement is a familiar term in recent left cultural analysis: from class to identity, from equality to difference or from freedom to security. Here, displacement entails reappropriation and new forms of domination and exploitation (although at times the question of the political effects of such displacement remains open). Thus, displacement recurs in each chapter to render the critical relation to recent developments in, respectively, the pharmaceuticals industry, the US government’s positions on terrorism, security and AIDS. US security politics displaces insecurity and fear from the structural level to relocate it in relation to bioterrorism. Neoliberalism displaces the waste of growth-driven economies elsewhere through the mediation of life sciences. The conceptual exchanges that underpin the displacement between life sciences and neoliberal capital are simultaneously made possible and furthered by institutional alliances. In high-risk areas of life-science experimentation, for instance, venture capital funds have made possible an institutional alliance between neoliberal practices of speculation and the promissory drive of life-science experimentation.

This re-problematization of the development of life sciences and incorporation of their concepts and practices within various apparatuses of governance in the service of capital reproduction is powerful and persuasive. Yet there is another implicit form to the displacement that is at the heart of Cooper’s approach. The potential of life sciences is not only displaced, reappropriated by the neoliberal capitalist project, but also, in a sense, essential to the very expansion of capitalism, in so far as ‘profits will depend on the accumulation of biological futures rather than on the extraction of non-renewable resources and the mass production of tangible commodities’. The life sciences appear as untapped potential, the new spaces of appropriation which open unthought possibilities for capital confronted by the earth’s spatio-temporal limits and dwindling non-renewable energy sources. The cellular and body generativity of stem-cell science, for example, bears uncanny similarities to the processes of neoliberal financialization, thus rendering institutional alliances almost a conceptually driven necessity. Capitalism appears to extract surplus value from the infinite potential of life. Thus, Cooper finds authors like Stengers and Prigogine inadvertently complicit in the valorization of the infinite potential of life. While opposing narratives of scarcity and limits, the life sciences reposition the abundance and regeneration of life as a site of capitalist profit. This malleability of life and infinite potentiality for surplus creation – in short, its capacity to become the universal equivalent of capitalist production and circulation – is rooted in a particular reading of Marx’s and Foucault’s analysis of capital and biopolitics inspired by the Italian workerist tradition.

The intimate connection between biology and capital reproduction is implied by the centrality of the ‘creative forces of human biological life’. The biotech industry displaces the force and potential of
life into the self-valorizing power of capital. Yet, the shift from material to immaterial labour was steeped in transformed conditions of production. How, then, does labour and its infinite creative potential shift to ‘life itself’ and its biospheric complexity? A fine conceptual ‘displacement’ takes place here: from labour to regenerating life, from production to circulation. Immaterial labour foregrounded the role of affect and communication in generating the new communication and informational commodities of post-Fordism. The self-regenerating life and surplus productivity emerging in the life sciences is, however, not linked with collective powers, but with the speculative practices of finance. If the life implied in biotechnological labour is not the life of the worker, whose potential for cooperation can give rise to the resistance of the multitude, as Hardt and Negri would have it, what resistance is possible in a world in which the displacement of biology by capital has become the motor of accumulation? ‘Life itself’ as emerging out of the project of the life sciences is also not the life of populations upon which biopower deployed its regulative technologies. Not only has the project of life sciences been displaced – that is, reappropriated by the neoliberal capitalist project – but the emancipatory potential of ‘life itself’ remains to be established. Neither workers nor collectivities (masses, populations or people) appear to have any place in the project of the life sciences.

The transformation of life into exploitable surplus, its continuous potential for regeneration as the equivalent of the financialization of the economy, resonates with the financialization literature on the rise of speculative capital and financial derivatives. Yet, the displacement of production by the sphere of circulation as ‘financial markets have become the very generative condition of production’ is problematic. As the argument in the financialization literature goes, neoliberal capitalism entails an autonomization of circulation from the sphere of production. If industrial capitalism valued production over circulation, labour over risk, investment capital over speculation, and territorialized forms over other socio-political organizations, post-Fordist capitalism reverses these hierarchies. Production appears to have been superseded – or at least obscured – by other modes of value-generation to such an extent that Marx’s definition of capital as M→C→M’ sees money replaced by risk. In a sense, Life as Surplus can be seen to go one step further in this argument by introducing surplus-generative life in the formula of surplus-generative risk. The new formula for capital takes production largely off the analytical screen: nonetheless, just as financial practices are dependent on the materialities of production (such as collateral assets, for example), the life sciences are also embedded in the materialities of production.

At the same time, Cooper introduces another element into the relation between neoliberalism and the biotech industry: they are mediated through security knowledge and practices rather than immediately transferable through conceptual exchange or institutional alliance with capital. Both conceptual exchange and institutional alliances are complicated by the introduction of security considerations. Thus the governance of scarcity has shifted to military considerations, with dwindling resources increasingly being seen to lead to violence, conflict and waves of environmental refugees. AIDS was securitized as a global threat in a move symptomatic of the changing post-Cold War definitions of security: from national security to human, biological, environmental security, and so on. While expanding the realm of security to encompass more and more spheres of life, these new modalities of securitization do not challenge the national security logic. The militarization and the reappropriation of ‘legitimate’ security concerns by the military and security professionals is concurrent with the reappropriation of the life science potential, their financialization and integration into the accumulation processes of capital. However, the expansion of security into new domains is not just a displacement of militarization and warmongering, but can also be indicative of the transformation of the concept of security. Security is increasingly understood not in military terms – or rather not exclusively in military terms – but also as the protection and promotion of mobility and circulation of populations, goods and services. In that sense, new practices of security appear conceptually similar to the focus of neoliberal governance, in a way reinforcing the exploitative apparatuses of power. Nonetheless, analytical attention to not only the proliferation but also the heterogeneity of security practices might help loosen the tightly knit apparatuses of neoliberal dominance that appropriate all other practices. While security governance appears increasingly focused on circulatory processes, radical contingencies and catastrophic risks, critiques of security have focused on the production of insecurities and forms of resistance and mobilization against insecurity. In that sense, utopia is ultimately not an originary promise that can be displaced or reappropriated, but a practice at the interstices of the production of insecurity and mobilizations against the insecurities of capitalism.

Claudia Aradau
I wonder how often the term ‘postcommunism’ has been used before. We are certainly used to the adjective ‘postcommunist’, routinely attached to socio-political formations that, having failed in one eschatological undertaking, ‘the building of communism’, have more or less seamlessly switched to another transitory ‘historical process’, that of overcoming their ‘communist’ past; where ‘communist’, unless we are falling into vulgar ideological labelling, denotes nothing more than a disposition. To speak of ‘postcommunism’ is to speak of being ‘post’ something that has never been achieved in practice, or, if ever achieved according to its own theory, would have signified the impossibility of any further ‘post’ by virtue of bringing History to its end. Yet, this is precisely how Sergei Prozorov thinks ‘postcommunism’: as a stable, theoretically identifiable social condition that has followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. True, in its specific empirical manifestations this condition may be most visible in today’s Russia. This, however, is not due to Russia’s failure to perform the ‘postcommunist transition’ properly, not because it got stuck, against its own will, at some unwanted and anomalous juncture of the historical process. On the contrary, ‘postcommunism’ here is presented as potentially universal and normatively desirable, thus warranting the thinking of ‘the ethics of postcommunism’. Or, as one of the main protagonists of Prozorov’s story, Russian rock artist Boris Grebenshikov, puts it: ‘everyone dreams of living like this, but they don’t have the guts’.

The ‘they’ in question are the ‘last men’ of Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’, preoccupied with ritualized technocratic management of their otherwise meaningless and powerless lives. Importantly, this lack of meaning and power is what characterizes, according to Prozorov, contemporary Russian Putinism, all its authoritarian pretences notwithstanding. Thus, far from glorifying any allegedly unique Russian ‘daring’, Grebenshikov presents an example of a genuine ethos of resistance. This is an ‘example’ not as a set standard for others to follow, but as a manifestation of concrete social practices, long in operation in Russia and in the Soviet Union – an exemplar, which is, as Giorgio Agamben continuously reminds his readers (and Prozorov is among the most attentive ones), the original meaning of paradigm. So, Prozorov’s ‘postcommunism’, explored mainly through the close reading of Agamben’s texts and Grebenshikov’s lyrics, is nothing less than a paradigm of resistance to the current global political order that, to use one of Agamben’s famous definitions, remains in force without signification. As such, it directly addresses what Agamben presents as the central task of contemporary theory and practice; that is, ‘a thought capable of thinking the end of the state and the end of history at one and the same time, and of mobilizing one against the other’.

The book begins by comparing Kojève’s and Agamben’s conceptions of the end of history, focusing on the idea of ‘work’, central to both the former’s reading of the Master–Slave paradox and the latter’s understanding of the ‘happy life’ as the only worthwhile alternative to the current reign of biopolitics. Prozorov’s clear preference here is for Agamben’s ‘profane messianism’, realized in the figure of the Workless Slave; that is, one of the protagonists in the Hegelian account of History who, by ‘simply’ ceasing to work, breaks out of the struggle for recognition and thus breaks down the dialectical logic of Hegelian history as such.

This theoretical scenario is then shown to be realized in practice in Yeltsin’s Russia. Rather than presenting Yeltsin’s era in purely negative terms, as a failure to perform successful democratic transition or a failure to achieve stable political order, Prozorov instead posits Yeltsin as a guardian not of ‘any specific form of order but the very possibility of trying out various courses of political development that, however, could always be played back, suspended or reversed with no consequences for the country’. He then translates this into Agamben’s philosophical terms, as an ‘extraordinary condensation of potentialities, all of which are, however, suspended in the aspect of their actualization’. All things can and do happen, though without significance or finality, “as if they did not”.’ This is one of the main characteristics of Agamben’s ‘messianic time’ made possible through the radical suspension of the teleological time of History and, consequently, rendering impossible any project-centred community, which, finally, allows for the (re)articulation of politics that is only possible in so far as humans are ‘beings
of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust’.

In fact, Yeltsin’s dismantling of all the teleological underpinnings of, first, perestroika, and then postcommunist transition was so successful that History could not be reigned either by the coup of October 1993 or by Yeltsin’s appointed successor Vladimir Putin.Appearances notwithstanding, Putinism amounts to little more than the ongoing ritual of the glorification of power without either ability or willingness to use power for any order-transforming projects.Counter-intuitively, but perfectly in accordance with Agamben’s analysis of the state of exception, this powerlessness of Putinism finds it best expression in the almost complete reduction of Russian politics to the use of executive force: ‘Perceiving itself as illegitimate in the absence of any historical project, authority in postcommunist Russia manifests itself through a snobbish redoubling of its own power, as the power of those who hold power or … as cratocracy.’ (In Agamben’s language: the sovereign power that remains in force without signification by virtue of its being in force.)

Thus the end of History in Russia is joined with the end of the state that now appears merely as an empty shell. However, the actual emptying of this shell requires a story of its own, this time told by Prozorov not from the perspective of the sovereign, but from that of the ‘slave who refuses to work’. Despite this provocative formulation, the empirical phenomenon behind it is rather familiar; namely, the continuous disengagement of Russian society from the public sphere that, according to Prozorov, began already in the Soviet Union and has only accelerated since 1991. This is where Grebenshikov enters the picture as an apostle of the ‘generation of janitors’. ‘Apostle’ here is again used in an Agambenian sense, as someone who, unlike a messiah, is recapitulating a messianic event rather than foretelling it, thus initiating a different, non-teleological mode of both storytelling and temporality.

In the case of Grebenshikov, this is especially interesting given the changing perception of his public role under Soviet and Putin’s regimes. In Prozorov’s reading, Grebenshikov never acted in a clear-cut dissident manner. Yet, under Soviet rule his open and explicit disengagement from the public sphere was readily recognized as a form of resistance. However, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Grebenshikov, although clearly benefiting from the changes, expressed little enthusiasm about the political developments that followed and produced some of his very gloomiest songs. Still later, his acceptance from Putin of the Order of Merit for the Fatherland was seen by many as a renunciation of any sound opposition to sovereign power. Not in Prozorov’s reading though. For him, the evolution of Grebenshikov’s ethos is a story of coming to terms with the central characteristic of Russian postcommunism, bespredel.

Literally translated as a condition of limitlessness, bespredel is also a direct consequence of the reduction of Russian political order to pure potentiality. The problem here consists in a ‘paradoxical conjunction of extreme potentiality and utter impossibility, whereby the absence of limits to the practice of freedom consumes the experience of freedom itself in the perpetual deferral of its actualization’. Hence the task: articulation of an ethos that would allow for the enjoyment of freedom under the conditions of limitlessness here and now. This is not the place to follow Prozorov’s detailed analysis of Grebenshikov’s lyrics. Suffice it to say that ‘solution’ amounts to a peculiar reappropriation of the public space by former ‘janitors’. Viewed from this perspective, it is no longer the society which is exiled from the public sphere by the all-powerful state, but rather the state that is externalized by a society searching for its own ways of minding its own business. This is achieved through a purely performative ‘play’ that exposes and ridicules the actual powerlessness of the state, as did Grebenshikov while accepting the state award.

There is a price to be paid for the participation in these ‘games’. A subject capable of such performances is no longer in firm possession of any predefined identity, becoming a ‘whatever being’ and as such a member of a generic or universal community. At which point Prozorov’s story stops being exclusively Russian, and, say, China and Luxembourg alike may be seen as existing under the conditions of ‘postcommunism’.

Alexander Astrov
Tumulting with reason


On the very brink of the English civil war, Thomas Hobbes was compelled to argue that it is a ‘great hindrance’ to civil government when no distinction is made ‘between a People and a Multitude’ (*De Cive*). A people is nothing if not of a piece, consisting entirely in its capacity to act as one (‘one will,’ ‘one action’). A multitude is disolute and tends towards dispersion; unable to hold itself together, it does not act, it only unbinds. The act par excellence of the people is the sacrifice of its sovereignty; it brings itself into existence by collectively surrendering its power for the security of a terrorized peace. The integrity of a people secures the abbreviation of its power in the body of a king. It is impossible, then, for a people to rebel, for the ‘King is the People’ (my emphasis). The identity of king and people is strict. This is not only a political prescription, it is an ontological proposition. The multitude, in turn, knows only revolt. It is the eruption of a wild supplement at the heart of the city, unruly and uncouth, at once a residue of the incivility of nature and a remnant left over from the historical constitution of the popular One. When men, Hobbes writes, do not distinguish between people and multitude, they are ‘tainted’ by mere opinions – passions, not reason – and so ‘do easily Tumult’.

Filippo Del Lucchese’s *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza* takes this ease with which the multitude tumults as its point of departure. It aspires to reconstitute what Del Lucchese calls the ‘rationality of the multitude’. The multitude tumults with ease not because it lets itself go, prey to passion and opinion, but because its revolts are the manifestation of a logical and ontological consistency that the entire history of modern political thought has laboured to suppress. Machiavelli and Spinoza are presented as two prongs of an assault on this tradition. Del Lucchese brings the two thinkers together in convincing ways, tracing the overt textual evidence of Machiavelli’s effect on Spinoza, while also placing them in a general configuration of thought, outside any dubious question of influence. His book is a historical reconstruction of a moment just before the consolidation of our contemporary political imaginary, dominated by contractual-
(or scientia intuitiva). ‘The question is what links the conditions that enable the development of the highest kind of knowledge, and ultimate of wisdom, with the collective dimension of the multitude, specifically in the form of … a multitude that has self-organized itself into a democracy?’ Del Lucchese reconstructs Spinoza’s ambiguous allusions to this form of knowledge that – unlike imaginary constructions derived from sensible experience and the abstract, general laws of the common notions – taps directly into the ‘singular essence of things’. By linking this knowledge, at once rational and affective, to the ‘absolute’ form of politics (as Spinoza characterizes democracy), Del Lucchese argues that this ‘science’ of the political is less a contemplation of the singular than a practice of singularities. A form of knowledge is, finally, a ‘form-of-life’. The form-of-life of the multitude consists in the scientific articulation of self-organization and revolt. The rationality of the multitude is the knowledge of its own nature – that is, its own laws: it knows that it is ‘right’ to rebel. It tumults with good reason.

Conflict, Power and Multitude reconstructs a moment in the history of thought with great rigour, a reconstruction that is an important contribution to the reactivation of an ‘alternative modernity’ and, more generally, to the underground current of materialist thought. Del Lucchese transforms a series of concepts (law, conflict, the occasion, democracy, multitude, ‘commonality’) that are absolutely contemporary, even if – or perhaps because – they are drawn from texts written on the threshold of political modernity. The book is also acutely sensitive to its intervention in the present, its persuasive textual analyses framed with and against contemporary political thought (Agamben, Nancy, Rancière). The limits of Del Lucchese’s project can, however, be discerned in his identification of ‘conflict’ – it is the subject of the book’s second section, but plays a structuring role throughout – with resistance. Del Lucchese argues that the ‘primal drive for resistance’ that founds Spinoza’s theory of individual modes should be understood in this way: ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ and, beyond this Foucauldian formula, ‘wherever there is life, there is resistance’. It is this reversibility of power and resistance, undoubtedly present in the texts of Spinoza, which can no longer be taken for granted. Indeed, one might venture that it will be necessary, in order to understand the nature of conflict and even ‘violence’ in its contemporary forms, to take leave of this logic of power altogether. Jacques Rancière, whom Del Lucchese also invokes in these pages, argues, for example, that conceiving the specificity of political processes requires abandoning the concept of power per se – and, by the same measure, resistance. Rancière proposes, instead, replacing the reversibility of power and resistance with the ‘heterogeneity’ of two logics, those of the police and the political. ‘Nothing is political in itself’, Rancière insists, ‘merely because power relationships are at work in it’. The mere presence of the police is not enough to trigger a political sequence. Perhaps, then, what is necessary for the exercise of collective political virtue is a supplement of some kind, an intrusion that cannot be explained by a given situation’s relations of force: an event, or, to use Machiavelli’s own term, an ‘occasion’.

Jason E. Smith

Endemic


In early August 2003, some 10,000 people fled for their lives and at least 300 civilians were killed as pro-government militias took over the town of Kutum in Western Sudan. In an unprecedented move, the governor of North Darfur, Osman Youssef Kibir, confirmed that the civilians were slaughtered by ‘a misled and unrestrained group’ of militiamen claiming to support the government. Kibir, however, denied any government responsibility. Many were not convinced. They pointed out that since the militias who had conducted the campaign were armed and trained by the government, then the hawks in Khartoum must have had the upper hand and were determined to crush the revolt led by the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), which had emerged from the Darfur Liberation Front.

The SLA had taken up arms in February 2003 claiming that the government had ‘introduced policies of marginalization, racial discrimination, and exploitation, that had disrupted the peaceful co-existence between the region’s African and Arab communities’. The SLA had then apparently seized Kutum to use as a bargaining chip but with no intention of holding it. So when fighting broke out on the town’s outskirts, precipitating a flood of refugees, the SLA retreated and the militias moved in. Many erroneously saw these events as marking the beginnings of what has come to be known as the Darfur tragedy. The unfolding of the tragedy was manna from heaven for those myriad
lobbies with either anti-Arab or anti-Muslim agendas. The powerful Christian Right lobby in the USA, for example, quickly seized upon it to chastise Khartoum’s Muslim rulers and by so doing provided added fodder to George W. Bush’s White House in its so-called War on Terror. The conflict was depicted as one in which ‘black farmers’ (‘non-Arab’ or ‘African’) were pitted against ‘pro-Arab militias’ called Janjaweed (‘men on horseback’).

The earlier pronouncements of the anti-Khartoum protagonists, which betrayed their intent, were taken as gospel truth by Western media which went along with their analyses of how ‘Muslim Arabs’ were committing acts of ‘genocide’ against ‘black Africans’. As such, a lazy section of the Western media left unchallenged, and even parroted, the earlier assertion by the Christian Right that ‘Muslim Arabs’ were indeed butchering ‘black African Christians’. Of course, it did not take long for them to realize that the Darfur conflict in fact pitted Muslims against Muslims. The tragedy was thus largely viewed through the prism of race. Unfortunately, this simplistic category of identity is not to be relied on in such a molten and intricate society with its ever-shifting alliances, and in which racial categorizations between ‘Arabs’ and ‘Africans’ are so fluid that they are tenuous. This is true of Darfur – an area the size of France, with large deposits of uranium, copper and oil – as it is true of the whole of Northern Sudan.

In his intellectually coruscating and challenging book Saviours and Survivors: Darfur, Politics and the War on Terror Mahmood Mamdani undermines certain assumptions about these categorizations, and indeed about what Darfur and the responses to it are all about. The anti-Arab and anti-Islam lobbies, which coalesce in the Save Darfur Movement, view these assumptions as sacerdotal. However, in intent, they and their responses, including humanitarian intervention, are nothing but ideological. The Save Darfur campaigners, for example, have been deliberately obscurantist by distorting the dynamics of the conflict and by insisting on conjectures that ignore some of the salient factors that underpin this conflict. What is thus refreshing and surprising about Mamdani’s book is its confidence in challenging these assumptions and the degree to which he is able to bring fresh insights into the origins of the Darfur crisis, its dynamics, the response of the humanitarian agencies, and how Darfur was used as a justification for Bush’s War on Terror. He has succeeded in putting into proper context the UN and African Union interventions together with the mediation efforts of Africa’s top diplomat, Salim Ahmed Salim.

The genesis of the Darfur conflict can be traced to the armed tribal clashes that have been endemic to the region since Sudan’s independence. These intensified as a civil war (1987–89) between local militias, but, as Mamdani notes, each of the militias had its own ethnic identification and none was organized along racial lines. The government got sucked into the conflict after the Islamist coup in 1989 and the opposition parties joined in the fray in 2002–03. Never has this been a conflict between ‘Africans’ and ‘Arabs’, however.

Mamdani – who has earned a reputation of going against the current, including that of fellow leftist academics – dares to ask some other rather germane questions also, such as, why do we call the killings in Darfur genocidal but not those in Iraq, where not only are the figures higher than those for Darfur, ‘but the proportion of violent deaths in relation to the total excess mortality is also far higher in Iraq than in Darfur: 38 percent to nearly 92 percent in Iraq, but 20 to 30 percent in Darfur.’ The sensationalist allegations of ‘genocide’ in Darfur had been routinely peddled by the Bush administration, despite the fact that they were disputed by well-informed aid agencies, including Médecins Sans Frontières.

The book’s historical narrative is highly informed. Mamdani’s discussion of the Islamist ideologue Hassan al Turabi brought back fond memories of the two-hour discussions that I once had with him in his north Khartoum villa one evening in January 1996. Then he was the éminence grise of President Omar Hassan al-Bashir and was regarded by many as the chief architect of the Islamist government that was installed in Sudan in the early 1990s. Now, espousing what some see as African Islamism, he is a key opponent of the al-Bashir regime but an ardent supporter of the Dafuris in their struggle against the centre of power. Mamdani has also done well in documenting the travails of Darfuri intellectuals, including the London-exiled Ahmed Ibrahim Diraige, the first chairman of the Dafur Development Front when it was formed in 1964, later governor of Northern Darfur, and the first and only Darfuri cabinet minister when he was appointed in the Umma Party government in 1968.

Many books have been written about Darfur, some competently, but what distinguishes Mamdani’s is the depth of research that has gone into it and the non-partisan way that he has approached his subject. It is well researched, well sourced, methodologically well grounded and well argued. This is scholarship as it should be.

Ahmed Rajab