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**COMMENTARY**

The Global Capital Leviathan  
**William I. Robinson** ..... 2

David Cameron's Tea Party  
**Richard Seymour** ..... 6

Alternatives to Austerity: The Need for a Public Utility  
Finance System  
**Robin Blackburn** ..... 10

**DOSSIER From Structure to Rhizome:  
Transdisciplinarity in French Thought (1)**

Introduction  
**Peter Osborne** ..... 15

Structure: Method or Subversion of the Social Sciences?  
**Étienne Balibar** ..... 17

Sex: A Transdisciplinary Concept  
**Stella Sandford** ..... 23

Science: The Invisible Transdisciplinarity of French Culture  
**Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond** ..... 31

Networks  
**Andrew Barry** ..... 35

**REVIEWS**

Rob Chapman, *Syd Barrett: A Very Irregular Head*  
Julian Palacios, *Syd Barrett and Pink Floyd: Dark Globe*  
Michele Mari, *Rosso Floyd*  
**Howard Caygill** ..... 42

Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*  
**Andrew McGettigan** ..... 45

Bruce C. Clarke and Mark B.N. Hansen, eds, *Emergence and Embodiment:  
New Essays in Second-Order Systems Theory*  
Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of Another Future*  
**Jon Goodburn** ..... 48

Richard Menary, ed., *The Extended Mind*  
**Benjamin James Lozano** ..... 52

Tim Morton, *The Ecological Thought*  
**Kate Soper** ..... 55

Hervé Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*  
**Nina Power** ..... 57

Thomas Müntzer, *Sermon to the Princes*  
**Nathan Coombs** ..... 59

# The global capital leviathan

**William I. Robinson**

**T**he money mandarins of global capitalism and their political agents are utilizing the global crisis to impose brutal austerity and attempting to dismantle what is left of welfare systems and social states in Europe, North America and elsewhere. The budgetary and fiscal crises that supposedly justify spending cuts and austerity are contrived. They are a consequence of the unwillingness or inability of states to challenge capital and their disposition to transfer the burden of the crisis to working and popular classes. Global mobility has given capital enhanced class power over nationally based working classes and extraordinary structural influence over state managers who seek economic reactivation and macroeconomic stability.

To understand the current conjuncture we need to go back to the 1970s. The globalization stage of world capitalism we are now in itself evolved out the response of distinct agents to previous episodes of crisis, in particular to the 1970s' crisis of Fordism–Keynesianism, or of redistributive capitalism. In the wake of that crisis capital went global as a strategy of the emergent transnational capitalist class and its political representatives to reconstitute its class power by breaking free of nation-state constraints to accumulation. These constraints – the so-called 'class compromise' – had been imposed on capital through decades of mass struggles around the world by nationally contained popular and working classes. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, globally oriented elites captured state power in most countries around the world and utilized that power to push capitalist globalization.

Globalization and neoliberal policies opened up vast new opportunities for transnational accumulation in the 1980s and 1990s. The revolution in computer and information technology (CIT) and other technological advances helped emergent transnational capital to achieve major gains in productivity and to restructure, 'flexibilize' and shed labour worldwide. This, in turn, undercut wages and the social wage and facilitated a transfer of income to capital and to high-consumption sectors around the world that provided new market segments fuelling growth. In sum, globalization made possible a major extensive and intensive expansion of the system and unleashed a frenzied new round of accumulation worldwide that offset the 1970s' crisis of declining profits and investment opportunities.

But crises of overaccumulation follow periods of hyperaccumulation. The current global crisis is one of overaccumulation, or the lack of outlets for the profitable absorption of surpluses. Crisis theory suggests that overaccumulation may be manifested in different ways. 'Profit squeeze' theorists demonstrated falling profits in the crisis of the 1970s, but this does not explain the current situation as profits soared in the period leading up to crisis and have recovered since their drop in 2008–09.

In the 1970s over-accumulation also took the form of stagflation, or inflation together with stagnation. Working and popular classes fiercely resisted in the early and

mid-1970s a transfer of the costs of the crisis to themselves. Neither these classes nor capital were willing to shoulder the costs of crisis; this stand-off is what in my view generated stagflation. But working and popular classes were able to put up resistance precisely because they faced capital within the confines of the nation-state. The gains these classes had made within nation-state capitalism and their ability to resist capital's impositions is precisely what led capital in the first place to go global – that is, to undertake a restructuring of the system through globalization.

### **Overproduction/underconsumption**

Stagflation and stand-off, however, do not characterize the current crisis. As has been amply documented, the portion of value going to workers has dropped sharply and living standards have plummeted since the late 1970s. Instead, it seems clear that overaccumulation is now expressed, as it was in the 1930s' crisis, as overproduction/underconsumption; the capitalist system is facing the challenge of how to unload surpluses profitably. The system had been stumbling from one lesser crisis to another since the mid-1990s – the Mexican peso crisis of 1995, the Asian financial meltdown of 1997–98, the recession of 2001 and the bursting of the dotcom bubble. By the new century two major mechanisms for unloading surplus would provide a perverse lifeline to the system: militarized accumulation and financial speculation.

The US state took advantage of 9/11 to militarize the global economy. The cutting edge of accumulation in the 'real economy' worldwide shifted from computer and information technology before the 2001 dotcom bust to a military–security–industrial–construction–engineering–petroleum complex that also accrued enormous influence in the halls of power in Washington. Military spending skyrocketed into the trillions of dollars through the 'war on terrorism' and the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, acting to throw fresh firewood on the smouldering embers of the global economy. Spin-off effects of this spending have flowed through the open veins of the global economy – that is, the integrated network structures of the global production, services and financial system.

Financial speculation was made possible by deregulation of the financial industry together with the introduction of CIT that gave rise to a globally integrated financial system. The 'revolution in finance' has included over the past few decades all sorts of financial innovations – a vast and bewildering array of derivatives: swaps, futures markets, hedge funds, institutional investment funds, mortgage-backed securities, collateralized debt obligations, Ponzi schemes, pyramiding of assets, and many more. These innovations make possible a global casino, or transnational financial circuits based on speculation and the ongoing expansion of fictitious capital. Securitization made every pile of money, such as pensions, as well as debt itself, or negative money, a 'tradable' and therefore a source of speculation and accumulation. These innovations allowed global speculators to appropriate values through new circuits that were in many respects irrespective of space and irrespective of 'real' value or material production.

Predatory transnational finance capital has sought one outlet after another for frenzied speculation. The sequence of speculative waves in the global casino since the 1980s included real-estate investments in the emerging global property market that inflated property values in one locality after another, wild stock-market speculation leading to periodic booms and busts, most notable the bursting of the dotcom bubble in 2001, the phenomenal escalation of hedge-fund flows and pyramiding of assets, currency speculation, one Ponzi scheme after another, and later on frantic speculation in global commodities markets, especially energy and food markets, which provoked a spike in world prices in 2007 and 2008 and sparked 'food riots' around the world.

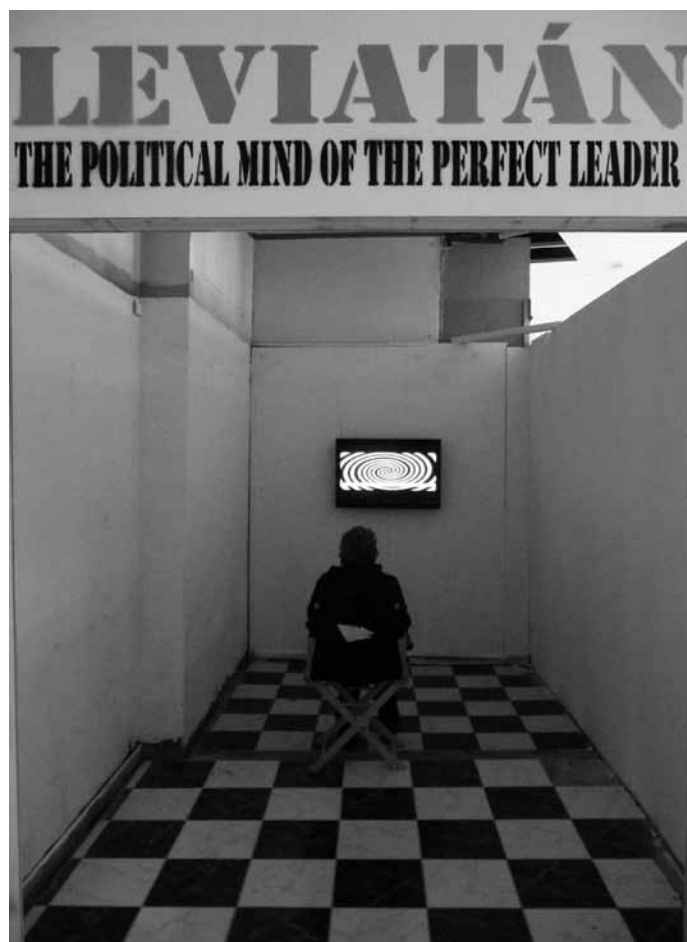
As speculation in the global financial casino reached fever pitch following recovery from the 2001 recession, the 'real economy' was kept afloat momentarily by a massive

increase in consumer debt (largely credit cards and mortgages) and federal deficit spending in the United States, which converted that country into the world's 'market of last resort'. The Federal Reserve decision to reduce interest rates to about 1 per cent in 2003 as a mechanism to overcome the recession also triggered a wave of speculation in the US mortgage market and prompted investors to indulge in the infamous subprime lending spree. The bottoming out in 2007 of the subprime mortgage market triggered the collapse a year later of the global financial system headquartered in Wall Street.

Yet in the perverse world of predatory transnational finance capital, debt and deficits themselves became new sources of financial speculation. This explains, in part, the latest round of crisis as manifest in Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and elsewhere. Government debt is now being portrayed as 'spending beyond means' and used to justify cuts in social spending and austerity. Yet this debt has become a major source of profit-making for transnational finance capital – the latest financial fix – to the extent that social consumption continues to decline as a source of accumulation. The global bond market stood in 2009 at an estimated US\$90 trillion and constituted the single biggest market for financial speculation in the wake of the 2008 collapse. Gone are the times that such bonds are bought and held to maturity. They are bought and sold by individual and institutional investors in frenzied 24-hour worldwide trading and bet on continuously through such mechanisms as credit default swaps that shift their values and make bond markets a high-stakes gamble of volatility and risk for investors.

The current crisis, in my view, is structural more than cyclical. The last major structural crisis, of the 1970s, was resolved through capitalist globalization. And, prior to that, the structural crisis of the 1930s was resolved through the creation of a new model of Fordist–Keynesian or redistributive capitalism. Transnational capital and its political agents are attempting to resolve the current structural crisis by a vast shift in the balance of class and social forces worldwide – in effect, to deepen many times over and to consummate the 'neoliberal counterrevolution' that began in the 1980s. Some global elites have proposed a global reformism that involves a shift from neoclassical to institutional economics, a limited re-regulation of global market forces, some redistributive measures, state stimulus programmes, and fomenting a shift from financial to productive accumulation. Yet it would seem that these reformers have been unable to prevail over the power of transnational finance capital.

Global capital has become a leviathan in which capitals from around the world are so deeply interpenetrated not only across borders but through the overlap of productive and financial circuits that it is not clear how meaningful it is to continue to make a distinction between the two. The giant global financial conglomerates draw in individual and institutional investors from around the world and in turn circulate unfathomable amounts of capital into productive, commercial and service circuits. In the wake of



globalization, it seems, global elites and capitalist state managers have lacked the political will or even the notion to restructure the system in any way that would re-establish some boundaries between financial and productive circuits or that would modify the role transnational finance capital has played as the regulator of the worldwide circuit of accumulation and the causal agent in the crisis.

Indeed, global speculators used the US state's bailout of Wall Street to channel a new round of speculative investment into the market in state-issued bonds and into bank lending to states strapped for cash in the wake of the 2008 economic collapse. Once the private banking and financial institutions recovered from the 2008 collapse – in large part thanks to government bailouts – they turned to unloading surplus into sovereign debt markets that they themselves helped to create. This new speculative frenzy by financial capitalists is now being presented as working peoples living beyond their means, a convenient smokescreen that conceals the origins and nature of deficits and legitimates the call for social spending cuts and austerity.

Greece provides the textbook case. As is well known, Goldman Sachs led the charge of transnational investors into Greece, advising Greek financial authorities to pour state funds into derivatives in order to make national accounts look good and therefore to attract loans and bond purchases. Goldman Sachs then turned around and engaged in parallel derivative trading known as 'credit default swaps' – that is, betting on the possibility that Greece would default. This raised the country's cost of borrowing, making huge profits for Goldman Sachs and increasing interest rates many times over for Greece, while raising the prospect of sovereign debt default and therefore justifying brutal austerity measures. In other words, speculation in sovereign debt is a mechanism for extracting from working classes present and future income streams, a mechanism at work as well in Ireland and throughout the EU and in the United States, and more generally worldwide (in this respect, the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis is but the coming to the First World of the debt crisis that the global South has experienced for several decades).

The austerity sweeping across Europe is particularly revealing; it represents an acceleration of the process of the 'Third-Worldization' of the 'First World', in which the wealth concentrated at some poles of accumulation in the world is no longer redistributed downward locally towards First World labour aristocracies. Regardless of the outcome of financial crisis in each individual country case, capital wins in both the short and the long term. In the short term, investors cash in on a would-be defaulter with higher bond rates and/or through state bailouts that are channelled into their coffers. In the long run, austerity intensifies the processes of regressive taxation, privatization and the dismantling of the social wage. Behind massive cuts in education and increases in tuition in both Europe and the United States, for instance, is the steady march of the privatization and commodification of public education. In short, the toxic mixture of public finance and private transnational finance capital in this age of global capitalism constitutes a new battlefield in which the global rich are waging a war against the global poor and working classes.

### **Global working class**

Which way, then, in the face of the global capital leviathan? Reformist forces from above in the 1930s were able to restructure capitalism by curtailing capital's prerogatives without challenging its fundamental interests. Today, by contrast, I do not see any way a reformism from above could adequately address the crisis without a head-on collision with the interests of global capital – especially the transnational banks, the oil/energy/extractive sector, and the military–security–industrial–reconstruction complex. This is to say that the capitalist state in order to salvage the system from its own self-destruction would have to exercise a remarkable degree of autonomy not just from

individual capitalists and investor groups but from the juggernaut that is the inextricably entangled mass of global capital. Such a role could only come about under a change in the worldwide correlation of class and social forces in favour of popular and working classes. Yet mass socialist and worker movements, although they are burgeoning, are weak compared to the 1930s.

A proto-fascist Right appears as insurgent. This Right seeks to fuse reactionary political power with transnational capital, to organize a mass base among historically privileged sectors of the global working class, such as white workers in the North and middle layers in the South, that are now experiencing heightened insecurity and the spectre of downward mobility. The proto-fascist response to the crisis involves militarism, extreme masculinization, racism, the search for scapegoats (such as immigrant workers in the United States and Europe) and mystifying ideologies. The need for dominant groups around the world to ensure widespread, organized mass social control of the world's surplus population and of rebellious forces from below gives a powerful impulse to a project of twenty-first-century global fascism. Images in recent years of what such a political project would involve have spanned the Israeli invasion of Gaza and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, to the scapegoating and criminalization of immigrant workers and the Tea Party movement in the United States, genocide in the Congo, the US/United Nations occupation of Haiti, the spread of neo-Nazis and skin-heads in Europe and the intensified Indian repression in occupied Kashmir.

The counterweight to a twenty-first-century fascism must be a coordinated fight-back by the global working class. Mass unemployment, foreclosures, the further erosion of social wages, wage cuts, furloughs, the increased exploitation of part-time workers, reduced work hours, informalization, and mounting debt peonage are some of capital's mechanisms for transferring the cost of crisis onto the mass of popular and working classes. Will popular sectors manage to forge a social solidarity of the oppressed, the exploited and the subordinate majorities across ethnic and national lines?

# David Cameron's Tea Party

**Richard Seymour**

**W**hile 'Tea Party' rebels agitate for the return of 'Austrian' principles in the USA, the Conservative Party under David Cameron is actually implementing these principles in the UK. Without prefacing their agenda with the hysterical red-baiting characteristic of the Tea Party, the Tories argue that their spending reductions are not ideologically driven but are necessary because of New Labour's fiscal profligacy.

The biggest cuts in absolute terms will be to welfare and council spending. Lower housing benefits will drive most of the poor out of the south of England by 2025. Reductions in social housing funding will triple the cost of rent for new council tenants. Libraries will be closed, street repairs stopped, and services for the young and elderly terminated. Already, the NHS, supposedly spared cuts, is feeling the strain with fewer staff working longer hours. Schools will have 40,000 fewer teachers. With tuition fees potentially rising to £9,000 a year, higher education is finished for many working-class

children. Half a million jobs will be shed in the most unionized sector of the economy. We will have longer working lives, less money to live on, fewer educational opportunities, and less support when we are ill or unemployed.

This is not just a drive for a 'smaller state'. As Stefan Collini wrote of the higher-education reforms recommended by Lord Browne, which include removing 80 per cent of government funding for teaching: 'This is more than simply a "cut", even a draconian one: it signals a redefinition of higher education and the retreat of the state from financial



responsibility for it.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Tories are trying to radically reinvent British capitalism and the state's role in it, taking it further along neoliberal lines, eviscerating the last unionized bastions of British society, gradually privatizing outposts of collectivism, and redistributing wealth and power from working people to the rich.

Why is the government prepared to undertake such a risky project? The Tories had worked extraordinarily hard to shed their reputation as 'the nasty party', which had left them with a base of just over 30 per cent of the electorate. Cameron's socially liberal leadership barely succeeded in raising this above a third of the vote, winning back just a fraction of the skilled workers and middle-class professionals lost since the early 1990s. To undertake policies now that will punish millions of those hard-won voters seems reckless. One explanation is that, as in the mid-1970s, the Tories' hegemonic position is already in trouble, and they are gambling on restoring their lost position by re-engineering society to create a more conservative electorate.

In the Marxist idiom, the Conservative Party is a 'bourgeois party' – a party whose purpose is to wage political struggles on behalf of the ruling class, into which it is integrated. Such formations are unstable because they must compete in an electoral system numerically dominated by the working- and middle-classes. Since 1867, the Tories have had to find ways to motivate growing numbers of middle and working class people to vote for them. Embracing the new science of polling after the devastating election defeat of 1945, they focused on building their base among the lower middle class and skilled workers. But since the 1950s, when they tended to gain just shy of 50 per cent of the vote, their base has been gradually narrowing. In the mid-1970s, their vote was lower than 40 per cent for the first time in the postwar era. The revival under Thatcher was fragile, based on between 42 and 44 per cent of the vote. But since the ERM crisis, the Tories have rarely gained support higher than the low 30s. If this secular trend is not halted and reversed, then the Conservative Party's usefulness to the capitalist class, members of which dominate its leadership, will be severely undermined. Thus the cuts can be seen as a gamble on both the future of British capitalism and the Conservative Party's role in it.

### Hayek in the UK

Consider Mrs Thatcher's project. Thatcher took office with British capitalism in crisis. The corporatist state built by previous administrations depended upon healthy revenue streams. According to the bastardized Keynesianism that informed official practice, the state should be the instrument of economic expansion. During recessions, it could borrow to invest, creating jobs and growth, and thus producing the source of its future revenue streams. Stagnation could, *pace* Wilson's 'white heat of technology', be overcome by corporatist expansionism. By the late 1970s, however, public spending projects

failed to produce the desired expansion, instead only contributing to inflation – the dual phenomenon known as ‘stagflation’. Most of the expansionist projects had failed, and Britain’s relative economic decline continued. The ‘winter of discontent’ proved that corporatism could not contain labour’s wage claims. Having evinced scepticism about Thatcher’s leadership, which looked like the nucleus of a UKIP-style middle-class protest party, capital turned to the Conservative Party.

Thatcher’s remedy was based on the neoliberal ideology that had been germinating in the chrysalis of social democracy. Economic planning, the Tories now said, was impossible in a free society. To plan production and consumption, it was necessary to plan people’s lives. This was absurd and had proven to be unworkable. The Tories would restore capitalist freedom, dismantling the corporatist institutions of planning, collective bargaining and incomes policy. Cheap money would be replaced by sound money, and the rentier would be revived. This was continuous with a strain of Conservative thinking going back to Oliver Lyttelton and Winston Churchill in the immediate postwar period, but it was directly inspired by the political philosophy of Friedrich Hayek.

Hayek championed an authoritarian liberalism first fashioned by the radical Right in the interwar years to meet the challenge of mass democracy. A consistent theme in this thought is the need to abbreviate democracy. Hayek did not prefer despotism, arguing that representative democracy had certain technical advantages. However, as he explained while visiting Chile in 1981, he preferred liberal dictatorship to democracy lacking all liberalism. His late writings on government recommended devolving all fundamental decisions to an infrequently elected upper chamber, with a small electorate, while the lower chamber would be entrusted only with technocratic resource allocation. In his endorsement of General Pinochet, he showed the influence of Ludwig von Mises, and of his apparent nemesis Carl Schmitt. Both had a grounding in the liberal tradition, were galvanized by battles with the Left, and eventually endorsed counter-revolutionary dictatorships to conserve the kernel of liberal social relations (capitalism).

As both William Scheuerman and Renato Christi have argued from different perspectives,<sup>2</sup> Hayek’s critique of welfarism and social democracy was strikingly similar to Schmitt’s critique of the party-political state. Both Hayek and Schmitt believed that social democracy enmeshed the state in a network of special interests that vitiated the universality of law, upon which a free society depended, undermined economic efficiency, and compromised the state’s autonomy. Public choice theorists would later express this idea in market-based language, maintaining that democracy incentivized clientelism, in which public servants offer favours to special interests, and budget-maximizing behaviour by bureaucrats. To remedy this, they recommended capping budgets, privatizing services where possible, and introducing reforms to make the state



more like the market. Thatcher's administration put these ideas into practice, taking great risks both with the Conservative Party's long-term ability to act as a hegemonic party, and with the state's ability to maintain public order.

### **Rentier revived**

The first years of the Thatcher government were characterized by public spending cuts amid a deep global recession. As a result, the government was divided and unpopular. Even a historically devastating split in the Labour coalition in 1981 didn't seem to be helping, as the newly minted Social Democratic Party ate as much into the Tory vote as it did into Labour's. By the middle of 1982, however, the situation had changed in the Conservative Party's favour. Revenues from North Sea oil had helped cushion the blows felt from the global recession, which was by then coming to an end. The government's popularity was recovering, and its base was heartened by the assertion of British imperial interests in the Falklands. This enabled Thatcher to further restructure relations between capital and the state, labour and the state, and capital and labour. A new neoliberal statecraft was pioneered. The state's role was no longer to create growth but to ensure that the microeconomic conditions existed for the private sector to expand. The macroeconomic priority was to contain inflation, which meant containing wages. Welfare was cut as far as politically possible, utilities privatized, and the public sector remodelled along market lines, with internal competition in the NHS and 'competitive tendering' in local service delivery. Huge budgets were entrusted to unelected quangos. With the big battalions of the labour movement defeated in the fields of Orgreave and the streets of Wapping, the institutions of social democracy were compelled to adapt to this new order. Parliamentary democracy was thus partially insulated from the claims of the working class, and New Labour was born.

Finally, the rentier was revived. The City was deregulated, and housing was rationed. Property prices boomed, which meant that consumption could be supported by households borrowing against the value of their property. This invested a large enough number of people in the new status quo to give the Tories a viable political constituency – even if it stored up problems for the future. Prior to the 2007 credit crunch, debt expert Ann Pettifor warned of 'the coming First World debt explosion' on account of the spiralling levels of household debt created to maintain consumer spending in the previous two decades.<sup>3</sup> Even after the crisis hit, by 2009 total private sector debt was £750 trillion, or 540 per cent of GDP – a time bomb that threatens to devastate any growth formula adopted by any future government. But the extent of financialization across the economy, with incomes as well as profits in servicing and manufacturing sectors dependent on stock market values, means that any government will be reluctant to address this. Instead, the Tories will advance the Thatcher revolution. The pretence that this has to do with New Labour's overspending is flimsy. New Labour was obsessed with fiscal credibility, reducing government debt at a faster pace than any since the Second World War. But beneath it is a serious analysis. The productive base of British capitalism can no longer sustain even the reduced welfare state inherited from Thatcher. If capital is freed from the taxes needed to foot this bill, while also invited to profit from public services, the Tories hope that a new phase of private-sector growth will ensue. That in turn will benefit enough people to create a viable political constituency, while weakening opposition forces, and making the new order irreversible. Another generational shift in wealth and power will have been effected.

### **Notes**

1. Stefan Collini, 'Browne's Gamble', *London Review of Books*, 4 November 2010, p. 23.
2. William E. Scheuerman, *Carl Schmitt: The End of Law*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD, 1999; Renato Cristi, *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism: Strong State, Free Economy*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1998.
3. Ann Pettifor, *The Coming First World Debt Crisis*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2006.

# Alternatives to austerity

## The need for a public utility finance system

**Robin Blackburn**

**T**he Great Credit Crunch of 2007–10 was, it is almost universally agreed, brought about by the irresponsibility and greed of bankers. But the huge public deficits needed to prevent a meltdown of the financial system are to be paid for by slashing public spending and shrinking social protection for many decades to come. The welfare state is to be dismantled at a time when higher unemployment and an ageing population make this a certain recipe for misery. The cut-backs are a gamble which makes recovery more difficult but has one certain result – a boost to the privatization and commodification of pensions, health and education.

For the last two decades neoliberals have been insisting that disaster would ensue if we did not have a bonfire of social entitlements. Public pensions were declared to be a nightmare in the making. Now the disaster has happened – because of the vices of financialization not the burden of welfare. The disease had quite different origins and causes from those that were forecast by the doom-mongers, but the medicine needed for this incapacitating ailment is just the same as before.

It is truly astonishing that a crisis caused by the bankers has to be solved at the expense of nurses, teachers, students, pensioners and the unemployed. The bankers are still widely thought to be culpable but few dare to defy the money markets and international financial agencies. Fear of the bond markets is excessive but not irrational. Countries that forfeit the confidence of the markets immediately find borrowing more expensive, but the clincher is that if confidence continues to plummet then default and bankruptcy loom. As citizens of Argentina discovered in 2001, businesses collapse, everyday life becomes an obstacle course and savings are wiped out.

But while it is rational to take the markets seriously, this should not mean capitulation before their false alternatives and truncated perspectives. Just as the draconian cuts menace hopes of recovery so the new regulatory requirements laid on the banks are pathetically inadequate and do little to prevent future financial crises.

The Left's response to the crisis has to be positive as well as negative. It must reach out to alternatives, and these should centrally include the establishment of a public utility finance system, the levying of taxes on capital, the building of local networks of democratically controlled social funds and a programme of diversified development. The aim of this package would be to stimulate investment-led growth, foster sustainability, encourage the formation of human capital, and yield a growth of productivity.

Before explaining what these measures might involve, it will be helpful to identify the features of neoliberalism which ensure that it fails even as it succeeds in gaining access to new sources of profit. The IMF and World Bank have aggressively promoted commercialization of pension provision, as Mitchell Orenstein has shown in his recent study *Privatizing Pensions*. Between 1994 and 2008 thirty countries in Latin America and Eastern Europe were persuaded to abandon their public pension systems and

replace them with personal pension funds managed by commercial finance houses. The international agencies resorted to shameless bullying and what Orenstein politely calls 'resource leverage'. As he explains, countries in the midst of a difficult transition to democracy were denied all financial assistance unless they agreed to pension privatization. In addition funds were made available by the World Bank to carry through campaigns of public persuasion, and key individuals were offered inducements and attractive employment if they went along with the process.

### **Pensions crisis**

The success of this campaign for pension privatization has proved a comprehensive disaster for the countries concerned. The rocky state of stock markets has meant that the promised accumulation targets have been missed by a mile. But even in periods where stock markets grew, the commercial funds suffered from exaggerated cost ratios. This is a central defect of the financialized model. Universal public schemes do not have the expense of marketing and customization that plague private provision. In an attempt to solve this problem countries were often persuaded to make participation compulsory, but the cost disease problem has remained. This is because either there is no effective competition, in which case the suppliers exploit their monopoly position, or there is competition ('choice') and an expensive marketing war between rival suppliers.

Other problems that beset the commercial provision of financial services are information asymmetry as regards contributors and information deficits as regards investments. On the one hand the finance houses have much more information than their customers and use this to secure advantages over them. On the other hand the Anglo-Saxon banks fly far above the ground level at which small and medium businesses exist and have no rational criteria to inform their credit decisions. Think of their folly in accepting so much exposure to subprime mortgages. Today a similar problem arises with respect to their reluctance to make any productive investments.

British and US savers have long experience of all these problems and have not been able to identify an effective remedy. Two problems are worth signalling since they go to the core of the neoliberal regime. The advocates of neoliberalism have been – as Peter Mandelson, the 'New Labour' strategist once put it – 'intensely relaxed' about greater inequality. Yet at the root of today's crisis is precisely the poverty associated with this inequality. The credit crunch in the USA was triggered by the breaking of a speculative bubble in subprime mortgages – namely mortgages taken out by poor people ('subprime' borrowers) who could not keep up payments expected of them. And at an international level the poor earnings of Chinese workers and farmers furnish too little demand to the world economy, generate huge trade imbalances and asset bubbles – and consequent threats to growth.

British and US savers now face ruinous shortfalls as a consequence of all the above problems – swooning markets, excessive costs, poor information and ballooning inequality. Yet in the UK the drastic cuts recommended by the Hutton report will push public employees into reliance on private-sector suppliers who are insecure and costly. They will also weaken public-sector pension funds that have a good record, with low cost ratios and at least a few attempts to favour social responsibility. The Hutton report itself acknowledges that public-sector pensions are not 'gold-plated' and that, at current rates, are set to decline as a proportion of GDP. The 'average' public-sector pension is a little over £7,000 and half of all beneficiaries receive only £5,600. Britain's pension problem is that provision is too low and too patchy. The state pension is among the lowest in Europe and half of the huge subsidy going to private pension savers goes to the top 10 per cent of earners.

The recent attempts to widen coverage and improve regulation will make little difference. In the UK many employees are likely to opt out of the new personal pension

accounts, and the savings they make are to be managed by commercial suppliers. According to the logic of a 'race to the bottom' it is sometimes asserted that because so many private-sector employees have poor provision, public-sector workers should be reduced to the same unfortunate position. Governments throughout Europe are seeking to impose this dismal proposition. The degradation of public provision leads to 'implicit privatization' as citizens are urged into the clutches of the financial services industry.

It might seem that President Barack Obama's health-care scheme bucks the trend, but sadly this is not so. The scheme was vetted in advance by the insurance industry and Big Pharma. The new scheme offers new business to these interest groups and will lead to escalating costs. To rescue the programme from rising costs it will be found necessary to curtail the service available to patients, and Obama has already cut back what is offered by Medicare to pay for the new programme – robbing Peter to pay Paul.

### **Investment-led growth?**

So what is the best way to tackle all these problems? We should note that elements of a public utility finance system – as in China, Germany and parts of Scandinavia – have proved more compatible with industrial investment. On the other hand public stakes in the banking system are useless unless there is a determination to use them. The US and British authorities have huge majority holdings in giant 'zombie banks' like CitiBank and RBS and yet they have refused to use their power to revivify these concerns and ensure that they make credit available to small and medium enterprises.

If there was a willingness to foster investment-led growth, where could the resources come from and where should they go? The Group of Twenty have been obliged to consider a banking levy and a financial transaction tax, something like the Tobin tax. There is obviously great scope for such levies and they would have the double benefit of restraining speculative activity and raising revenue. While there can be a place for rather modest levies on some types of transaction, the banking levy should not be modest at all. Justice and strategy both demand very stiff measures, tantamount to the socialization of a swathe of the financial institutions. These banks were faced with ruin in 2007–08 and were saved by the public treasuries. For nearly two years the banks have been nursed and mollicoddled by the central banks. They have been able to borrow very cheaply and then lend the money out at very safe and advantageous rates. In some cases they could borrow from the central bank at less than 1 per cent and lend that same money back to the government (by purchasing bonds) at 3 or 4 per cent. Taking only a tiny amount of risk they could lend at 8 or 12 per cent to those with good collateral. Concerned mainly with reducing exposure, they have denied credit to small and medium firms – hence the tenacity of the credit crunch. Thus the British government's Special Liquidity Scheme allowed the British banks to borrow £165 billion at a discount to market rates; bonds floated by the banks worth a further £120 billion were made palatable by a government guarantee.<sup>1</sup> These figures should be borne in mind when considering the proposed annual yield of the levy on the banks in the UK – just £2 billion.

The banks have been so dependent on the taxpayer and public support that there is an overwhelming case for large public stakes. The banks – large and small – could be obliged to issue shares equivalent to 40 per cent of their annual profits to a regional network of social funds. Using these funds as their security the regional funds could then draw up – in association with local elective bodies – a ten-year programme of productive investment, embracing both public and private ventures. Such a programme might include public universities and research institutes, Green energy schemes, and universal access to broadband and other informational systems. The German experience of publicly owned Sparkasse and Länderbank linked to manufacturing, and the *Mittelstand* or medium-sized companies would be well worth studying. Also relevant is

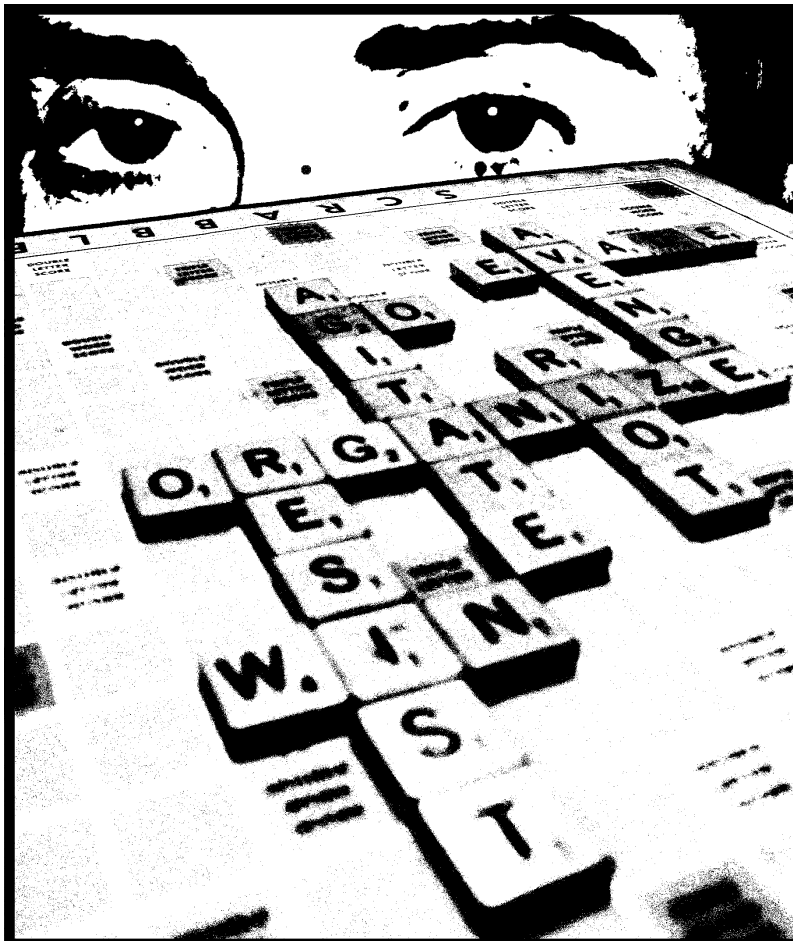
the experience of public-sector pension funds in the USA and UK and the Mondragon Group co-operative in Spain, with its special finance arm.<sup>2</sup>

While I believe that this is the best way to finance the emergence of a public utility finance system, other sources of capital might come from a land tax on commercial real estate and a general share levy on large corporations. I have outlined these possibilities in the conclusion to my book *Age Shock: How Finance Is Failing Us* (2006). The key device of the share levy requires corporations to issue shares annually worth 10 per cent of their profits to the regional network of public funds. The shares acquired in this way are not sold, but the dividends they earn are applied to specific social priorities, such as funding pension provision. In Britain another potential source of public funds would be a rebate on the statutory interest payable on capital injected by the private finance initiatives. Some £210 billion of PFI capital assets now earn an enticing rate of interest. Simply reducing the interest rate charged by NHS hospital contractors by 0.02 per cent could save £200 million a year.<sup>3</sup>

The classic device of twentieth-century socialism was the nationalization of industry. In the twenty-first century the key institution may well prove to be a network of publicly owned and controlled financial funds. Private financial institutions are inefficient and risky, in contrast to the potentially greater security, social justice and economy of public finance.

### Notes

1. 'Banks on Methadone', *The Economist*, 24 July 2010.
2. For additional arguments along these lines, see Gerald Holtham, 'A National Investment Bank Can Raise our Growth', *Financial Times*, 27 October 2010.
3. Jesse Norman, 'Hard Times Call for Rebate on PFI Deals', *Financial Times*, 17 August 2010.



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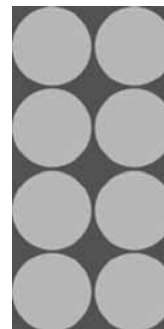
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# From structure to rhizome: transdisciplinarity in French thought (1)

The concept of transdisciplinarity is not part of the explicit discourse or self-consciousness of 'French thought'. Rather, it is used here, imported from the outside as a kind of operator or problematizing device, to begin a process of rethinking one of that body of thought's most distinctive but infrequently remarked-upon characteristics – its tendency to move fluidly across disciplinary fields and modes of knowledge – and thereby also to rethink some of its main ideas.

Unexamined transdisciplinary dynamics motivate and energize many of the 'great books' of postwar European theory. In France one can point emblematically to Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), the first volume of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Practical Ensembles* (1960), Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (1962), Foucault's *Words and Things*, Derrida's *Writing and Difference* and Lacan's *Écrits* (each 1966) and Deleuze and Guattari's two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972, 1980). All are books that cross disciplines with a confidence and facility that belie the complexity of the exchanges between the disciplinary knowledges upon which they are built – in often widely differing and unstated ways. And all have productive but problematic relationships to the varieties of systematic orientation (including anti-systems) that characterize the post-Kantian European philosophical tradition, raising the question of the proto-philosophical character of transdisciplinarity itself.

One way to approach this situation would be to focus on the singularities of such canonical texts as literary works. Another, adopted here, is to approach them via the most general concepts that they construct, and to inquire into the genealogy and transdisciplinary functioning of these concepts: 'structure', of course, and its place within work that was later called 'post-structuralist'; but also existentialism (whose death was prematurely announced), within which the rethinking of the concept 'sex' associated with Western feminism has its philosophical beginnings; along with ideas associated with tendencies that

do not fit so neatly into such boxes – like 'network'; and those that are simply too general to be usefully pegged to particular texts or even bodies of theoretical writing, such as 'science'.

The 'entries' presented below stake out some ground for rethinking these concepts from a transdisciplinary standpoint. By way of introduction to such a project (of which this is just one part of a small national sample – a second part of the sample will follow later in 2011), it may be useful to set out something of the thinking about transdisciplinarity that stands behind it. In particular, it is necessary to make clear what is *not* intended by the term 'transdisciplinarity' in this context, although the unintended usage must nonetheless be engaged if the current institutional conditions of knowledge-production are to be acknowledged.

## Trans-, inter-, multi-, hegemonic and anti-

In the context of the 'post-philosophical' theoretical heritage of twentieth-century European philosophy, the concept of transdisciplinarity has two main points of reference. The first is the German critical tradition (post-Hegelian and materialist in inspiration), within which it appears as one way of thinking the conceptual space opened up by the critique of the self-sufficiency of a disciplinary concept of philosophy: a universalizing conceptual movement that recognizes (following Marx) that the idea of philosophy can only be realized outside of philosophy itself. Transdisciplinarity is thus, here, the product of a certain philosophical reflection on the limits of philosophy; a result of the self-criticism of philosophy, in a manner that opens philosophical discourse up to the claims of other discourses – a 'philosophizing beyond philosophy' as Adorno described it, with reference to Walter Benjamin's writings. Here, among the disciplines that are crossed, transdisciplinarity thus appears to have a privileged relationship to the philosophical tradition, even if it is primarily one of negation (determinate in each instance, but not necessarily generalizably so).

Something similar may be discerned in the generalizing and often transcendental dynamics of a certain ‘French thought’ from 1945 through to the 1980s. This thought inhabits something of the same trans-disciplinary conceptual space as the German critical tradition, but in a variety of radically anti-Hegelian modes. It too exhibits a complicated set of constitutive relations to philosophy – sometimes by its denial (which is not necessarily the same as its negation), but more often through philosophy’s transformation: ‘regenerating itself out of its other’, as Balibar puts it, below, in relation to structuralism. Different ways of being anti-Hegelian in France, one might say, tend to articulate alternative modes of transdisciplinarity.

Currently, however, the term ‘transdisciplinarity’ is most frequently to be found as part of anglophone methodological debates in the physical and social sciences, and in Science and Technology Studies and Education Studies, in particular. It is there, quite reasonably I think, opposed to established concepts of *interdisciplinarity* and *multidisciplinarity* – those two multiple-choice boxes familiar to anyone who has filled in an AHRC grant application in the UK. (‘Interdisciplinarity’ is understood to refer to a multiplicity of disciplinary methods employed by a researcher; multidisciplinarity to a multiplicity of researchers with different disciplinary affiliations.) These are now bureaucratic categories. The notion of transdisciplinarity is certainly, in various ways, an advance in relation to these two established ways of thinking disciplinary relationships. However, it has been subjected to a bureaucratic straitjacket of its own.

The notion of transdisciplinarity is an advance, formally, in denoting a movement across existing fields (as opposed to simply a thinking *between* them or a *multiplication* of them); and it is an advance in terms of theoretical content, in so far as it locates the source of transdisciplinary dynamics pragmatically in a process of *problem-solving* related, ultimately, to problems of experience in everyday life. It has been placed in a straitjacket, however, to the extent to which this process of problem-solving is generally reduced to a relationship between a *policy-based* reformulation of the problems at issue, which are construed in such a way as to be amenable to *technological* or other instrumental solutions. (Think of the way, in the case of Education Studies, for example, that the concept of ‘lifelong’ learning rapidly morphed into ‘work-based’ learning.) This conception has been summed up by Helga

Nowotny and others as ‘Mode-2 knowledge production’. The social organization of knowledges appears here in large part as an administrative issue – as, indeed, does the current reorganization of academic knowledges in British universities along corporate–managerial lines. In this context, ‘transdisciplinarity’ can become one of the things that is ‘happening to us’ in the universities, and not in a nice way.

In the context of the German and French critical traditions, and their anglophone reception, on the other hand, it is not inter- and multi-disciplinarity to which transdisciplinarity is most fruitfully opposed, or the bureaucratic reorganization of knowledges which drives it, so much as the conceptual pair of *hegemonic* disciplinarity (think of ‘English’) and a resistant *anti-disciplinarity* (think of ‘text’), which is motivated by a certain politicization of knowledges. In this context, transdisciplinarity is not the conceptual product of addressing problems defined as policy challenges, which are amenable to technological solutions, but rather of addressing problems that are *culturally and politically defined* in such a way as to be amenable to theoretical reformulation, as a condition of more radical forms of political address. The axes policy/technology are replaced by the axes theory/politics.

The emergent sociological discourse of transdisciplinarity is *positive* and *organizational*; the one gestured towards here is, though not wholly negative, at least *problematizing* and political.

The organizational conceit of the conference from which the ‘entries’ that follow derived is that we might obtain some insight into the relationship between problematization and transdisciplinarity through reflection upon the generalizing dynamics of particular concepts in French thought since 1945: from ‘structure’ to ‘rhizome’...<sup>\*</sup> This narrative is not intended teleologically but rather, like the notion of transdisciplinarity itself, as a critical device: a positing of oppositional points, conceptually and historically defined, the relationship between which – and hence the meaning of each – is still very much disputed. Politically, these poles represent two very different decades: those of the late 1950s and early 1960s (‘structure’), and the late 1970s and early 1980s (‘rhizome’), respectively: the beginning and the end, one might say, of a certain period of intellectual and political radicalism, which was definitively closed by the apparent opening of ‘1989’. Today, new openings present themselves.

**Peter Osborne**

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<sup>\*</sup> The conference, ‘From Structure to Rhizome: Transdisciplinarity in French Thought, 1945 to the Present – Histories, Concepts, Constructions’, was held at the French Institute in London, 16–17 April 2010. It was organized by the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) – in what were to become its final months at Middlesex University, before its move to Kingston – in collaboration with the Cultural Services of the French Embassy.

# Structure

## Method or subversion of the social sciences?

Étienne Balibar

### 1

It seems there's no longer any real doubt as to the answer to this question, and that it is doubly negative. 'Structuralism', or what was designated as such mainly in France in the 1960s and 1970s (setting aside the question of other uses), is no longer regarded as a truly fertile method in the domains of sociology and anthropology, nor in those of linguistics and psychology, even if many of the concepts and schemata of thought that it put into circulation are still recognizable. A good portion of those who had enthusiastically adopted its language and objectives have turned away from it, in some instances towards methodologies that are more positivist, statistical or explicative, and in others towards participative inquiries, seeking a more immediate contact with 'experience'. But one couldn't really say it represented a 'subversion' either, since – apparently at least – the social and human sciences are holding up very well and still enjoy the same institutional legitimacy.

The moment has thus arrived to start singing the 'swansong', and probably to take note of a 'collective shipwreck', to use the expressions advanced by the sole work on the question available today, which is, truth be told, extremely mediocre.<sup>1</sup>

Our point of view will be different, for we figure that the question of identifying the exact content of the enterprise or intellectual adventure called 'structuralism' is still largely open to discussion and full of enigmas. But this question is itself indissociable from the question of knowing under what other forms and what other names the questions that gave rise to this enterprise are still posed today. We might even say it's a question of knowing under what forms and names they can resurface, as soon as it becomes clear that the good health of the 'social sciences', the unity of their field, and the compatibility of their 'methods' are in truth extremely fragile. The problem of subversion thus presents itself again, but in a more ominous atmosphere, for we are no longer in a conjuncture of

the 'triumph' of this project of scientific knowledge: in many respects we risk entering into the 'liquidation' phase, to invoke a more or less expedient term of inventory.

The first condition for seriously discussing the lessons of structuralism is to realize that no unitary position was ever constituted under this name, not even in the sense of the extension of a model. Structuralism does not designate a school, then; it designates a movement, within a given intellectual conjuncture. And what characterizes it above all, to borrow a key expression from Foucault, are its 'points of heresy'.<sup>2</sup> These appear to turn mainly on three large questions: that of the constitution of the subject, that of the theoretical break or cut [*coupure*] of knowledge, and that of the universality of human nature. But before going further, we must first say a few words concerning what constitutes, prior to these divergences, the epistemological background common to the major 'structuralist' endeavours.

### 2

In spite of what has been put forth (and has been particularly supported by the received idea according to which structuralism has its roots in the generalization and exportation throughout the human sciences of a linguistic model, with the Saussurean theory of language and its typical dichotomies – synchrony/diachrony, language/speech, signifier/signified, and so on, – constituting in this respect at once the prototype of a structuralist approach and its logical organon), I don't believe it is necessary to emphasize here before all else the primacy of the question of the sign and structures of signification. Or, rather, the importance of this question comes second, on the basis of an actively sought original solution to the methodological dilemma that was constitutive of the human sciences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that continues to accompany their institutional development.

This dilemma presents itself as a conflict between an ‘explicative’ and a ‘comprehensive’ method, a ‘nomothetic’ and an ‘idiographic’ method, or a tradition that is naturalist, deterministic, and so on, and one that is hermeneutic. Ultimately, the structuralist programme coalesces around the project of overcoming the alternative between ‘individualistic’ analytical reductionism and ‘holistic’ organicism (to use the terminology eventually imposed by Anglo-Saxon efforts).



Approaching things from this point of view allows us to resituate the structuralist project in a double context. First of all, the philosophical context (which we will return to in our conclusion): one might suggest that the unilateral choice between a reductionist and an organicist perspective is typical of ‘scientific’ methodologies, whereas major philosophical projects are always concerned instead to overcome or relativize this abstract opposition. The fact that structuralism also sought exit from this dilemma is evidence of its philosophical dimension, but this does not mean that it was purely speculative. On the contrary, structuralism always sought to implement this overcoming in an immanent way, in the development of an effective knowledge that refers to objects.

Then there is a context that belongs specifically to the human sciences: what accounts for structuralism’s specificity must be grasped here through comparison with a certain number of previous and later endeavours, all of which nevertheless belong to the same grand historical conjuncture. Let us mention the effort to synthesize sociology and history developed by the *Annales* School and brought to its maximal conceptual precision by Fernand Braudel. Let us also mention the more recent pragmatic conception of ‘sociological reasoning’ as ‘natural reasoning’ developed by Jean-Claude Passeron.<sup>3</sup>

### 3

As for Marxism’s contribution to this debate: as a discourse precisely situated at the intersection of philosophy and the social sciences (with or without reference to the ‘dialectic’), it has been and remains decisive, but according to very different orientations. The conception of historical materialism proposed by Althusser around a notion of a structural causality that was specifically based on a distancing from both ‘mechanical causality’ and ‘expressive causality’ was in fact one of the driving elements of the structuralist movement as such (much more than Lévi-Strauss’s fairly conventional reference in his early texts to the determinant function in the last instance of material infrastructures and to Marx’s theory). The American ‘heretical’ Marxist Immanuel Wallerstein has been engaged in a totally different project since the 1970s, seeking to overcome the conflicts of method within nineteenth-century social science. In his analysis of the complementary aspects of the world economy, considered as a historical concrete system whose general laws reflect regulation in a given period, he has instead sought models on the side of systems theory and the ‘New Alliance’ theorized by Prigogine.<sup>4</sup>

‘Structure’, ‘system’ (words whose specific sense, if it could even be determined, is hardly important) are terms that are essential here in order to designate the mode of thought (and knowledge) of the totality that structuralism sought beyond these dilemmas. They have in common the emphasis on the relations to the detriment of the terms, or rather the postulation that the function and identification of the terms are entirely determined by the nature of the relations. Whence the affinity of structuralism with the mode of axiomatic thought in mathematics and the deductive sciences; for it is clearly necessary for the relations to be organized in a system, or considered as a totality, in order for this ultimate determination to be really thinkable. This is what allows structuralism to go beyond the theses of the positivist and critical traditions, which are also directed against ‘substantialism’. These put the emphasis either on the relation (as in the famous Comtean definition of law) or the function (as in Cassirer’s definition of the concept), but they leave the problem of the relation between the set and the individual totally unresolved. Inversely, the structuralism that provides the means to characterize individuals as well as sets by a ‘second degree totality’ – the system of relations that assign them their respective places – must inevitably open onto a new, properly ontological dilemma, for which the two possible interpretations of the Althusserian notion of ‘support’ (*Träger*) provide a clear enough idea.

Either the support is a singular existence constituted by the action of the structure – which determines all of its features, in other words, generates it – or, on the contrary (in the manner of the Lacanian ‘Real’), the support is an undetermined limit, whose singularity by definition exceeds all logical determination. We will return in a moment to this dilemma with regard to the constitution of the subject and the ‘point of heresy’ that it establishes in the structuralist tradition. It would not be difficult to show that it is exactly parallel to the one that opposes the syntactic-semantic orientation to the pragmatic orientation in contemporary logic.

#### 4

The emphasis structuralism put on a new conception of totality, overcoming the aporias of the alternative between individual and set, corresponds to a specific conception of the correspondence between objects of knowledge and the construction of theories. No one has better isolated this conception in years than Jean-Claude Milner. Having participated in its development, he ultimately extricated himself and countered with a return to a universalist ‘Galilean’ epistemology, based on a generalized conception of scientificity as the production of literal algorithms in the tradition of Chomsky and Lacan.<sup>5</sup>

What Milner has clearly shown is that the structuralist project, which is essentially anti-reductionist, tends to give substance to an ideal of science as being immanent to the domain of relations forming its ‘object’. As such, it is just as irreducible to an application or importation of concepts from physics or biology as it is to the transcendence of the mind. For this immanence to be so, it is necessary to establish a ‘natural’ correspondence between the domain (or the field of objects: what Althusser had called the ‘continent’), the concepts whose specificity gives rise to a ‘problematic’ (or a mode of determined ‘constitution’), and ultimately the procedures of verification and demonstration. We are thus at the opposite side of the idea of a *mathesis universalis*, in what Milner calls an epistemological ‘Aristotelianism’ (and whose slogan could in fact be the prohibition on *metabasis eis allo genos*, reiterated by Husserl at the beginning of the *Logical Investigations*).

Here we find explained the structuralist movement’s propensity to pass from a formalist to a historical epistemology, centred on the question of the formation of concepts proper to each science and on the search for the inaugural ‘break’ for new domains of scientificity. That its major preoccupation has always been to trace the ‘frontiers’ of the domain of objects that correspond

to science, or to locate the ‘mode of constitution’ of the objects of knowledge that renders them accessible to the concept, is also made clear. Finally, it becomes clear why it exercised a particular appeal for researchers in different disciplines, from linguistics to anthropology to psychoanalysis, who were concerned above all to escape from both the technicism of formal ‘models’ and the humanist litanies of consciousness [*litanies humanistes de la conscience*].<sup>6</sup>

On this basis we can thus situate the main ‘points of heresy’ or dilemmas of structuralism. It ought to be clear that none among them has yielded (or could yield) a definitive decision. And thus we understand how the structuralist movement had for its ‘end’ the yielding, in the best of cases, to diverse ‘post-structuralisms’: an ‘end’ not in the sense of an exhaustion of questions, or an avowal of impotence, but of an inevitable displacement.

#### 5

The first dilemma is the one that concerns the constitution of the subject. After the somewhat simplistic debates over the opposition between the point of view of the structure and that of the subject (or over the misrecognition of the subject by the supporters [*tenants*] of the structure), which have certainly been sustained by adversaries and epigones, it is time to realize that all the major representatives of structuralism, in their



respective domains, have concentrated their efforts precisely on the question of the subject with the intention of removing this notion from its transcendental indetermination. In so doing, they make it shift from a constituent to a constituted function, or consider it as an effect.

All the structuralists in this sense consider the subject to be ‘produced’, or rather, that there exist

modes of production for the subjectivity effect. It is this common inspiration or problematic that allows us to understand, in this instance, the anthropological dimension present in all structuralist enterprises, at least if one admits that the proper object of anthropology is precisely the study of differential modes of subjectivity and forms of individual or collective (in fact, more fundamentally, transindividual) experience that correspond to them in the history of humanity.

Such a programme can seek theoretical precursors from various directions, for example in the classical theories of the passions and the imagination (Malebranche, Spinoza, Hume), especially since they underscore the dimension of misrecognition indissociable from any structure of the constitution of the subject. Or in the Marxian analysis of 'commodity fetishism', as it makes evident the forms of subjectivity (perception of the world and of the other) implicated in the very objectivity of value and market exchange.<sup>7</sup> But it so happens that French structuralism drew the formulation of its problems essentially from the set of questions bequeathed and suggested by the work of Mauss, Lévi-Strauss's presentation of which (as Claude Imbert never ceases to remind us) truly constitutes the key moment of 'crystallization' for the programme as a whole.

For the attempt to find in the very form of social relations, or their specific 'logic', the explanation for the conduct, strategies and modes of representation of oneself and others that form the secret of subjectivity effectively comes from Mauss, and more specifically *The Gift*. In this regard, Mauss completely reworked the Durkheimian legacy, moving past the juxtaposition of a naturalism of the social organism (or of the division of labour) and of a moralism or normativism of the 'constraint' society exercises over individuals. He discovered in the constitution of the symbolic body (at once symbolizing and symbolized) the very point of indistinction between the individual and the set, between individual initiative and the transindividual unconscious.<sup>8</sup> From here, the alternatives play out. They basically bear on two points. One concerns the relation between modes of subjectivation [*subjectivation*] and structures of subjection [*assujettissement*]. This 'play on words' that runs across the whole *Western* tradition has a particularly strong resonance in French, and this is perhaps what explains the fact that French structuralism wound up with it at the heart of its internal conflicts (between Lacan and Foucault, Lacan and Althusser, Althusser and Foucault: all so many ways of thinking this articulation, by privileging one term or the other).

The other point concerns the relation of subjectivation to individuation, and leads to the confrontation between a conception of the individual subject that makes of it the 'synthesis of structural determinations', interiorized in a corporeal habitus or in a determined ideological position, and a conception of a subject that makes of it the lack, the 'void' abstractly common to all structures and consequently on the underside [*en-deçà*] of determined forms of individuality, testifying to the impossibility of there being any subject that ever coincides perfectly with itself. Bourdieu is on one side here, Lacan on the other, along with all those for whom structuralism was generally an attempt to think, according to the analysis of Gilles Deleuze, the 'flaw or default [*défait*] of structures', rather than their completeness and their efficacy.<sup>9</sup> One could say that Althusser, for his part, never ceased to oscillate between the different possibilities according to essentially political criteria.



## 6

The second dilemma can be presented as an antithesis within the interpretation of the idea of the theoretical break, which is itself constitutive of the idea of the relation between the subject and the forms of knowledge from the moment that the subject is precisely no longer constituent, but must be thought rather as an 'effect'. How will its reinscription in

the field of knowledge (or 'theoretical practice'), for which it no longer constitutes the presupposed *a priori*, shielded from all contradiction by its universality and its simplicity, be effected? And how will this reinscription be compatible, not with a pure and simple relativism, but with a reworking of the ideal of universality?

I'll leave aside here the 'solution' Foucault proposed in 1966 in *The Order of Things*, regardless of its own philosophical interest (the 'disappearance' of the subject of knowledge in the period between successive 'epistemes', which resonates at least formally with a certain Heideggerian idea of the history of being, but then the resurgence of the practical subject, or of a subjective engagement precisely in the form of 'heretical choices' that internally divide each episteme). Rather than constituting a problematic for the human sciences, this solution is basically a meta-discourse.

On the other hand, we can compare the two strategies respectively signalled by the Althusserian expression of the 'epistemological break' and the Lévi-Straussian expression of the 'view from afar' (the title given to the third volume of *Structural Anthropology*). They are opposed term for term, departing from the formally common necessity for a deconstruction of evidence or a breaking of the 'hermeneutic circle' in which the subject of knowledge never faces the object except by having at its disposal a 'pre-comprehension' of its signification in advance. With the object in this case being human behaviour, or the social relation, it is important for the structuralist project to institute the conditions of a radical alterity in the place of all pre-established complicity, and yet also to transform this alterity into the very condition of conceptualization.

From the perspective of the epistemological break, this alterity is provided by the very development of the concept. It is thus essentially intellectual, even if it is later revealed to be the tributary of historical conditions that are much more material (in particular, a certain 'position' taken in the class struggle, and more generally in the conflicts between the 'dominant' and the 'dominated'). From the perspective of the view from afar, theorized and practised by Lévi-Strauss, this alterity is provided by the cultural decentring of the observer, redoubled in his 'self-consciousness', wherein it takes the form of a conflict between two orientations that are both necessary. The participation and the retreat confront one another par excellence in the interpretation of the limits between the sacred and the profane, the normal and the pathological, and the violence and the institutions that belong to each 'culture'.



## 7

To conclude, this opposition allows us to open on to a third 'point of heresy'. We can fully illustrate it with the help of contradictory tendencies found in the work of Lévi-Strauss and the uses to which they can be put.

It is obviously an error to think that structuralism did nothing other than rediscover essentialist ideological themes concerning human nature in modern terminology, as various adherents to existentialism and the dialectic have rashly accused it of doing. It does not follow, however, that structuralism has nothing in common with the questions that proceed from the 'loss' of this 'paradigm' (as Edgar Morin would say). On the contrary, the most interesting effect of its anthropological engagement is precisely that it brings about multiple theoretical possibilities in this regard, all of which concern the search for an elaboration of the concrete status of the universal as the correlate of the idea of the human race [*en tant qu'il constitue le corrélat de l'idée d'espèce humaine*].

To some extent, the origins of this interrogation are located elsewhere in one of the major 'practical', but not institutional or technocratic, questions to which we owe the development of the human sciences in the second half of the twentieth century: the question of racism and the arguments one can oppose to it after the abjection of Nazism and colonialism became clear.

Faced with this, one of the possibilities leads not so much towards the biological naturalization of universals as towards a cognitivist program; that is, an interpretation of different 'perceptions' of the human as differing learning processes inscribed in the very constitution of the brain. The other possibility, which is also at least latently present in Lévi-Strauss (in his

writings on history and those close to Devereux's, from the pathological of one civilization to another),<sup>10</sup> seeks to think the universal not so much as a power or plasticity realized in differential learning experiences, but as the system itself, constituted by the double diversity of 'cultures' and individual 'characters'.

Here we are more in the tradition of Fourier than of Helvetius, and it is not an accident that such considerations can appear particularly fruitful in a moment when we are faced with the problem of the alternative between a recrudescence of the war of the races, transmuted in exclusion, and the constitution of a new integral differentialism that can be drawn from the structuralist enterprise. This would be a differentialism that is not content to oppose historically collective sets like so many separate incommunicable 'universes' (which is basically just a resurrection of the old Humboldtian thematic), but which shows each individuality traversed, at least virtually, and constituted by the relation of all the forms of subjectivity (and their non-relation: difference or irreducible alterity). This in no way suffices to practically assemble the subjectivities or identities in global space. But this is probably one of the only ways to ground its possibility apart from pious humanist wishes and litanies of respect for the Other.

## 8

Three points of heresy, then, but, as is immediately clear, three prospects as well, for the opening and renewal of debates that have lost nothing of their actuality. The question of knowing in which 'domain' of the division of intellectual labour these debates are playing out remains to be asked. At a certain level this question is futile; it only concerns the classification of 'disciplines' in the architecture of teaching establishments and in the structures of finance and power in the CNRS. But, on the other hand, it requires the following response: all of these questions are fundamentally philosophical. And this is how I would gladly put an end to the dilemma that I proposed myself at the outset: the importance of structuralism does not come so much from its having provided a 'method' for the social sciences or what in it allows us to 'subvert' their epistemological status, as from the manner in which it has reinscribed its problems in philosophy, contributing once again to the latter's regeneration out of its other.

**Translated by Knox Peden**

The images in this piece are installation shots of Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance, 1980–1981*, at FACT (Creative Foundation for Art and Technology), Liverpool Biennial, November 2010.

## Notes

This article has its origins in a talk at the Journées d'étude of the URA 1394 for Political, Economic, and Social Philosophy, CNRS–Université de Paris X–Nanterre, 6–7 April 1995; published as 'Normes de scientificité et objet des sciences sociales', in Tony Andréani and Menahem Rosen, eds, *Structure, système, champ et théorie du sujet*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1997. It is presented here as a basis from which to think the transdisciplinary dynamics of the concept of structure.

1. François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme*, 2 vols, Editions La Découverte, Paris, 1991 and 1992; republished Librairie Garnier–Flammarion, Paris, 1995. François Dosse, *The History of Structuralism*, 2 vols, Volume 1: *The Rising Sign, 1945–1966*, and Volume 2: *The Sign Sets, 1967–present*, trans. Deborah Glassman, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997. [Balibar's reference to the 'swansong' alludes to Dosse's Baudelairean titles for the two volumes in French; the title of the second volume, *le chant du cygne*, forms a homophonic pun with the title of the first, *le champ du signe*, the field of the sign. *Trans.*]
2. Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Gallimard, Paris, 1966; *The Order of Things*, Random House, New York, 1970.
3. Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le raisonnement sociologique. L'espace non-poppérien du raisonnement naturel*, Nathan, Paris, 1991.
4. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Impenser la science sociale. Pour sortir du XIXe siècle*, PUF, Paris, 1995, translation of *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991.
5. Cf. in particular Jean-Claude Milner, *L'Amour de la langue*, Seuil, Paris, 1978; Verdier, 2009; *For the Love of Language*, trans. Ann Banfield, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1990; *L'Œuvre claire: Lacan, la science, la philosophie*, Seuil, Paris, 1995; and the text on the Saussurean conception of the sign, unfortunately difficult to find today, 'Retour à Saussure', *Lettres sur tous les sujets* no 12, April 1994, ed. Le Perroquet, now available in *Le Périphe structurale: figures et paradigmes*, 2nd edn, Verdier, Paris, 2008.
6. The question had been posed with an exceptional clarity in the major book of G.G. Granger, *Pensée formelle et sciences de l'homme*, Aubier, Paris, 1960.
7. On the anthropological dimension of Marx's analyses of 'commodity fetishism', cf. among others, Jean-Joseph Goux, *Freud, Marx, Economie et symbolique*, Seuil, Paris, 1973; *Les iconoclastes*, Seuil, Paris, 1978; and Alfonso M. Iacono, *Le fétichisme: Histoire d'un concept*, PUF Philosophies, Paris, 1992.
8. The major function of Mauss's œuvre is henceforth perfectly elucidated due to the work of Bruno Karsenti: first in his short book, *Marcel Mauss: Le fait social total*, PUF Philosophies, Paris, 1994; and then above all in his doctoral thesis (Université de Lille III, 1996): *L'Homme total: Sociologie, anthropologie et philosophie dans l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss*, PUF, Paris, 1997.
9. Gilles Deleuze, 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism?' (1972), in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1954–1974*, trans. Mike Taormina. Semiotext(e), New York, 2003, pp. 170–92.
10. Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Cosmopolitanism and Schizophrenia' (1983), in *The View from Afar*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel and Phoebe Hoss, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, pp. 177–85.

# Sex

## A transdisciplinary concept

**Stella Sandford**

What is sex? Some feminists have harboured suspicions about this form of question, given its philosophical (or ‘metaphysical’<sup>1</sup>) pedigree. But philosophy no longer has the disciplinary monopoly on it. Indeed, with regard to sex, the more interesting task today is to pose and to attempt to answer the question from within a transdisciplinary problematic. For the question requires a theoretical response capable of recognizing that it concerns a cultural and political (and therefore neither a specifically philosophical nor a merely empirical) problem. It requires an account of sex which is theoretically satisfying whilst being both adequate to and critical of everyday experience; a critical-theoretical account capable of embracing the everyday experience of sex, its lived contradictions. This article represents a first attempt to construct a transdisciplinary concept of sex to this end. It traces a line from Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* to some recent attempts to define ‘sex’ and various related but importantly different concepts, and ends by proposing an answer to the question ‘What is sex?’ that draws on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. For our transdisciplinary efforts will of necessity spring from some specific discipline(s) while not remaining confined within them, and not allowing them to remain confined within themselves (which has been something of a problem for philosophy, historically).

### **With and without gender**

Sex, *sexe*, *Geschlecht*, *sexo*, *sesso*, and so on. Do these words all refer to the same thing? Presumptions about the obviousness of the meaning of sex might suggest that they do, but the least analysis reveals that the case is otherwise. For example, does ‘sex’ translate the French ‘*sexe*’, or is it a false friend? We have reason to be cautious because of an English interloper: the concept of ‘gender’. When, in the contemporary anglophone context, we insist on the specificity of the concept of ‘sex’ we distinguish it from a range of

related but distinct concepts: ‘gender’, ‘sexuality’ and (I would add) ‘sexual difference’. Most importantly, the distinction between sex and gender, which emerged in the 1950s in the published work and clinical practice of the American psychologist Robert Stoller, was seized upon in the following decades by feminists who immediately saw the direct political advantage of a vocabulary that allowed them to distinguish between what they saw as a biological reality (the functional distinction between male and female in reproduction: sex) and a socio-cultural system or demand (normative masculinity and femininity: gender). ‘Gender’ achieved a theoretical ascendancy in anglophone feminist theory that it still holds today. In some other linguistic contexts seemingly straightforward translations of the sex/gender distinction were made; where this was not possible feminists also introduced the English ‘gender’ as a term of analysis into other languages.

In retrospect, it is possible to posit a conceptual distinction between sex and gender in the analyses of various thinkers before the distinction was marked in the technical vocabulary. So, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1790) and John Stuart Mill’s *On the Subjection of Women* (1869) both exposed the falsity of the presumption that the present state of women, deprived of education, was determined by nature; an achievement that can reasonably be seen as distinguishing between what is now called ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. Indeed they laid some of the theoretical groundwork that later allowed the distinction to be made. Similarly, anglophone feminists have tended to read the sex/gender distinction into Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe*, despite the terminology being absent. The famous claim that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’<sup>2</sup> is for many the founding claim for the analytical priority of gender over sex in second-wave feminism. I will return to Beauvoir later, to dispute this tendency. For now, the point to be emphasized is that where the originally

English-language sex/gender distinction operates, 'sex' is conceptually determined in its opposition to 'gender'.

Of course, many feminists who happen to be French have found the sex/gender distinction agreeable, and certainly it can be rendered in French. Nevertheless, the sex/gender distinction is decidedly foreign and indeed disagreeable to some of the major French feminist theorists of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. This has sometimes been an obstacle in the English-language reception of these feminist theories from France, and not only because 'gender' is an alien concept when it comes to the interpretation of, for example, the meaning of '*le féminin*' for Luce Irigaray or of '*la différence sexuelle*' in various other psychoanalytical feminisms. If the English 'sex' is conceptually determined in its opposition to 'gender', but no such equivalent conceptual opposition animates these French feminist theories, there is reason to doubt even the ostensibly more plausible conceptual equivalence between 'sex' and '*sexe*'.

This leaves us with a two-way problem in the translation between French and English, which is precisely the topic of the entry for '*Sexe*', written by Geneviève Fraisse, in the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*. '*Sexe*', Fraisse writes, is only apparently a 'transnational' concept: 'The word "sex" in the English language essentially refers to the biological and the physical; in French, however, this

word signifies "the sexual life" quite as much as "the sexed character of humanity".' For Fraisse, it seems, 'sex' and 'sexual difference' are synonymous; as are '*sexe*' and '*différence sexuelle*'. The English 'sex' and 'sexual difference' 'refer to the material reality of the human'; *la différence sexuelle* is the *presupposition* of a difference between the sexes defined in a certain way, whether biologically, as in the natural sciences, or philosophically, as in '*la pensée du féminin*', the thinking of 'the feminine'.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, for Fraisse, '*Différence sexuelle*' coexists in French with '*différence des sexes*', from which it is distinguished to the extent that the latter 'implies the empirical recognition of the sexes without that leading to any definition of content'.<sup>4</sup> '*Différence des sexes*', Fraisse writes elsewhere, is a 'philosopheme'.<sup>5</sup> To the extent that the French '*sexe*' includes '*différence des sexes*' within its meaning, as Fraisse effectively argues that it does,<sup>6</sup> it is already in some sense a theoretical concept, referring to something to be *thought* rather than a biological reality to be taken for granted. Without the philosopheme '*différence des sexes*', '*la différence sexuelle*' ('sexual difference', 'sex difference' or the English 'sex') is reduced to an empirical fact. According to Fraisse, American feminists, having only their limited (English) concept of sex, lacked any adequate linguistic tool with which to think *la différence des sexes*; they therefore 'invented' the concept of gender



to make up for this lack.<sup>7</sup> But ‘gender’ is not a translation of ‘*différence des sexes*’, which remains untranslatable into English. ‘Gender’, Fraisse writes, has become a transnational term,<sup>8</sup> but ‘*la différence des sexes*’ is still, it seems, a French speciality.

Although Fraisse sees the invention of the concept of gender as a ‘contemporary philosophical event’ that acknowledges the necessity to think ‘*la différence des sexes*’, the quickly achieved theoretical hegemony of ‘gender’ – which, it is true, for some decades almost entirely displaced any analysis of ‘sex’ in anglophone feminist theory – is regrettable to the extent that it seems to efface ‘sexe as sexuality’ (‘*le sexe comme sexualité*’),<sup>9</sup> that is, what is included in the French concept of *sexe*, according to Fraisse. (‘Gender’, she puns, is a ‘cache-sexe’. That doesn’t translate well into English either.<sup>10</sup>) The anglophone inability to think ‘*la différence des sexes*’ with a concept of gender means that ‘sexe’ is not *thought*; ‘gender’, that is, produces a philosophical deficit, ironically bolstering the old-fashioned view that ‘*la différence des sexes*’ is not be counted among the starry array of philosophical objects, such that people will say, as Fraisse recalls in 1996, ‘How extraordinary! What an idea, to want to think the “*différence des sexes*”!’<sup>11</sup> The consequences of this philosophical deficit are not just theoretical.

In the entry on ‘Gender’ in the *Vocabulaire*, written by Monique David-Ménard and Penelope Deutscher, it is argued that the Anglo-American distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender identity rules out the possibility of thinking the primarily psychoanalytical concept of ‘*sexualité*’ or ‘*la différence des sexes*’ that these authors see as holding sway in French feminist thought. ‘*Sexualité*’ or ‘*la différence des sexes*’, they claim, is neither physiological nor psychological, but fantasmatic, to do with the drives (*pulsionnelle*).<sup>12</sup> The social determinations of gender and the physiological givens of sex are just two of the materials by means of which fantasies and drives are forged.<sup>13</sup> Clearly David-Ménard and Deutscher’s ‘*différence des sexes*’ is different to Fraisse’s ‘*différence des sexes*’, but the authors make the same point for us here: the French and the Anglo-Americans do not think sex in the same way; indeed, the anglophones do not *think* sex at all.

### **Pas de Beauvoir?**

It is surprising, to say the least, that neither the entry on ‘*Sexe*’ nor that on ‘Gender’ in the *Vocabulaire* mentions Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*. (Beauvoir, in fact, does not appear in the *Vocabulaire* at all. I just mention that.) How is this to be explained? Partly, of course,

the absence is explained by the fact that Fraisse’s account of the philosopheme ‘*différence des sexes*’ is clearly the articulation of one particular position, not a general account of what is thought on the subject in French. David-Ménard and Deutscher’s psychoanalytical concept of ‘*sexualité*’ or ‘*la différence des sexes*’, which they are undoubtedly correct to contrast with a certain anglophone concept of sex, is similarly specific. Overall, the main concern of both entries is to criticize the limitations of the concept of gender with regard to a French concept of ‘*sexe*’ beyond the sex/gender distinction. Ironically, in the entry on ‘*sexe*’, this leaves us with precisely that philosophical deficit that its author ascribes to ‘gender’ – namely, a failure to *think* ‘*sexe*’, since such a thinking would have to include what anglophones call ‘sex’, too. Perhaps this is because the remit of the *Vocabulaire* extends only to *philosophical* concepts, and the English ‘sex’ does not count as such. But, first, the *Vocabulaire* is also allegedly about words; and, second, can philosophical concepts be cut off from the generalities of everyday usage? Especially when that concept is ‘sex’? It is here that the question of a transdisciplinary, rather than a *narrowly* philosophical, concept is raised.

The concept of sex is not explicitly theorized in *The Second Sex*; nor does Beauvoir construct a concept of sex as a central theoretical element of her œuvre. Nevertheless, *The Second Sex* opens the theoretical space that made this possible for her successors. Beauvoir tends to write of ‘the sexes’ (‘*les sexes*’), ‘the two sexes’ (‘*les deux sexes*’), and men and women’s relation to their ‘*sexe*’, not of sex itself, and not of ‘*la différence des sexes*’. ‘*Sexe*’ in *Le deuxième sexe* is not a theoretical construction but the site of a problem. When referring to the functional, biological concept of sex Beauvoir tends to write of the ‘the division of the sexes’ (‘*la division des sexes*’),<sup>14</sup> but she begins her main discussion of this (in the first chapter of the first volume, ‘The Givens of Biology’), with a warning: ‘it is necessary to say, from the beginning, that the very meaning of the *division* [*la section*] of species into two sexes is not clear.’<sup>15</sup> The point of this chapter of *The Second Sex* is to demonstrate that biology cannot, on its own, supply an answer to the two main questions of the book: What is a woman? And why has woman been assigned or assumed the subordinate position of the Other in relation to man? If biology could answer the first of these, woman’s being would be reduced to her being-female. ‘The fact is’, Beauvoir writes, ‘that she [woman] is a female’,<sup>16</sup> but her sex or her being-sexed is not identical with this. When she writes that ‘no woman can, without bad faith, claim to situate herself

beyond her sex' she is not referring to 'her function as a female' ('*sa fonction de femelle*').<sup>17</sup> The two sexes in *The Second Sex* are not just male and female but, more importantly, man and woman. It is sex in the sense of the sex of men and women, not of male and female, which is the topic of *The Second Sex*, and 'men' and 'women', unlike 'male' and 'female', are not biologically, but existentially defined.

Beauvoir describes the obviousness of the division of humanity into two sexes in the following way:

It is enough to go for a walk with one's eyes open to be sure that humanity is divided into two categories of individuals, whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial; perhaps they are destined to disappear. But what is certain is that, for now, they do most obviously exist.<sup>18</sup>

As this is clearly not a list of biologically determined characteristics, many anglophone readers have presumed that such passages show that Beauvoir is really talking about gender, not sex. But granted that she is not talking about 'sex' in the sense determined by the sex/gender distinction this does not mean that she is not talking about sex in another sense. Refusing the reduction of sex to biology is the beginning of the opening out of the concept of sex for thought. That there is a need to emphasize the illegitimacy of this reduction shows that, so far as Beauvoir was concerned, there was *also* a concept of sex in French thought very similar to the anglophone concept of sex determined in its opposition to gender. This takes us to the crux of the problem. In effectively refining and specifying the meaning of sex existentially, Beauvoir reminds us, precisely, that this effort of thought must pitch itself against the dominant popular concept of sex evident in the assumption, common in both lay discourse and in philosophy, that biological sex determines what it is to be a woman. ('What is a woman? "*Tota mulier in utero*: she is a womb", according to one.'<sup>19</sup>)

We may call the popular, dominant concept of sex the modern 'natural-biological' concept of sex, not to commit it to a particular disciplinary-scientific origin or ontological status but because of the presumptions that constitute it. These presumptions are that there simply *is* sex duality (the exclusive division between male and female) and that that duality is naturally determined. As such, its referent is presumed to be a natural and not a historical object, and the possibility that the concept is precisely *modern* is hidden. I contend that this concept has no purely descriptive function in relation to human being, but the presump-

tion in its use is, precisely, that it does. It has no purely descriptive function because the constitutive and exclusive duality of its terms – male and female – is empirically inadequate to the phenomena that it would allegedly encompass without remainder, meaning that its duality is in fact normative and prescriptive.<sup>20</sup> Further, the natural-biological concept of sex functions in relation to human being to refer to a natural foundation for existence, such that it offers itself as a naturalistic explanation for some aspects – sometimes even *all* aspects – of human psycho-social existence and behaviour. Thus the natural-biological concept of sex functions as something both naturally determined and naturally determining and it is effectively impossible to separate these two aspects. In allegedly describing a natural foundation for human existence, the natural-biological concept of sex prescribes a duality, the nature of which is taken to be more or less determining of aspects of that existence.



When the more sophisticated theoretical constructions of *sexualité* and *la différence des sexes* overwrite this popular conception, the palimpsest does not erase all trace of the natural-biological concept of sex; far from it. If this is not acknowledged, the concepts of sex as *sexualité* and *la différence des sexes* float free, with no critical or political purchase. This may be fine for psychoanalysis, but not for feminism. The recognition of this is the basis for another discourse on sex in French thought, the sociologically informed political determination of the concept of sex in Christine Delphy's work. Sex, for Delphy, is not a natural given but a social relation, enabling the identification and recognition of groups in a hierarchical relation of oppression and exploitation. Sex, in this sense, is a material and ideological condition for the reproduction of the means of existence in a particular social form. In common with Monique Wittig, Delphy's political concept of sex does not simply overwrite the 'English' popular natural-biological concept; rather it includes the latter as the – reified – form of appearance of

the former.<sup>21</sup> There is a direct line from Beauvoir to Delphy and Wittig in this respect. Neither Delphy nor Wittig appears in the *Vocabulaire*, either.

The persistence of the popular natural-biological concept of sex is not merely a regrettable theoretical naivety that more sophisticated theorists can simply dismiss; *this persistence must itself be thought*. In her *Sexe, genre et sexualités* Elsa Dorlin insists on this. How can we explain, Dorlin asks, the contradiction between the medical sciences' acknowledgement that 'the complex process of sexualization is irreducible to the two categories of sex' and the medical practices – notably the medical management of intersex infants – which continue to accept, and indeed support, an unambiguous 'bicategorization' as unquestioned fact?<sup>22</sup> How to explain 'the persistence of a belief and a scientific practice which contradicts the rationality of the very theory of which it claims to be the application'?<sup>23</sup> For Dorlin this contradiction amounts to a quasi-permanent scientific crisis, a crisis which remains unresolved because sexual bicategorization is necessary to ensure the reproduction of the social relation of domination that we call 'gender' (even though, at the same time, science itself has revealed that sexual bicategorization as social and historical norm, such that the social relation of 'gender' is in fact the ultimate basis for 'sex'):

If the crisis in the natural foundation of sex (male/female) is what sustains gender relations, it is first of all the effect of a contradiction between scientific theory and practice – a contradiction which is simultaneously both the effect of the crisis and its solution. The crisis is perpetuated as such. It is a scientific situation of the status quo which resolves a political problem, reifying the (political, not natural) categories of sex – bracketing, suspending the research into the natural foundation of sex, and employing a doxico-practical criterion (that is, gender) 'in the absence of anything better', 'while we wait'.<sup>24</sup>

Thus the persistence of the modern natural-biological concept of sex must be thought, and not simply dismissed, because, its theoretical desubstantialization notwithstanding, it still sustains the gender system and its compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>25</sup> Dorlin's analysis exhibits the contradiction between the two faces of sex – naturalized bicategorization and denaturalized social-historical effect – and explains *why* the contradiction is sustained in terms of an ideological function. But is it possible to construct a single concept of sex for which this contradiction would be constitutive? And one, moreover, which explained *how* the contradiction is maintained?

## 'An object in the idea'<sup>26</sup>

Any construction or philosophical determination of a concept of sex must in some way acknowledge the social reality or the effective actuality of the popular natural-biological concept of sex if it is to have any critical or political purchase. The construction of a critically adequate concept of sex is therefore the construction of a conceptual anamorphosis. In invoking anamorphoses I have in mind not Holbein's famous memento mori, but trinkets: the postcards, playing cards, bookmarks and so on that reveal one picture when turned this way, another when turned that. A single, transdisciplinary concept of sex – or at least a concept with pretensions to being such – would have to be similarly vacillant: encapsulating both a theoretically determined account of the functioning of the popular natural-biological concept *and* its criticism. The psychoanalytical concept of a fantasmatic complex, championed by David-Ménard and Deutscher, and Fraisse's philosophical concept of *la différence des sexes* do not do this precisely because of their disciplinary delimitations. I submit that this would be the case with any disciplinary concept of sex.

If there is already a path cut in the direction of a single, transdisciplinary concept of sex in feminist theory it runs from Beauvoir through Delphy and Wittig, but not much further. Judith Butler took the baton across the Atlantic but her *Gender Trouble*, brilliant though it is in many respects, effectively dismissed sex – it explained it away, rather than specifying it conceptually. (This is because, in *Gender Trouble*, Butler remained mortgaged to a presumptive natural-realist ontology, according to which sex could not be said to exist, coupled to an epistemological problematic according to which the in-itself of sex could not be known.<sup>27</sup>) But Butler, gender theorist par excellence, *did* see that the normative dimension of the popular natural-biological concept of sex was *politically* the force to be reckoned with; thus her criticism of 'sex'. In this respect, contra Fraisse, any *gender* theorist, precisely in their rejection of the popular natural-biological concept of sex and its normative dimension, thinks sex better than the psychoanalytical theorist or philosopher of *sexualité* and *la différence des sexes*, who remain aloof from it.

The task of constructing a critical concept of sex in its greatest generality requires, as we have said, a determination of the nature of the popular natural-biological concept of 'sex' which can account for its actual effects, its social existence. I suggest that we can find the means for this in Kant's philosophy.<sup>28</sup> In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant, having discussed

the *a priori* contribution to experience of the faculties of sensibility and understanding and the legitimate employment of the concepts of the understanding (limited to the realm of possible experience), famously introduced what he called the ‘ideas’ of pure reason, or ‘transcendental ideas’.

The faculty of reason, according to Kant, itself generates, *a priori*, certain concepts (that is, ideas) and principles which, according to the ‘demand of [speculative] reason ... to bring the understanding into thoroughgoing connection with itself’,<sup>29</sup> guide the use of the understanding, pointing it towards the absolute totality of the series of conditioned appearances, its unconditioned ground. The idea of ‘freedom’ is, according to Kant, an idea in this sense. The idea has no possible congruent object in experience; it does not determine any object for cognition (it has no ‘objective validity’, in Kant’s specific sense of being valid for the determination of objects in general); but it ‘serve[s] the understanding as a canon for its extended and self-consistent use’.<sup>30</sup> This is for Kant the legitimate or proper ‘regulative’ use of the ideas of pure reason.

But the ideas of reason are also misused, or misapplied, in illegitimate ‘constitutive’ uses; that is, by mistaking their subjective necessity for objective validity, giving a purported objective reality to the object of the idea. This gives rise to what Kant calls ‘dialectical’ or ‘transcendental’ illusion, which is distinguished from both error and empirical and logical illusion in being ‘natural’, unavoidable and incorrigible – ‘irremediably attached to human reason’. For even when the being-illusory of the transcendental illusion is revealed, it does not cease to deceive us.<sup>31</sup> The unavoidable tendency to understand the necessity of the ‘constant logical subject of thinking’ (my being the ‘absolute subject of all my possible judgements’) as ‘a real subject of inherence’<sup>32</sup> – that is, a substance in the ontological sense – is just such a dialectical illusion, according to Kant.

If the trick of all transcendental illusion rests in ‘the taking of a subjective condition of thinking for the cognition of an object’, its necessity lies perhaps in reason’s inability to think its idea ‘in any other way than by giving its idea an object’. And in fact, Kant writes, the dialectical illusion of the substantiality of the soul, for example, expresses a proposition (‘the soul is substance’) that is perfectly valid *so long as we keep in mind* that nothing further can be deduced or inferred from this, ‘that it signifies a substance only *in the idea* but not in reality’.<sup>33</sup> This ‘object in the idea’ – this is the crucial phrase – is really only a ‘schema for which no object is given’.<sup>34</sup>

The regulative principles of pure reason are called ‘transcendental principles’ to the extent that they *must* be presupposed for a coherent use of the understanding. For example, ‘we simply have to presuppose the systematic unity of nature as objectively valid and necessary’, according to Kant, in order to determine within the ‘manifoldness of individual things’ in nature the identity of species, genera and families.<sup>35</sup> The mistake is to suppose that this unity, which is a mere idea, is to be encountered in nature itself.



Kant’s example here of the specifications of species, genera and families pertains to the domain of what he elsewhere calls the ‘systematic description of nature’,<sup>36</sup> distinguished from ‘natural history’. But, as Robert Bernasconi has shown, the idea of reason also has a role to play in natural history, specifically – and this is of immense historical significance – in determining the concept of race.<sup>37</sup> As Bernasconi points out, the concept of race is not derived, for Kant, from nature; rather it is explicitly posited as a conceptual necessity for natural history.<sup>38</sup> For Kant, as Bernasconi explains, ‘in the present state of our knowledge the idea of race imposes itself’, as regulative idea.<sup>39</sup>

Clearly the idea of race provided an example, for Kant, of the legitimate, regulative employment of an idea of reason. Even if the legitimacy of this idea is now questioned politically, it remains true that the concept of race has no corresponding, scientifically identifiable object in experience, although the lived experience of being-raced is undeniable. Does this mean that ‘race’ imposes itself as transcendental illusion? If it does, Kant’s idea of transcendental illusion is now historicized.<sup>40</sup>

But what of the modern, natural-biological concept of sex? What grounds are there for thinking that sex might be an idea of reason and – in a sense yet to be determined – a transcendental illusion?

To recall, the presumptions internal to the modern natural-biological concept of sex are that there simply is sex duality (the exclusive division into male and

female) and that this duality is naturally determined. Further, in so far as ‘sex’ refers to a natural ground for human existence it is presumed to be something naturally determining. As the exclusive duality of its terms is empirically inadequate to the variety that it would allegedly encompass without remainder, the duality of sex is not descriptive, but prescriptive – quite literally prescriptive in the case of the intersexed infant who will be made to conform, more or less successfully, to one or other of its terms. Taken together, the constitutive presumptions and the prescriptive function of the modern natural-biological concept of sex contradict each other. As previously stated, the concept has no purely descriptive function in relation to human existence, but the presumption in its use is precisely that it does.

These two contradictory elements in the concept of sex may perhaps be understood as the difference between its uses as an abstract and as a concrete noun: abstractly, the general term for the (presumed exclusive) duality of male and female; concretely, referring to particular instances of one or other of those two terms. The equivocation between these uses – a conceptual juddering so fast as to be invisible – accomplishes the same ‘transcendental subreption’<sup>41</sup> that Kant identified in the representation of a formal regulative principle as constitutive, the result of which is hypostatization. Or, just as, in the first paralogism of pure reason, the formal, transcendental unity of apperception is taken for the ‘real subject of inherence’<sup>42</sup> (substance understood ontologically), so too the formal principle of the exclusive division into male and female (the prescriptive or, in Kant’s terminology, regulative principle) is taken for the cognition of an objectively real object (for Kant, an object given in intuition).<sup>43</sup> The ‘transcendental doctrine of the soul’, or ‘rational psychology’, is the taking of the idea of the soul for a real object and the subsequent claims to be able to infer from this idea alone the essential attributes of the soul.<sup>44</sup> In the same way, we may say, the ‘transcendental doctrine of sex’, taking the idea of sex for a real object, claims to be able to derive from the idea of sex alone the essential attributes of men and women.

Is ‘sex’, then, a transcendental illusion? Sex is not a transcendental illusion on Kant’s own definition, since this includes a reference to its ahistorical inevitability, ‘irremediably attache[d] to human reason’. Sex is *our* illusion; it was not Plato’s, for example.<sup>45</sup> But to the extent that we are also required to account for the actual effects of the concept of sex – its real existence as a structuring component of human experience –

there is, to use Kant’s word, something ‘unavoidable’ about it.<sup>46</sup> The idea of sex, like all ideas of reason according to Kant, is ‘merely a creature of reason’; but the ideas ‘nonetheless have their reality and are by no means merely figments of the brain’; ‘we will by no means regard them as superfluous and nugatory’.<sup>47</sup> Thus, we might say, sex is an objective *historical* illusion: an illusion that cannot be contrasted with reality because it *is* real to the extent that its effects are real. However, *given as object only in the idea* ‘sex’ (like the transcendental idea of the soul, for Kant) ‘leads no further’,<sup>48</sup> or its leading further is precisely the form of its ideological function.

What is the relation between this philosophical interpretation of the popular, natural-biological concept of sex as a regulative idea and the possibility of a single transdisciplinary concept of sex? For the moment, we can say this: there is already a kind of homology between them. The transdisciplinary problematic arises in the relation between conceptual generality, on the one hand, and everyday linguistic usage, experiences and practices, on the other. The objective historical illusion of sex is, I have suggested, precisely the transcendental subreption of this relation, or, in another vocabulary, the effective reification of the concept, at the highest level of its generality, empirically instantiated in almost every aspect of our lives. Avoiding the transcendental subreption is not merely a matter of theoretical vigilance; it is a political struggle at the level of everyday experience. The question of the meaning of sex is not a dispute to be settled by intellectuals or scholars; it is the lived contradiction of our sexed existence today.

## Notes

1. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1985, p. 122.
2. ‘On ne naît pas femme: on le devient’, *Le deuxième sexe*, Vol. II, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, p. 13.
3. Geneviève Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, *Vocabulaire européen de philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, under the direction of Barbara Cassin, Éditions du Seuil/Dictionnaires Le Robert, Paris, 2004, p. 1155. See also Geneviève Fraisse, *La différence des sexes*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1996, p. 45: “‘*Différence sexuelle*’ is a philosophical presupposition [un *parti pris*] peculiar to French thought, notably that of Hélène Cixous or Luce Irigaray; *différence sexuelle* is already a definition of *la différence des sexes*, the ontological or psychological affirmation of a difference which is the starting point for a philosophy of the feminine.”
4. Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, p. 1155. See also Fraisse, *La différence des sexes*, p. 46: ‘The concept of “*différence des sexes*”, such as one finds in Hegel, for example (*Encyclopaedia*), has the advantage of leaving open the questions

- apparently resolved by the preceding concepts [of *différence sexuelle* and *gender*].
5. For example, Fraisse, *La différence des sexes*, pp. 44–5.
  6. Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, p. 1156: ‘The English language has at its disposal only *sexual difference* while French can use, for nuance, *différence sexuelle*, *différence des sexes* and, indeed, *différence de sexe*.’
  7. ‘It was decided that the necessity for thinking *la différence des sexes* would be symbolized by the concept of *gender* [Il est décidé de symboliser, par le concept de *genre*, la nécessité de penser la différence des sexes]. Thus the concentration of attention on this notion of *gender* is a contemporary philosophical event.’ Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, p. 1155.
  8. Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, p. 1156.
  9. Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, p. 1155. ‘*La sexualité*’, note, is also not the same as the English ‘sexuality’.
  10. Literally, in English, something that ‘hides sex’; but also what we call in English, rather less elegantly, a ‘G-string’.
  11. Fraisse, *La différence des sexes*, p. 6.
  12. Monique David-Ménard and Penelope Deutscher, ‘Gender’, p. 497. It is symptomatic that English has no adjective with which to translate ‘*pulsionelle*’.
  13. David-Ménard and Deutscher, ‘Gender’, p. 496.
  14. For example: ‘La division des sexes est en effet un donné biologique, non un moment de l’histoire humaine.’ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, I, p. 19.
  15. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
  18. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
  19. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
  20. On the empirical inadequacy of the duality of sex categories see Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Basic Books, New York, 2000. See also Elsa Dorlin, *Sexe, genre et sexualités*, PUF, Paris, 2008, especially ‘L’Historicité du sexe’, pp. 33–54.
  21. See, for example, Christine Delphy, ‘Penser le genre: Quels problèmes?’, in Marie-Claude Hurtig et al., *Sexe et genre: de la hiérarchie entre les sexes*, Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, 1991 (‘Rethinking Sex and Gender’, trans. Diana Leonard, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1993, pp. 1–9); Monique Wittig, ‘The Category of Sex’, in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1992. On this political concept of sex see also Stella Sandford, ‘Sexmat, Revisited’, *Radical Philosophy* 145, Sept/Oct 2007.
  22. Dorlin, *Sexe, genre et sexualités*, pp. 42, 43.
  23. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
  24. ‘Si la crise du fondement naturel du sexe (mâle/femelle) permet de maintenir le rapport de genre en état, elle est d’abord l’effet d’une distorsion entre théorie et pratique scientifiques, qui est à la fois l’effet de la crise et la solution de cette dernière. La crise est maintenue comme telle. Elle est une situation scientifique de statu quo qui résout un problème politique, à savoir la réification des catégories, non pas naturelles mais politiques, de sexes: maintenir la recherche du fondement naturel du sexe en suspens, utiliser “aute de mieux” ou “en attendant” un critère doxico-pratique – le genre.’ Dorlin, *Sexe, genre et sexualités*, p. 52. On the relative stability of this crisis and its function, see also Elsa Dorlin, ‘Sexe, genre et intersexualité: la crise comme régime théorique’, *Raisons politiques* 18, May 2005, pp. 117–37.
  25. See Dorlin, *Sexe, genre et sexualités*, p. 55.
  26. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allan W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, A670/B698.
  27. For this argument, see Stella Sandford, ‘Contingent Ontologies: Sex, Gender and “Woman” in Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler’, *Radical Philosophy* 97, September/October 1999, pp. 18–29. Nevertheless, the importance of *Gender Trouble* for the philosophy of sex is hard to overestimate.
  28. The following argument is elaborated at greater length in the Coda to my *Plato and Sex*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2010.
  29. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A305/B362.
  30. *Ibid.*, A329/B285.
  31. *Ibid.*, A293–298/B249–355, A339/B397.
  32. *Ibid.*, A350. This is the first of the ‘paralogisms of pure reason’.
  33. *Ibid.*, A396, A681/B709, A351, emphasis added.
  34. *Ibid.*, A670/B698, A674/B702, emphasis added.
  35. *Ibid.*, A651–2/B679–680.
  36. Immanuel Kant, ‘On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy’, in Robert Bernasconi, ed., *Race*, Blackwell, Oxford and Malden MA, 2001, pp. 40, 39.
  37. Robert Bernasconi, ‘Who Invented the Concept of Race?’, in Bernasconi, ed., *Race*. Bernasconi’s essay on race has provided me with a model for part of the present discussion of sex.
  38. Kant, ‘On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy’, p. 40. *Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Prinzipien in der Philosophie*, Akademie Ausgabe Vol. VIII, pp. 157–84.
  39. Bernasconi, ‘Who Invented the Concept of Race?’, p. 29.
  40. Compare Michel Foucault’s conception of the ‘historical *a priori*’: ‘This *a priori* is what, in a given period, delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field, provides man’s everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognized to be true.’ Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1970, p. 158.
  41. A619/B647.
  42. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A619/B647, A350.
  43. Which is not to say that the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’, qua (self-)consciousness of the spontaneous action of the understanding, does not itself harbour a metaphysics. But that is another matter.
  44. Its substantiality, simplicity and ‘personality’, that is, its being a ‘person’, and the (problematic) ideality of external objects.
  45. See Stella Sandford, *Plato and Sex*.
  46. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A298/B354.
  47. *Ibid.*, A479/B507, A314/B371, A329/B385.
  48. *Ibid.*, A350–51: ‘one can quite well allow the proposition *The soul is substance* to be valid, if only one admits that this concept of ours leads no further, that it cannot teach us any of the usual conclusions of the rationalistic doctrine of the soul, such as, e.g., the everlasting duration of the soul through all alterations, even the human being’s death, thus that it signifies a substance only in the idea but not in reality.’

# Science

## The invisible transdisciplinarity of French culture

**Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond**

Let me start with an apology: this conference obviously is concerned mainly with philosophy, literature, the social and human sciences, much more than with those sciences that are known as exact, natural or whatever – but which could probably, more to the point, be called ‘inhuman’ and ‘asocial’. It is thus for me, as a physicist, a somewhat intimidating honour to speak in this setting. I will try to face the challenge seriously, and not just as a way of letting this assembly pay lip service to the importance of these other sciences in the social world, if not always in the intellectual one.

### **What about transdisciplinarity?**

Still, my task is not easy, for at least two reasons. First, there is nothing special about French sciences in this era of wide internationalization – although a case could be made for some specificities at the beginning of the period addressed to by this conference, namely, the immediate post-war years, when French science had accumulated a real lagging behind. However, this would be caught up in the 1950s.

Second, despite much talk about and enthusiastic perspectives on an alleged new kind of science, transdisciplinarity in the natural sciences has never been much of a real endeavour and, when practised, cannot be said to have met with overwhelming successes. Let me be content to discuss two opposite cases (not specifically French ones), both borrowed from the field of physics, which I hope to be representative of the problem. If only because, as is well-known, practitioners in the domain rather preposterously tend to think of their discipline as a universal and canonical one that, eventually, should encompass every other field of knowledge, or at least inspire it.

In the late 1940s, a few physicists, out of dissatisfaction with the theoretical difficulties of their science and/or ethical disillusion with its military applications (the nuclear weapons used over Japan), turned to

biology. Thus was born molecular biology. But the point is that, considered at face value, this did not at all turn to be a transdisciplinary field. It has become an entrenched discipline of its own. As a consequence, the old frontier between chemistry and biology has been, for all practical and theoretical purposes, replaced by two frontiers, respectively, between chemistry and molecular biology on the one hand, and between molecular biology and conventional biology on the other hand. Even though this description is admittedly somewhat excessive, the whole development can hardly be considered as a triumph of transdisciplinarity.

More recently, there has been a strong renewal of interest in the use of sophisticated physical models and mathematical methods in the field of economy, applying tools such as fractal notions, chaos theory and so on. Is it necessary, in view of the recent economic crisis, to stress that this alleged transdisciplinarity, which was supposed to bring about the ‘rigorization’ of economic theory, has not been an obvious success?

Having explained how little I can tell you, now, let me come to that little I may tell you.

### **The science wars**

Let me first recall the main events and controversies that developed in the 1990s and became known as the ‘Science Wars’. It all started with the publication of a book by the US scientists Paul R. Gross, a biologist, and Norman Levitt, a mathematician, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrel with Science*,<sup>1</sup> which consisted in a very strong attack against ‘post-modernism’ on the grounds of what they considered to be its anti-rationalist stance. They accused mainstream social scientists and philosophers of showing very little understanding of the (hard) sciences they were dealing with, and of advocating extreme forms of relativism, dismissing the specific character of scientific knowledge as such. The book was followed by a no less polemical conference organized in 1995 at the

New York Academy of Sciences by Gross, Levitt and the well-known historian of science Gerald Holton, under the strong title 'The Flight from Science and Reason'.

The counterattack came in early 1996 as a special issue of an academic journal of postmodern critical theory, *Social Text*. The authors were sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and so on, but it also featured the historian of science Dorothy Nelkin, the researcher in biotechnology Les Levidow, the biologists Ruth Hubbard and Sarah Franklin, and the mathematician Richard Levins – quite a number of 'real' scientists. They argued that Gross and Levitt's attacks expressed the loss of self-confidence of scientists and their fear of the future, due to the deep changes in the social organization of research, the merchandizing of knowledge and the decline of state support for fundamental research. Viewed in this perspective, the social scientists, non-analytical philosophers and literary critics were but convenient scapegoats. Unfortunately, *le ver était dans le fruit* (the rot had already set in), since this most interesting and articulated issue of *Social Text* concluded with the now famous article by the physicist Alan Sokal, 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity', which was but a nonsensical parody of postmodern jargon, deprived of any scientific contents; its publication was considered by Sokal to offer proof of the intellectual vacuum of the rest of the issue. Sokal exposed his successful hoax in May 1996, in the journal *Lingua Franca* (now extinct). There then followed in the Anglo-Saxon world a flurry of articles, books, conferences, which slowly subsided. I will not dwell on these exchanges since I am concerned here with the French situation. Let me only mention the important contribution by Steven Weinberg, a well-known theoretical physicist and Nobel prizewinner, who in the *New York Review of Books* of August 1996 fully endorsed Sokal's position, which was no doubt supported tacitly by the majority of natural scientists; although, to be fair, another well-known physicist, David Mermin, offered a much more balanced but much less publicized view.

### Whose 'impostures'?

In France, the debate was sparked by the publication of a book, co-authored by Alan Sokal with the Belgian physicist Jean Bricmont, with the telling title *Impostures intellectuelles*.<sup>2</sup> Now, the target was not so much science studies or postmodernism in general, or under its mainly American guises, but rather the French intelligentsia, which was indicted as the source of all

the evil. Rather than an argued essay, the book offered a *bêtisier*, a collection of allegedly foolish quotations taken from works by Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva, Irigaray, Debray and the likes, where these authors referred or alluded to various bits of scientific knowledge, either mathematical, such as the Gödel theorem, or physical, such a relativity theory. Sokal and Bricmont indulged in pointing out the careless use of scientific terms as poor metaphors, going so far as to deny the validity of employing these terms in any discourse foreign to purely technical and specialized endeavours. True, it must be acknowledged that some of the quotations pointed out by Sokal and Bricmont were rather preposterous. But many of them were short sentences taken out of context, or badly transcribed oral remarks.

Of course, the authors thus accused of intellectual impostures reacted more or less angrily. For a few weeks, the debate was at the forefront of the cultural pages in the daily and weekly press. Eventually, in 1998, a collective and thoughtful reply appeared as a special issue of the quarterly *Alliage (culture, science, technique)*, under the title *Impostures scientifiques*, echoing that of Sokal and Bricmont's book and sending back the accusation. Let me summarize the counter-arguments to those of Sokal and Bricmont by referring to my own contribution in this issue, which dealt with three main questions:

1. *Who is responsible for the misunderstandings?* Philosophers and sociologists are not alone in their sometimes questionable understanding of physical and mathematical sciences. As a matter of fact, physicists themselves have often led the way towards these abuses, as can be shown by a detailed study of the so-called 'Uncertainty Principle' and other examples taken from modern physics.
2. *Do scientists understand the humanities better than philosophers, sociologists, and so on, understand science?* The lack of philosophical and humanistic culture on the part of scientists from the 'hard' disciplines makes them prone to pass equally arrogant and poorly informed judgements on the endeavours of social and human sciences.
3. *Should not scientists be encouraged to develop a deeper and more thoughtful relationship with language?* The present socio-political conditions of science production lead scientific knowledge to a permanent state of immaturity, inhibiting its epistemological recasting and favouring a careless relation to language. Science needs to recognize the fecund ambiguities of ordinary parlance, and cannot shun metaphorical expressions.

More generally, no criticism coming from the hard sciences and addressed to the softer ones can be valid if it is not first of all an auto-critique.<sup>3</sup>

### Science and French culture

You will no doubt have recognized in these arguments, grounded in an acknowledgement of the deep importance and relevance of language, a line of thought directly related to the intellectual atmosphere of France in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly as concerns the links between linguistics, semiology, sociology and philosophy. The widespread influence of this atmosphere explains why the ‘science wars’ never really developed in France. For, coming back to the historical account of the Sokal ‘affair’ (as it was called), it is striking that Sokal and Bricmont’s book received very little support. It was publicly hailed mainly by a restricted group of ultra-rationalists writing in the review *Raison présente*, published by the ‘Union rationaliste’, and by the satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo*. Only one philosopher of science of some reputation, namely Jacques Bouveresse, took sides with Sokal and Bricmont. The popular and non-institutional scientific journals, like *La Recherche* and *Sciences et avenir*, while in general not very open to the philosophy and sociology of science, were very cautious and published mostly critical reactions to the book. Even more significant is the fact that practically no scientist, and certainly none of the most illustrious

ones, claimed positions similar to those advocated by Weinberg in the USA. True, many physicists and biologists took advantage of Sokal and Bricmont’s book to poke fun at their colleagues in philosophy and social sciences, but in a mostly private and rather childish and uneasy way.

This case study can, I think, be understood as evidence of the existence of what I would call an invisible, or latent, form of transdisciplinarity characteristic of French culture, invalidating C.P. Snow’s diagnosis of the existence of two separate cultures.<sup>4</sup> Humanities, to this day, still exert a deep, if often implicit, influence on the French scientific community. But for how long, given the globalization of contemporary techno-science? That is the question.

### Notes

1. Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrel with Science*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD, 1994.
2. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Impostures intellectuelles*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 1997.
3. Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond, ‘The Mote and the Beam: Who is Blind to Whom?’, in M. Carrier, J. Roggenhofer, G. Küppers and P. Blanchard, eds, *Knowledge and the World: Challenges beyond the Science Wars*, Springer Verlag, Berlin and Heidelberg, 2004, pp. 247–64.
4. See Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond, ‘Two Cultures or None?’, *Proceedings of the Euroscientia Conference, Science and Technology in Europe: New Insights*, Rome, November 1997.





# Networks

Andrew Barry

In an article first published in July 1968 in *New Left Review*, Perry Anderson gave an analysis of a critical weakness of British intellectual culture. His diagnosis is remarkable and surprising. One of the key problems, Anderson argued, was that Britain has failed to make any contribution to the classical sociological tradition; moreover, this failure was indicative of a wider failure to be European and to be modern. Sociology, he suggested, was one of the great achievements of the 'European bourgeoisie at the end of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'. By contrast, British intellectual culture was marked by a lack: 'why did Britain never produce either a Weber, a Durkheim, a Pareto or a Lenin, a Lukács, a Gramsci?'<sup>1</sup>

Today, while one could point out many weaknesses in British intellectual culture, few would argue that the lack of an indigenous sociological tradition is one of them. But whatever its strengths and weaknesses, something like Anderson's analysis was certainly influential. From the 1970s onwards, social theory developed rapidly in British universities. Anthony Giddens, who had published a textbook on Marx, Weber and Durkheim,<sup>2</sup> can be taken as indicative of this trend and was, for a time, a leading light. What was taken to be traditional British empiricism was rejected, and British social scientists read and reread the European sociological canon they should have been reading all along, rather than through the mediation of its American interpreters. Social theory rapidly became something of a meta-discipline, effecting a radical transformation of not only sociology but also English, in the form of the emerging interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. The political influence of social theory arguably reached its height in 1997 when Giddens himself proposed the Third Way as the project of New Labour. New Labour, in Giddens's work, became a neo-Durkheimian project of moral renewal.<sup>3</sup>

But what was the new British social theory? How did it come to relate to 'French social thought'? And why would the idea of the network come to be significant for its further transformation?

I begin with four observations. First, what came to be called social theory in Britain was largely devoid

of any specific empirical content. The superstructure of social theory was not built on a base of empirical research, although it could make use of empirical examples, but only in so far as they illustrated more general theoretical claims. In this context, Marx's interest in the reports of Her Majesty's inspectors in *Capital* could be taken as of incidental importance to his thought. Weber's concepts, such as rationalization and status, could be easily stripped of any relation to historical investigations of religion and economy, or the comparative analysis of culture. And the use of statistics by Émile Durkheim in *Suicide* was of much less importance than his methodological prescriptions, even if his use of statistics in practice did not necessarily follow the prescriptions laid down in *Rules of Sociological Method*.

The purification of theoretical analysis from empirical content was enormously powerful. It enabled social theorists to develop wide-ranging accounts of modernity and postmodernity. It established a clear hierarchy between the value of theoretical and empirical labour. It made it possible to blur the boundaries between the social sciences and philosophy in a particular way. Foucault, for example, who had insisted on the importance of an attention to detail in *Discipline and Punish*, could be read as a social theorist of subjectification and power, whose treatment of historical materials was of no particular interest. His account of discipline could be taken to sum up a whole society and then criticized by those who thought that he had failed to give any account of, for example, consumption or the media. He, along with Bourdieu and Baudrillard, was added to the canon of European social theory. French social thought, which was believed to be intrinsically more theoretical than the indigenous product, as Anderson had argued, was vital to the reinvention of British sociology as a theoretically driven enterprise.

A second observation that can be made about Anderson's essay is that, in his view, the natural sciences and the arts were not a critical part of the problem of British intellectual culture. They did not have any special political significance. After all, the natural sciences were objective, and the arts were too subjective to provide any rigorous analysis of global

society. The social and the natural sciences were clearly distinct. In effect, Anderson understood 'the social' as divorced from the domain of the material, the organic or biophysical, the non-human, the vital or the aesthetic. The development of an indigenous social theoretical tradition, in Anderson's account, would disrupt the boundaries between the various social sciences and humanities, but would leave the integrity of the borders between the natural and social sciences pretty much untouched.

Third, Anderson had surprisingly little to say about geography and anthropology in Britain, two indigenous forms of explicitly social thought. Perhaps part of the reason for Anderson's lack of interest in these disciplines was that, in so far as they focused on specific regions or peoples or cultures, they failed to address the kinds of general problems of the 'global reconstruction of social formations' that he thought to be clearly lacking in Britain. They were too focused on the study of particular territories or cultures to be of more general significance. Anderson cited the absence of a chair of sociology in both Oxford and Cambridge at the time as a sign of the weakness of British intellectual life, although both universities had already established posts in geography and anthropology in the late nineteenth century. Britain still had an imperial intellectual culture, which was clearly not suited to the development of the kind of wide-ranging account of society that had developed in France and Germany: 'suppressed in every obvious sector at home, thought of the totality was painlessly exported abroad, producing the paradox of a major anthropology where there was no such sociology. In the general vacuum thus created, literary criticism usurps ethics and insinuates a philosophy of history'.<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, Anderson had little to say about the rich history of applied social research in Britain which could not be regarded as merely administrative. If Giddens later made social theory part of the intellectual apparatus of New Labour, there was a prejudice against anything that seemed too practical or governmental, or too rooted in a particular local or national context.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose's efforts to write to the history of social research in Britain provides a necessary corrective to Anderson's prejudice, for 'social thought owes as much to the machinations of people like doctors and bureaucrats as it does to the erudite reflections of quasi-philosophers'.<sup>6</sup>

It is in this context, all too briefly sketched, that we can understand some of the significance of the idea of the network in French thought, and its translation in Britain, to which I now turn.

## The actor-network

A specific paper can be taken as a starting point. In 1981 two French sociologists, Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, published an essay that laid the basis of what later came to be called actor-network theory – an approach which has now become extraordinarily influential across the social sciences in Britain. Why has this been the case? The paper's title, with its direct attack against sociologists and a certain style of social theory, is suggestive: 'Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro-structure Reality and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So'.<sup>7</sup> For Callon and Latour, the problem for social theory, in its ambitions to be something of a transdisciplinary metadiscipline, was that it helped to create macro-structures. It did not so much analyse how the social was assembled in practice as contribute rather too rapidly, enthusiastically and uncritically to its constitution.

The origins of actor-network theory in French thought were transdisciplinary. Latour and Callon's 1981 paper cited the semiotics of Greimas, from which they took the concept of the actant.<sup>8</sup> Another source of inspiration was the philosophy of Michel Serres, whose work had been deeply influenced by information theory and thermodynamics, from which actor-network theory borrowed the concept of translation.<sup>9</sup> And they were also influenced by the Anglo-American tradition of micro-sociology and, although they were not aware of it at the time, its unacknowledged debts, via the Chicago school, to the late-nineteenth-century sociology of Gabriel Tarde.<sup>10</sup> But what was implied by the concept of the network in actor-network theory? There are three main ideas, none of which is adequately conveyed by the idea of the network in English.

First, networks are about relations. But the relations do not exist between distinct entities, such as individuals, institutions, classes and so on. Nor are networks something like structures within which individuals are located. Rather, networks are mobile sets of relations within which actors are progressively formed and transformed. Take a typical actor (actant), such as a drug molecule. A given drug molecule is not one thing. It changes its properties depending on whether it is found in a pure form in a lab, exists in a solution, is part of a tablet, mixed with water, or interacts with the body of the patient or the recreational user. You can't say that the molecule has given properties. A drug molecule is not a thing which then has relations with other things – its properties are in process. Indeed, drug companies don't make pure isolated substances. They make networked things, with multiple properties and forms.<sup>11</sup>

I use the example of the drug molecule deliberately. The notion of the actor-network brought with it a particular relation to science, which takes the form of neither critique nor celebration. While Anderson reckoned that any study of the natural sciences was irrelevant to the analysis of political culture, actor-network theorists have argued that the study of the natural sciences is of central importance for all those concerned with contemporary politics. And the question of the distinction and relation between the natural and social sciences is necessarily a political matter.<sup>12</sup>

Second, the concept of the network is about scale. Networks can, of course, exist at any scale. One can have a network between molecules, between persons or between states. Indeed, sociology, following Comte and Durkheim, had tended to imagine that social forms exist at a series of different levels or scales. At the bottom was the individual, then there were institutions, then there were national societies and economies, then there was global society. Each higher scale could be understood as the context or frame for the one below. The micro was simply part of the macro, and the global was the most fundamental scale of all. All too quickly, social theorists lost any concern with the specificity of things, whether regions, industries or materials. But as Callon and Latour saw it, the idea that there

was a hierarchy of scales was a mistake in the first place: 'too often sociologists – just like politicians or the man in the street – change their framework of analysis depending on whether they are tackling a macro-actor or a micro-actor.'<sup>13</sup> Seen in terms of an analysis of networks, this scalar order was disrupted. On the one hand, one could trace the constitution of so-called macro-actors.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, what might appear to be small objects – a drug molecule for example – could be understood as points of interference between multiple relations: economic calculations, desire, biophysical processes, moral norms and research programmes. In short, the micro was not just irreducible to the macro, it could also include an equally complex constellation of elements.

In subsequent years, what was called actor-network theory continued to develop. One could break down Latour's work, for example, into a number of stages, influenced both by movements in French thought and by Anglo-American history and sociology of science. First, there was an engagement with semiotics, manifested both in the 1981 paper and in his 1987 textbook *Science in Action*, which became the principal introduction to actor-network theory in the English-speaking world. Second, the 1993 text *We Have Never Been Modern* was strongly influenced



by Shapin and Schaffer's 1985 account of the debate between Hobbes and Boyle over the question of the relation between politics and natural philosophy in the seventeenth century and the constitution of the space of debate about matters of fact about the natural world.<sup>15</sup> Third, in the 1990s, Latour's work took an ontological turn, influenced by the philosophy of Isabelle Stengers and A.N. Whitehead. At this time, the concept of the actor-network almost disappears from view altogether, as the term 'network' had become, by then, too closely associated with notions of instantaneous electronic communication and the virtual society. Fourth, there was the discovery of the sociology of Gabriel Tarde, as a historical antecedent to actor-network theory. In English, the link between actor-network theory and Tarde's sociology is most clearly articulated in *Assembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (2005). Latour resurrects the idea of the network, but understands it not so much as an analytical concept as a sign of a kind of methodological and ethical commitment. The network theorist is attentive to the empirical complexity of relations between actors, manifested in the 'quality of the text':

the network does not designate a thing out there which would have roughly the same shape of interconnected points, much like the telephone, a freeway, a sewerage 'network'. It is nothing more than an indicator of the quality of a text about the topics at hand.<sup>16</sup>

Although *Assembling the Social* is explicitly a work of social theory, actor-network theory was not, at least initially, understood as a contribution to social theory at all in Britain. Rather it was read, much more narrowly, as a contribution to the emerging field of science studies, which, in 1981, included the sociology of scientific knowledge, associated with the Edinburgh school of Barry Barnes<sup>17</sup> and David Bloor, and the Marxist analyses of the *Radical Science Journal*. In effect, actor-network theory established itself in opposition to both these approaches, although its principal terms, 'actor' and 'network', were often misunderstood in translation. The actor was all too often equated with the individual agent, and the network with the idea of the social network. Yet it is perhaps not surprising that, at least initially, it was difficult to view actor-network theory as a form of social theory. After all, it did all the kinds of things that social theory wasn't supposed to do, at least in the account developed, in different ways, by Anderson, Giddens and others. For a start, it both problematized the boundary between the social sciences and the natural sciences and raised

the question of the significance of the natural sciences in political life.

As David Edgerton has argued, the natural sciences have been quite central to British intellectual culture, particularly through their links to war and empire. In *The Warfare State*, Edgerton is scathing in his criticism of Anderson's thesis, arguing it is complicit with scientists' own self-serving account of Britain as an anti-scientific culture, uncritically accepting C.P. Snow's account of British scientific decline.<sup>18</sup> Edgerton himself does not discuss the significance of a strand of thought in Britain that might include Whitehead and Gregory Bateson, for example, which sought to interrogate and reconfigure the relations between the natural and social sciences. In the British context, actor-network theory can be seen as a contribution to the extension and renewal of this heterodox tradition.

But another reason why it was difficult to read actor-network theory as social theory, at least initially, was because of its apparent reliance on detailed empirical case studies. The importance of case studies to actor-network theory was common enough in science studies, for good reason. For sociologists of scientific knowledge wanted to distance themselves from the overgeneralized accounts of scientific method that had been typical of the philosophy of science in the second half of the twentieth century, a field that had become increasingly decoupled from any engagement with or awareness of contemporary scientific practice. For actor-network theorists and others, science had to be understood as a set of localized practices, and the generalities that scientific practice produced were the product of local circumstances.

In the UK, a clearer engagement with actor-network theory developed in social anthropology. In Marilyn Strathern's work, in particular, the notion of the network was brought into critical dialogue with the anthropologist's interests in kinship relations. Drawing on her fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, Strathern had already recognized that relations should not be conceived as existing between persons, but could be taken as models for complex phenomena involving persons and things. Strathern had no problem with the idea of non-human actors that had been so problematic for some sociological readers of actor-network theory, although she differed from Latour about how one might rethink the question of scale and the problem of where networks 'are chopped off' through ownership.<sup>19</sup>

Here I do not want to dwell on Strathern's work in detail, but note one connection between Strathern and actor-network theory. For Strathern, and more generally in British social anthropology, fieldwork can never



be conceived of as the application of social theory: the idea of social theory as a kind of metadiscipline, which cuts across the differences between the social sciences, is a mistake. In this sense, Strathern's work is rooted in anthropological fieldwork, and is always in dialogue with the anthropological tradition. But at the same time, Strathern's approach has been continually inventive, drawing in and reworking sources – including actor-network theory – from outside of social anthropology. The practice of theorizing is not exterior to or prior to ethnography, but should be understood as an integral part of ethnographic practice. Indeed one of the challenges of reading Strathern's work is the way in which she weaves between ethnographic observations, comments on the social relations of the University, including such matters as research assessment and departmental management, and apparently theoretical claims.<sup>20</sup> From this angle of vision, the idea of a hierarchical relation between social theoretical and empirical work and between studies of particular cases and wider contexts was problematic.

So it is within social anthropology that the network initially found its disciplinary home in Britain. Con-

temporary anthropologists are used to the idea that theoretical invention comes through empirical engagement. The challenge that fieldwork poses for theory often emerges out of an attention to detail, which doesn't mean any detail is relevant. Fieldwork always generates an excess of research materials. Moreover, anthropologists have had little difficulty with the idea that it is necessary to interrogate the distinction between persons and things. Some of the same considerations apply to geography, for geographers have also become increasingly concerned with the problem of the relations between the natural and social sciences, as well as rethinking the question of the significance of the particular case, as situation or event.

### Physical sociology

In a lecture given as part of a series organized by the *British Journal of Sociology* to mark the new millennium Latour called for the formation of a physical sociology. This problem for sociology was not, as Anderson saw it, a lack of theory per se, but an on-going dialogue with the physical sciences and an

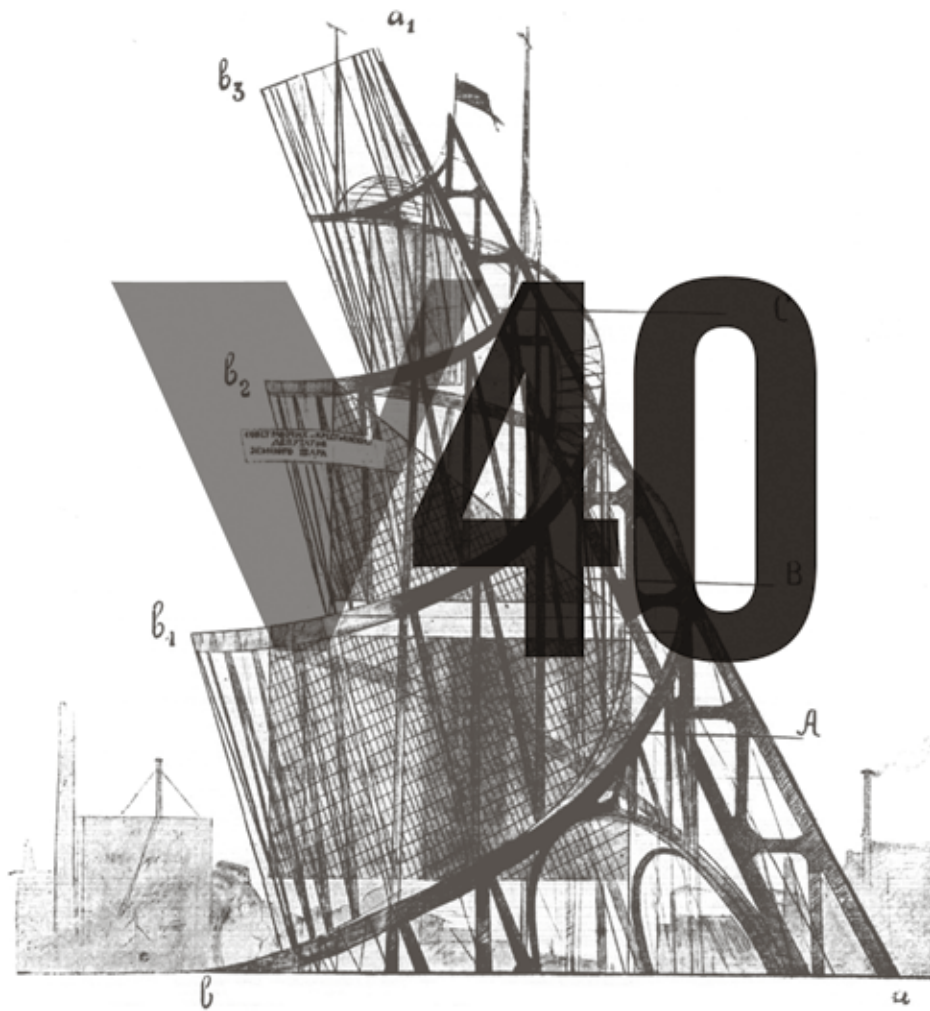
interest in the 'physical'. As Latour noted, this already existed within anthropology and geography: 'until the advent of STS [science and technology studies], each social science was confronted by its disciplinary boundaries by the issue of what a "thing" is. Only sociology had escaped such a fate. There is a physical and a human geography and a physical and a social (or cultural) anthropology.'<sup>21</sup> Actually, physical geography and anthropology are not particularly good models for the new field of physical sociology, for there is not that much dialogue between physical and social anthropologists or even between human and physical geographers. But one area where there is ongoing collaboration between human and physical geography is in relation to what might appear to be applied areas of environmental research, related to such matters as climate change and conservation. And indeed some of the most inventive work in geography has been in relation to the study of environmental policy and environmental politics.

However, in French thought the possibility of a physical sociology had already been raised in the 1890s.<sup>22</sup> In *Suicide* Durkheim had sought to demonstrate, against Tarde, that neither the study of psychology nor physical geography were at all relevant to the sociological project. For Durkheim the social was devoid of both mental and material elements. The possibility of a transdisciplinary form of social thought was precluded from the very beginning. Tarde, by contrast, had insisted on the possibility of a sociology of animals, cells and atoms as well as persons.<sup>23</sup> Part of the importance of actor-network theory in the British context has been to reopen the question of how to bring the study of materials into the social sciences.

In Britain, French social thought has all too often been understood simply as theory. Indeed, the view that French thought is of interest primarily because of its theoretical orientation has led to an industry of secondary commentary. But the purification of social theory cuts theory off both from the diverse traditions of thought that have informed it and from the empirical and experimental research which has been essential for its continuing vitality. Actor-network theory has played a part in something of a revitalization of empirical social research in Britain, and formed part of the basis for a rethinking of the empiricist tradition.<sup>24</sup> Anderson was wrong to say that Britain lacked an indigenous tradition of social thought. There were several such traditions, but their renewal was to be achieved not by the purification of social theory, but through a process which perhaps can best be described as transdisciplinary.

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# He preferred not to...

Rob Chapman, *Syd Barrett: A Very Irregular Head*, Faber & Faber, London 2010. 441 pp., £14.99 pb., 978 0 571 23854 5.

Julian Palacios, *Syd Barrett and Pink Floyd: Dark Globe*, Plexus Publishing, London 2010. 448 pp., £14.99 pb., 13 978 085965 431 9.

Michele Mari, *Rosso Floyd*, Giulio Einaudi, Turin, 2010. 273 pp., €21.00, 978 88 06 19544 1.

The death of Roger Barrett in 2006 did little to still the mythopoetic obsession that pursued him for most of his life. As 'Syd Barrett' he suspended his studies at Camberwell Art School to pursue a temporary 'job' as pop star and icon of the 1960s' underground. Five years later, still only in his mid-twenties, he walked back to his childhood home town of Cambridge leaving behind him a band – Pink Floyd – their debut album *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, two solo albums, *The Madcap Laughs* and *Barrett*, and rumours of madness, excessive drug consumption and inexplicable eccentric behaviour. His exit from fame provoked feverish speculation confirmed by the monuments to the 'crazy diamond' or victim of 'the machine' erected by his former band, speculation that persisted for decades and, now, beyond his death.

At first sight it is hard to see why his action, or actions, should have provoked such obsessive fascination. Expulsion from the music business is the norm, survival the exception. Why was Barrett remembered and not allowed, as he wished, to slip into the near oblivion that is the destiny of most 'retired' pop musicians. The proximity to what Pink Floyd became is clearly important, but along with their compulsion to keep the memory of mad Syd alive, other powerful forces were at play. The fate of Syd Barrett was almost immediately moulded into a cautionary tale of the consequences of 'permissiveness' – holding up the spectacle of a brilliant young man reduced to a blank staring freak by excessive LSD use. Mobilized by the moral majority as a victim of the concealed cynicism of the counter-culture – the 'squalid truth' of its libertarian political and cultural aspirations – Barrett became an unwilling moral exemplar.

Yet even this is not enough to explain the enduring preoccupation with Barrett's exit from the business: added to it are doubts about the character of Barrett's gesture. While not quite living in a barrel, his actions during the last months of the first Pink Floyd

seem classically cynical, recalling Bartelby's 'I would prefer not to' or even Hamlet's putting on of 'an antic disposition'. The testimony to his madness is continually haunted by claims that it was to some degree put on, consciously exaggerated or was something else altogether. If so, his resort to cynical reason in the twilight of the 1960s could account for his inspiration for the punk movement in the mid-1970s. The way Barrett made his exit and the rigour with which he then lived on, maintained his silence, pursued his art and refused any contact or compromise with his previous persona or world was worthy of Diogenes.

For the most part, writing on Barrett during his lifetime tended to chime with Pink Floyd's monumental threnody to his madness. The signal exceptions were the sober recording histories published by his producer Malcolm Jones, *The Making of 'The Madcap Laughs'* (1986), and later by David Parker, *Random Precision: Recording the Music of Syd Barrett, 1965–1974* (2001). They present a quite different picture of a young artist in difficulty having to work in unsympathetic and even hostile circumstances. Since his death the mythical approach to Barrett has reached what is hopefully a cathartic paroxysm in Alfredo Marziano and Mark Worden's *Floydspotting* (2008) and now Michele Mari's *Rosso Floyd* (2010), succeeded by the critical sobriety of the biographies by Rob Chapman and Julian Palacios.

Michele Mari's novel *Rosso Floyd* is an exercise in negative Barrettology that assembles 'fictional' testimonies to the absent one in the style of a papal dossier of miracles intended to make the case for sanctity (or its opposite). It frames a mythical drama of fraternal sacrifice through the eternal return of a struggle between the mythical beings 'pink' and 'floyd' (members of rock bands) and within the psyche itself. Blood is everywhere – Red Floyd – as is the biblical precedent of Joseph and his brothers, the dreamer apparently sacrificed by the jealous brothers, whom

he subsequently brings under his control. Taking to an extreme Pink Floyd's own mythology, Mari makes the members of the band into animals who are haunted by their sacrificed founder. The testimonies that make up the novel point to an omnipresent and omnipotent Syd, the willing, almost Christlike victim of a sacrificial logic that he himself sets in train and then remotely presides over.

It is hard to imagine a more extreme mythical version of the Barrett epic than this grandiloquent, compelling and not entirely ironic fiction of Saint Syd, nor is it necessary to since it already exists. Marziano and Worden's scary *Floydspotting* provides a guidebook for retrospectively stalking Barrett and to a lesser extent the other members of Pink Floyd. One of the most disturbing contributions to the genre of psycho-geography, not only do the authors know where Syd Barrett lived, they also know where he went to school, where he took his walks, first took drugs, ate Italian food... Organized like a guidebook, it presents photographs and descriptive historical analyses of the places associated with the Passion of Syd Barrett: Cambridge station merits an entry as the place where Syd got the train to London; the Regal cinema Cambridge where Syd missed seeing the Beatles; and even a photograph and description of Cambridge crematorium. Following the model of a guide to the ruins of the ancient world, *Floydspotting* invests Barrett and Pink Floyd's traces with a bizarre and disturbing mythological charge.

The mythical investment is firmly resisted in Rob Chapman's biography *Syd Barrett: A Very Irregular Head* and Julian Palacios's delicate and judicious *Syd Barrett and Pink Floyd: Dark Globe*. Both give an unadorned, revisionist account of what happened and are sparing with pretended explanation and moralistic comment. At the centre of their accounts is a fresh look at the counter-culture and above all Barrett's close relationship to the avant-garde in the visual arts. Both emphasize that Barrett considered himself primarily an artist, interrupting his work for an adventure in music that quickly got out of hand. Chapman's biography is rich in oral testimony to Barrett's time at Camberwell and the emergence of his painting from a matrix of abstraction, collage and destructive art. Both Chapman and Palacios point to the parallels and links between Barrett and the work of John Latham, Gustav Metzger and Yoko Ono and their shared association – direct and indirect – with the nascent institutions of the counter-culture such as the Anti-University, the Notting Hill Free School and the Destruction in Arts Symposium. These events/institutions provided the ecology for the emergence of Barrett's Pink Floyd as a multimedia

experimental outfit made up of art and architecture students combining improvised sound and lights.

Chapman and Palacios complement each other admirably at this point. While Palacios patiently situates the emergence of Barrett's Pink Floyd within a thick description of the milieu of the counter-culture, Chapman works comparatively. He compares Pink Floyd to AMM – whose improvisations were more resistant to commodification – and Barrett's guitar playing to the experiments of AMM's Keith Rowe. Barrett's gesture of withdrawal is placed alongside AMM's Lawrence Sheaff, who ceased to play music in 1967. In visual art, Barrett's work is compared with John Latham's use of words and sounds as material, engaging in satire and parody and emphasizing the multimedia art-event rather than the artwork. Chapman draws important lessons from such parallels, showing why Pink Floyd were more vulnerable to commodification than AMM and insisting that Barrett's experiments, while readily identifiable in the art world, seemed to betoken insanity in the context of the music business. While Latham's *Still and Chew/ Art and Culture in 1966–67* (an event said to have had 'a seminal impact on Syd') cost him his job at St Martin's, his sanity was never put in doubt. Barrett's song 'Have You Got it Yet?' that changed each time it was played, his concentration on a single note during a performance and his sabotage of a *Top of the Pops* performance was enough to put his sanity into question.



In their different ways, Chapman and Palacios arrive at the conclusion that Barrett continued to pursue an avant-garde project while the milieu of the counter-culture, initially sympathetic towards it, changed and edged Pink Floyd towards EMI and the world of commodified music. Adorno's 'torn halves of an integral freedom' visibly ceased to add up in the pop trajectory of Pink Floyd. The band followed the counter-culture entrepreneurs first to the clubs, then to larger events and on to their first single 'Arnold Layne'

(produced by Joe Boyd) and finally out into the corporate world of EMI. Palacios chronicles the changes in the scene and the band, showing how the criterion of commercial success imposed itself remorselessly, if at different speeds in each.

At the outset Barrett proved an effective pop musician, writing two reasonably successful hits that still sound fresh and alive. The question of whether the singles represent a compromise with the commercial values of the music industry or the rare achievement of an integral freedom where avant-garde and popular culture briefly joined is also raised by the first album, *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. The answer is probably both, with the problems of negotiating the gulf between avant-garde and pop worlds emerging initially in the studio in the shape of the mutual contempt of Barrett and the EMI enforcer/producer Norman Smith. A pop



group led by a painter with an interest in Joyce, Beckett and Berio, and for whom Rothko, De Kooning and Soutine were essential points of reference, seems an unlikely proposition and not surprisingly quickly ran into problems. Playing absurd venues in the provinces where improvisation was unwanted if not unheard of and repetitive performances of hits *de rigueur*, promotional appearances such as Top of the Pops, and pop star role-play in inane interviews proved increasingly difficult and oppressive for Barrett.

Palacios is especially sensitive to the ways in which the repetitive routine of 'the job' wore Barrett down, leading to fatigue, sleep deprivation and a growing air of despair. The gestures such as refusing to mime on *Top of the Pops* – Lennon also let his guitar hang loose

at this venue – and occasionally preferring not to play or write new hit singles can be understood less as signs of drug-induced madness than a growing reluctance to compromise coupled with the inability to see a way out. Palacios cites Barrett explicitly discussing Hamlet's 'antic disposition' with Anthony Stern (one of Chapman's key sources) as the context for a claim in a 1967 interview with journalist Tom Lopez that 'if I wanted to say nothing or if I want to act in an extraordinary way, then I feel that that too is justified'. For his colleagues in the band, such behaviour was interpreted as inexplicable betrayal or sabotage and attributed to drugs and mental illness. Understandably, they could not see how these actions might at the limit be interpreted as a refusal or even an attempt to reintroduce the experimental or the auto-destructive values of the avant-garde back into the band. Their hostility and dependence – they were waiting for the third single – further served to exhaust Barrett.

Chapman's experience as a *Mojo* journalist serves him well in searching out bootleg recordings of concerts and television appearances and producing a revisionist account of Barrett's legendary 'breakdown'. He shows how Barrett's performances through 1967 were uneven, but far from the consistent disaster remembered by some of the band. This is corroborated by Palacios's careful reconstruction of the pressures of 1967, especially the American tour during the autumn of that year. He shows how Barrett first stopped playing after a large electric shock onstage. In subsequent concerts Barrett detuned his guitar, blew on a tin whistle and disrupted the band's routine: 'very Dada', 'very modern' commented Waters and Mason. While not playing down the contribution of drugs, Palacios emphasizes the effect of changes in Barrett's habits, dope as a constant, LSD in the early years and, while in the USA, STP, the substitute for the recently outlawed LSD, with all 'the glory and the doom sealed up in it' in the words of its inventor. During the late 1960s Barrett moved to the prescription sedative Mandrax and in the early 1970s, with the most physically devastating effects, to alcohol. Yet it seems that these added a horrific complication to an already impossible predicament rather than being its sole or even main cause.

Chapman and Palacios give full accounts of Barrett's departure from Pink Floyd and sensitive analyses of the making of the two solo albums. They manage to liberate Barrett's work from the crude symptomatology that identifies the material and style of the songs as the direct expression of mental breakdown. Barrett's songs of disassociation, ambivalence and paranoia do

not have to be immediately identified as symptoms of their author's mental distress, but are explorations of these states in the medium of pop music. The biographers show how they were produced under conditions of great stress, giving just credit to the solidarity of some of Pink Floyd. They also show a Barrett who was beginning to withdraw from the world of pop music and drawing a conscious line under his career as a musician. Once again the two biographies complement each other, with Palacios offering consistently illuminating analyses of Barrett's musicianship and Chapman his use of collage and his debts to Shakespeare, Shelley and Clare.

Even when released from the burden of psychopathology, the songs on *The Madcap Laughs* and *Barrett* testify to damaged life. It is striking how often becalmed 'life' itself is, as addressed in the refrain of the sublime 'Dominoes' – 'Life that comes of no harm / You and I and dominoes / A day goes by'. The biographers tread carefully when the private Roger Barrett leaves the public Syd behind him. The testimony of family and neighbours emphasizes the dignity of Barrett's new life, consistent with the old in making art and destroying it. In a sense the very rigour with which Barrett separated himself from most of his past – learning the ability to become indifferent to it – and the rare exceptions that he permitted to this rule or habit in its turn runs the risk of becoming interpretable and even exemplary. Yet Chapman and Palacios avoid this. Both end on the note of difference: the one with humour, the other with hope.

**Howard Caygill**

## OMG

Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2004 and 2010. 266 pp., £32.99 hb., £17.99 pb., 978 0 253 34248 5 hb., 978 0 253 22189 6 pb.

The new (and long awaited) paperback edition of Martin Heidegger's *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, first published in hardback in 2004, supplies a translation of Volume 60 of the *Gesamtausgabe* (1995). It contains transcriptions and notes pertaining to the 1920–21 lecture courses 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion' and 'Augustine and Neo-Platonism'. Most of this material has been available second-hand to an

English readership since the publication of Theodore Kisiel's *The Genesis of Heidegger's 'Being and Time'* (University of California Press, 1993), who produced a seventy-page summary of the courses based on lecture notes taken by students attending.

Heidegger had been working closely with Edmund Husserl at Freiburg since the end of the war and had been nominated by the latter as the 'phenomenologist of religion' from among his junior researchers. The course announced for the winter semester of 1920/21 promised to introduce some of the findings of this work to students. These lectures, two hours per week, were not prepared for publication by Heidegger and the archives have not yielded a full manuscript. The editors of *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Matthias Jung, Thomas Regehly and Claudius Strube) build the account of the course, like Kisiel, by organizing material from five extant student transcripts, relying primarily on that in Oskar Becker's hand, whilst also providing an appendix of notes and sketches prepared by Heidegger. When comparing the two accounts, there are crucial differences in collation and structure. Kisiel has far more sensitivity to the presentational form through which the material is developed and has ordered the course more coherently, preserving its thrust. Not least, he appreciates the way in which Heidegger summarizes the previous hour at the end of each lecture and espies when and how questions are set up and answered, whereas *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* introduces thematic headings which occlude this; particularly disappointing is the failure of what ought to be a scholarly resource to date the individual lectures.

As underscored by the editors of the German text, the first part of this course is important for its introduction. In particular, it is the only place where Heidegger presents in concerted fashion the notion of 'formal indication' (*formale Anzeige*), which is indebted to Husserl's notion of 'categorical intuition' from the sixth *Logical Investigation* and Emil Lask's work. In the course of the exposition, the distinction between generalization and formalization as two distinct types of 'universalization' is explained, before the subtractive power of the second is positioned as a hermeneutic method to suspend the tendency (most developed in the sciences) to contextualize and synthesize contents into a prefigured domain of understanding (*Verstehen*). Were *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* the only source for this material, one would sympathize with those students who complained to the dean and forced the interruption of the course at the end of November. The technical difficulties are exacerbated

by a translation which does little to help the reader: at a crucial point in the technical explication, both *Generalisierung* and *Verallgemeinerung* are translated as ‘generalizing’ so that the intended distinction between the two is lost. Second, the specificities of *Objekt* (object) and *Gegenstand* are obscured by translating the latter as ‘thing’. Kisiel chooses ‘counterstance’, which has its own drawbacks; better would be something like ‘feature’ to underscore that it covers whatever can be made to ‘stand out’ as attention moves. ‘Thing’ is acceptable in its generic sense, but given the legacy of German Idealism in phenomenology it has to be contrasted with *Ding*, which is also translated as ‘thing’ by Fritsch and Gosetti-Ferencei. It becomes impossible to follow the movements in argument when both appear in the same paragraph without indicating which ‘thing’, *Gegenstand* or *Ding*, is meant. (For more on this technical distinction in phenomenology, see the very useful article by Dominique Pradelle in *RP* 139).

As Kisiel presents convincingly, Heidegger hastily switched to an improvised lecture on Paul’s ‘Letter to the Galatians’ and moved on to Thessalonians after the Christmas break. Heidegger’s umbrage is recorded by Fritz Neumann: ‘I shall lecture to you on history and, without further consideration of approaches and method, take a concrete and particular phenomenon as my point of departure. This I do under the assumption that you will misunderstand the entire procedure from beginning to end.’ Kisiel is correct to emphasize that the lecture ‘dissipates in loose ends’. That said, the discussion of Paul’s writing post-conversion illustrates the manner in which formalization is used to uncover a distinct form of religious life and experience. Resolutely opposed to traditional theoretical approaches, phenomenology attends to moments of radical origin lost to explication and conceptual systematization. Instead, the attention to modes of prayer and devotion allows for a distinct phenomenological correlate to be reconstructed as the ‘genuine situation’. This entails the destruction of the history of religion and especially the proofs for the existence of God (‘not originally Christian’).

In the following semester, summer 1921, Heidegger offered a course on ‘Augustine and Neo-Platonism’, which concentrated on Book X of *The Confessions* to such an extent that very little mention of Plotinus is made. *The Phenomenology of Life* transcribes nineteen handwritten sheets of Heidegger’s plus two appendices – some notes and sketches on related material found in a bundle marked for a later lecture course on Augustine’s philosophy of time (Book XI) and some supplementary selections from Becker. It is here that the

edition suffers from the absence of any index or means of cross-referencing for the three sets of materials provided. It is a fragmentary read. In contrast, Kisiel’s account of this is thorough and coherent, though it is based only on the Becker transcript. It supports his contention that a straightforward account of the *course delivered* is superior to the undifferentiated inclusion of Heidegger’s own notes thematically connected but added at various times.

*The Phenomenology of Life* provides an additional third section entitled the ‘Philosophical Foundations of Medieval Mysticism’. The material included here is presented as the basis for a course that was announced for the winter of 1919/20 but cancelled. Kisiel disputes this claim, stating that this is an incomplete selection taken from working notes begun much earlier: only a third of it relates to mysticism (see his overview essay on recent Heidegger translations in *Studia Phenomenologica* V, 2005). Less sophisticated than the material in the other parts, they reflect Heidegger’s earlier proximity to Catholicism – where the Church preserves what is true – and his shift towards a Protestantism which goes back to religious experience. Religious life would then be the renewal of original experience; the perpetual endeavour ‘to lead oneself back to that first inner unity’ – religiosity rather than the articulated concepts of theological dogma. The inclusion of this third part does, however, allow the reader to see the preceding trajectory before Heidegger moves on towards the ‘atheism of philosophy’ – a legacy that can still be found in the footnotes of *Being and Time*. The complex interrelation of phenomenology, religion and philosophy is underscored in correspondence from 1927 with Rudolf Bultmann where Heidegger offers that book as the ‘ontological founding of Christian theology as science’. The ambiguity of this line can be filled out by considering the content of these earlier lecture courses in relation to the central concerns of Dasein’s factual life (care and falling) and historicity.

In a footnote to *Being and Time* (H199, n.vii), Heidegger writes: ‘The way in which “care” is viewed in the foregoing existential analytic of Dasein is one which has grown upon the author in connection with his attempts to interpret Augustinian (i.e. Helleno-Christian) anthropology with regard to the foundational principles reached in the ontology of Aristotle.’ In 1920/21, this philosophical anthropology is positioned against the rival neo-Kantian approaches, which aim at a typology or classification of ‘spiritual’ or cultural forms – crucially, again, understanding (*Verstehen*) is consistently criticized, since it can only *comprehend* the history and multiplicity of life and not grasp what

prompts that effort and activity. For Heidegger, this problem underlies all contemporary philosophies of history, including Marburg neo-Kantianism, Spengler's *Decline of the West* and *Lebensphilosophie*. They all generate derivative notions of history, which are only concerned to adapt it to the 'cultural needs of the present'. According to Heidegger, the phenomenological approach, reading historicity from out of the sense-structures of living Dasein, will 'blow up' the traditional system of concepts and demand entirely new categories.

Paul and Luther had already been read as new forms of experience, arising *only* out of Christian life experience. It is from lectures on Augustine that a materialist basis for care can be seen – how desire structures and ties us to life. (Here Heidegger used the term *Bekümmern*, rather than *Being and Time*'s

which prefigures the later analysis of the 'They'. The resulting 'troubles', *molestia*, describe the 'disquiet of the heart' (*inquietum cor nostrum*). In contrast to pagan asceticism, which would 'cut off and throw away' this as reified characteristic and non-essential burden, for Heidegger *molestia* is an 'opportunity for seriousness': 'the radical possibility of falling, but at the same time the "opportunity" to win itself'.

This 'factual analytic' presents the originary form of Christianity directed to the *vitam beatam*, happy, or, better, 'blessed' life marked by the 'joy of truth', whose goal is rest, repose and quietude. Seeking to overcome the existential condition generates a temporality based on Philippians 3:13: 'forgetting what lies behind and straining to what lies ahead'. Not only distinct, Heidegger suggests that this is fundamental – Paul's primitive Christian experience *is* Dasein's most radical



*Sorge*). Every basic experience involves forms of enjoyment (delight) and, in describing the manner in which it seeks to repeat and strengthen the associated satisfactions, Augustine develops a precursor to Spinoza's conatus: 'life seeks more life' in Heidegger's gloss on this 'snare of desire'. Since these desires and wills pull in different directions, addicted, greedy life is marked by dissipation, distension and temptation of which the dominant forms are: desire of the flesh (lust), desire of the eyes (curiosity), and secular ambition. Each offers a distinct way for Dasein to lose itself. For example, the ambition to be loved, feared and recognized leads to domination by others in a way

possibility. In the notion of the *parousia* – awaiting the return of the already appeared Messiah – Heidegger claims Christianity lives temporality *as such*. Paul cannot count the days to this future return: he is witness to a distinct form of waiting for that which comes 'like a thief in the night'. While the strength of this claim may be qualified by *Being and Time*, the manner in which the Christian waits, 'beleaguered and steadfast' for what can arrive at any moment, again anticipates the resolution with which authentic Dasein comports towards death.

The cursory treatment of these themes, to which Heidegger does not return, should indicate that these

lecture courses provide an important perspective on *Being and Time*. Unfortunately, it is difficult to recommend the purchase of *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* itself, which suffers from the faults of the *Gesamtausgabe* as well as introducing its own. It contains little by way of the standard scholarly apparatus – there are no indices and the idiosyncratic glossary is barely more than a page. Given that the lectures include Greek and Latin as well as German this is unsatisfactory. Moreover, the translation is cumbersome with serious lapses in syntax, whilst decisions on technical terms are not consistent with current scholarship and mean that, as noted above, important sections are very difficult to follow. A few examples of infelicities: *Verweltlichung* becomes ‘worldization’ rather than ‘secularization’; reference is made to Luther’s 1518 Heidelberg *Dissertation*, rather than *Disputation*; a reference to Luther’s ‘dogmatic fundament’ offers an occasion for humour where none was probably intended. Despite these limitations, specialists will probably be keen to pick up a copy for the primary materials alone. For non-specialists, your fifteen pounds would be better spent towards a copy of Kisiel’s excellent book.

**Andrew McGettigan**

## Properly modern

Bruce C. Clarke and Mark B.N. Hansen, eds, *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays in Second-Order Systems Theory*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2009. 296 pp., £66.00 hb., £16.99 pb., 978 0 82234 581 7 hb., 978 0 8 2234 600 5 pb.

Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain: Sketches of Another Future*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2010. 536 pp., £35.50 hb., 978 0 22666 789 8.

In these two new books, both Andrew Pickering and Bruce Clarke and Mark Hansen argue for the need to retrieve an idea of ‘cybernetics’ as the basis for an approach best able to understand and critique the nature of modern systems, whilst simultaneously insisting that the legacies of its earlier twentieth-century forms need to be thoroughly thought through, and critiqued, today. Clarke and Hansen open the collection *Emergence and Embodiment* by stating that ‘the imperative to theorize operational closure has, arguably, never been more urgent’, in so far as it is only through such theorization that ‘cultural theory can rescue agency – albeit agency

of a far more complex variety than that of traditional humanism – from being overrun by the technoscientific processes that are everywhere transforming the material world in which we live today’. Although he is a very different kind of book, Andrew Pickering presents a new historical and critical re-theorization of British cybernetics, suggesting that one may find here a distinctive and radical outline for a new ‘nomadic science’, a ‘forward-looking search ... [for] a vision not of a world characterized by graspable causes, but rather of one in which reality is always “in the making”’. There are of course important political reasons not to want to give up on the prospect of assigning causes to conditions – those of capitalism for instance – and Pickering does emphasize that this is not a replacement exercise. But, as he writes, what he is concerned with is describing how ‘cybernetics drew back the veil the modern sciences cast over the performative aspects of the world, including our own being’.

One of the major problems with writing about cybernetics today is that the word has been used to refer to a series of related but very different concepts and objects. Indeed, Clarke and Hansen note that ‘a definitive history of cybernetics would be an impossible project’ given the radically transdisciplinary conditions of its emergence and historical unfolding. The term, in its more historically specific disciplinary sense, refers to several stages (‘first’ and ‘second order’) of a distinct ‘trans-discipline’, most famously associated with the Macy Conferences (1946–51), which included figures such as Norbert Weiner, Warren McCulloch, John von Neumann, Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead and Heinz von Foerster. The latter three in particular were associated with developing what became known as second-order cybernetics – a self-reflexive critique of cybernetics that theorized the role of the observer, and attempted to problematize the tendency towards instrumentality and control. Clarke and Hansen usefully propose the term ‘neocybernetics’ to refer to the contemporary continuation of this project, incorporating within it associated theorists such as Francisco Varela, Niklas Luhmann and Evan Thompson.

The Macy conferences focused on understanding through abstraction the organizational or cognitive component of material systems, whether physical, chemical, biological, social or psychological. This research, it has frequently been observed, developed in part out of programmes funded by the military during the Second World War, and various combinations of state and industry funded research in the immediate postwar period. Later research did not have such patronage, and indeed became characterized, in its more radical

forms at least, as increasingly anti-institutional and counter-cultural. Pickering argues that the marginality of neocybernetics comes from its very practice and the properly trans-departmental behaviour of its protagonists. Yes, it has strong connections with psychiatry, but as anti-psychiatry. Yes, it had a shared knowledge base with systems theory, but as a critique of command and control. Yes, as a science of interconnections it is profoundly ecological, but it recognizes no distinction between natural, human and social systems.

Exactly what the term 'cybernetics' refers to is itself, then, a site of struggle and contestation, and in many recent commentaries its meaning has been rendered unhelpfully ambiguous, associated with specific critical-theoretical positions, and specific historical legacies, that also have powerful and often wildly misleading 'pop-cultural' representations. So, for example, whilst, for Donna Haraway, the concept of the cybernetic organism, or cyborg, describes a move beyond any simplistic appeal to the natural, and is a reminder that to be human is always already extended and post-human, for Katherine Hayles, writing at the height of the 1990s' imaginary of an immense virtual reality *separate* from material reality, cybernetics came to be described as a dangerous immaterialization, a privileging of information over substance, the pattern over the matter. If the urgency of Hayles's 'immaterial' commentary, at least, can seem increasingly dated, there are nonetheless other critiques of cybernetics that do need to be considered here. Notable would be Bill Nichols's 'The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems' (1988), Peter Galison's 'The Ontology of the Enemy' (1994), and perhaps most energetically Tiqqun's 'The Cybernetic Hypothesis' (2001). All of these are based around the proposition that cybernetics describes a shift in the social form of technology, from tools as extensions of the human to a condition where non-human networks of tool-systems instrumentalize the human. Often in these accounts, cybernetics, and systems theory in general, signify little more than what Cary Wolfe describes (in Clarke and Hansen) as a 'grim technocratic functionalism'.

In the Tiqqun commentary, in particular, cybernetics is used as a catch-all description of broader developments in postwar capitalism – specifically post-Fordism and associated increasing networks of communication, control and capital – and perhaps even signifies the very essence of the absolute subsumption of life by capital. In a not untypical passage they state that

cybernetics is not, as we are supposed to believe, a separate sphere of the production of information and communication, a virtual space superimposed on the

real world. No, it is, rather, an autonomous world of apparatuses so blended with the capitalist project that it has become a political project, a gigantic 'abstract machine' made of binary machines run by the Empire, a new form of political sovereignty, which must be called an abstract machine that has made itself into a global war machine.

Clearly, what Tiqqun are referring to as 'cybernetics' is the broader intensification of the systematic and militarized character of capital itself that we have seen over the course of the twentieth century, and would not seem to be in any way reducible to the postwar trans-disciplinary research project that is the subject of Clarke and Hansen's and Pickering's books. At the same time, arguably, much of what Tiqqun term 'the cybernetic hypothesis' has clear historical roots in all kinds of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century moments, and in the emergent forms of global networked capitalism itself – in its fundamental condition *as a relation and a process* – and the ever more complex and recursive forms through which it is mediated, as it does with cybernetics proper. Whilst, then, to be sure, many new technologies and organizational forms of post-Fordist capitalism can be traced directly to the innovations and spin-offs of cybernetic research, the thesis that 'cybernetics' is in any simple way *responsible* for contemporary capitalism seems implausible (and even a confused form of idealism). Capitalism itself has always been radically systemic, and has consistently shaped the dominant forms of systems theory to its own ends, even whilst the knowledge and legacies of historical cybernetics have fed back and intensified these very processes of capital.

Equally, however, it is important to note that the 'philosophical' project of cybernetics has, through various routes, fed into many 'radical' forms of contemporary critical theory and social science. As Clarke and Hansen note, a range of

recent thinkers such as Michel Serres, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers, have deployed neocybernetic discourse extensively and transformatively. Neocybernetic discourse is central to current historical, interpretive, and theoretical investigations using concepts such as narrative, medium, assemblage, information, noise, network, and communication to remap the terrain of knowledge with reference to the operational boundaries of systems and their environments.

Several chapters in the Clarke and Hansen collection touch upon these influences. (Cary Wolfe's essay even extends this list to consider Jacques Derrida's engagement with neocybernetic thinking.) Latour's

work in particular tends to be seen as speaking to (or from) a neocybernetic move beyond the nature/culture dualism that for Latour characterizes modernity, a point that both Hansen and Pickering make much of. For Latour, famously, modernity has played out a dualism of people and things, which is now institutionalized as the natural and social sciences. Pickering notes that ‘our key institutions for the production and transmission of knowledge thus stage for us a dualist ontology: they teach us how to think of the world that way, and also provide us with the resources for



acting as if the world were that way.’ In contrast to established disciplinary knowledge, for Pickering ‘cybernetics inevitably appears odd and nonmodern ... [it] stages a nonmodern ontology in which people and things are not so different after all.’ Of course, one might equally suggest that the dualisms that have characterized post-Enlightenment bourgeois thought are actually ‘not yet modern’, whereas cybernetics proposes and performs a properly modern new form of knowledge.

Pickering, who started as a quantum physicist, has written about the social forms of scientific practice, and the effect of these forms upon the knowledge claims made by science. He argues that the modern ideology of science is fundamentally representational, and claims that the experimental work of British cybernetics (in which he includes Bateson, R.D. Laing, Stafford Beer, Gordon Pask, Ross Ashby and Christopher Alexander) stages a non-representational approach, a ‘reciprocal coupling of people and things’ and ‘an understanding of science as a mode of performative engagement with the world’. Clarke and Hansen open their collection of essays on a similar theme, developing a remark made by Varela some three decades ago (yet still, they suggest, accurate) that ‘the operational

closure of cognizing systems’ was the key idea capable of initiating new research programmes able to challenge ‘our current models about cognition ... [which] are severely dominated by the notion that information is represented from an out-there into an in-here, processed, and an output produced’. A consideration of operational closure thus characterizes many of the chapters in *Emergence and Embodiment*, including a useful interview with Heinz von Foerster, a memoir piece by Varela, and a previously unpublished translation of a Luhmann lecture series. For Maturana and Varela, operational closure describes the way that any autopoietic system (for them a biological organism) produces itself through producing a boundary: a specific metabolic interface, through which it ‘perceives’, ‘cognizes’ and ‘brings forth’ a world. Whilst autopoiesis, strictly defined, only refers to living entities (indeed defines them), in informational systems it can describe social and mental ‘autopoiesis’ too, even if, as Luhmann emphasized, these systems have their own specificities. Neocybernetic discourse offers different modes of conceptual engagement with such operationally closed systems. Bateson’s proto-rhizomatic approach focused on the ways in which the boundaries of a system or ‘self’ are

simultaneous produced and breached through metabolic and informational loops that extend far out into the environment: an internalization of external relations. Maturana and Varela by distinction focused on the ways that autopoietic or self-producing systems are informationally closed to non-metabolic flows.

In addition to the question of operational closure, or theorizing how self-organizing systems relate to their environment, there are several other themes that appear throughout *Emergence and Embodiment*. George Spencer Brown’s idiosyncratic work *Laws of Form* – so influential on the generation of cyberneticians and ecologists around Bateson and Varela in the 1970s – appears in several pieces. His proposal for a new calculus based upon an innovative approach to thinking whole–part relations (as a distinction that re-enters itself) remains just as appealing to thinkers today as then (Michael Schilz and Edgar Landgraf in particular). Elsewhere, the importance and range of Varela’s thinking in particular stands out in several essays. Evan Thompson usefully unpacks the relationship between autopoiesis and neurophenomenology in his later writings, whilst John Protevi considers the politics of Varela’s work and life. Neocybernetic thought, Clarke and Hansen suggest, is ultimately

characterized precisely by ‘its new questioning and eventual overcoming of classical substance/form distinctions’ which it ‘de-ontologizes’ and supersedes with a ‘distinction between form and *medium*’. This is the reasonable response to the charges levelled by Hayles and others regarding the way that early cybernetics *did* prioritize form over substance, pattern over matter, and in so doing reinscribed familiar gendered dualisms (‘pater’ over ‘mater’). However, even these charges are surely somewhat overstated; think of Wiener’s early description of the human as ‘whirlpools in a river of ever-flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves.’ Whilst Wiener is valorizing pattern over matter, it is still nonetheless a fairly embodied and sensuous metaphor. If, as Clarke and Hansen note, ‘cybernetic methodologies draw out the virtuality correlated with actuality’, neocybernetics can be understood as a re-materialization, describing the recursive passage of organizational pattern through an embodied system, and paying ‘a new level of attention to the media of its forms or, more concretely, to the environments and embodiments of systems’.

Heinz von Foerster noted that in the early 1960s ‘my American friends came running to me with the delight and amazement of having made a great discovery: “I am living in an Environment!”’ The turn towards a conception of the environment is the correlate of operational closure, but also, of course, mirrored broader developments in ecological thinking and its cultural dissemination during this period. The engagement of neocybernetics with the environment was developed in particular through Bateson’s ecological work, and von Foerster and Stafford Beer’s work on biological computing. But it also took on some other perhaps more surprising forms, in particular through an engagement with architecture and design, producing a body of work that Pickering spends much time with. Operating at the margins of schools and practice, a radical experimental cybernetic agenda was pursued in this context, drawing together Gordon Pask with experimental architectural theorists such as Cedric Price and John Frazer, which continues to this day. Pickering suggests that this research stages ‘an experimental approach to design as a process of revealing rather than enframing’ and ‘points us to a notion of design in the thick of things, plunged into a lively world that we cannot control and that will always surprise us’.

The disjunction between Tiqqun’s ‘cybernetic hypothesis’ and what Pickering, Clarke and Hansen are proposing might seem staggering. Do we just need new terms to define more precisely what are actually

very different tendencies and projects, theories and phenomena? Or do we need to grasp *dialectically* the necessary relationship between them? Certainly, when Tiqqun state that ‘attacking the cybernetic hypothesis ... doesn’t mean just critiquing it, and counterposing a concurrent vision of the social world; it means experimenting alongside it, actuating other protocols, redesigning them from scratch and enjoying them’, it seems that they could be describing the radical cybernetic critique of enframing systems that Pickering himself describes, but while arguing for a transformation of terms. One of the more useful aspects of the Tiqqun text, in this respect, is its identification of the complex relations between socialist and Marxist traditions and what they call the cybernetic hypothesis. A critical re-evaluation of such moments of conjunction – for example Stafford Beer’s metabolic planning system developed in Allende’s Chile – would certainly appear important today. An exchange between neocybernetics and neo-Marxism might be more productive still. For Clarke and Hansen,

the human has always been a *for-itself* complexity imbricated with the environment ... In stark contrast to any naive conception of autonomy as the absolute self-sufficiency of a substantial subject, this concept demarcates the paradoxical reality that environmental entanglement correlates with organismic (or systemic) self-regulation. Thus a system is open to its environment in proportion to the complexity of its enclosure.

They go on to note that ‘this equation remains in force even – and indeed must remain in force especially – in the face of today’s massive incursions of technics into the domain of the living’. In fact there is much in neocybernetic considerations of the ways in which technical objects and systems mediate our relations with the world that can bring something to (and take much from) Marxian conceptions of labour, metabolism and technology – especially perhaps in the emerging area of urban political ecology. The conceptions of metabolism and circulation deployed in, for example, Erik Swyngedouw’s recent work are borrowed from nineteenth-century systems biology. Yet it is not just a case of bringing conceptual metaphors up to date by reference the latest systems biology – Swyngedouw is in any case establishing a strong continuity with Marx’s use of these concepts. It is, above all, the fact that neocybernetics has theorized a conception of abstract *metabolism in general*, in its conception of operational closure, that may well be most valuable for radical thinkers today.

**Jon Goodbun**

# Of worlds flickering and unstable

Richard Menary, ed., *The Extended Mind*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2010. 424 pp., £29.95 pb., 978 0 26201 403 8.

In 1541, in his famous letter of dedication ('To the Most Holy Lord, Pope Paul III') and preface to *De Revolutionibus Orbium Caelestium*, the man usually regarded as the father of modern astronomy, Nicolaus Copernicus, issues three implicit but unmistakable concessions that are surprising to find in a text widely regarded as ushering in a revolution responsible for overturning 1,600 hundred years of cosmological 'truths'. They are also, I want to suggest, analogical to the development, today, of an ontology inaugurated by the philosophical thesis of what – following an increasingly influential 1998 essay by Andy Clark and David Chalmers – has been called 'the extended mind' (EM).

Copernicus's first concession is historical. Copernicus explains that while *De Revolutionibus* makes a definitive astronomical contribution, in certain respects there's nothing particularly revolutionary about its thesis: as Copernicus readily concedes, not only is he *not* the first astronomer to suggest that the Earth is in motion, but providing proof for such a thesis isn't really even his principal objective. Copernicus made no apology for exclusively directing his work to a small group of mathematically adept professional astronomers (as he put it: 'Mathematics are for mathematicians') who were, like himself, working on the problem of the planets; as a result, his assertion that the Earth was in motion was little more than a peripheral conclusion he had inadvertently backed into as a necessary analytical step towards resolving such a problem.

Relatedly, then, is a second, analytical concession. Not only is the extended impact of the reality of the Earth's motion of secondary importance to Copernicus; in point of fact, most of the popularly celebrated 'revolutionary' features of Copernicanism – the disrepute of epicycles, the relegation of the sun to the status of a commonplace star, the simple and parsimonious computations of planetary positions, the profound cosmological consequences of an integrated, infinite universe, and so on – are not actually present in *De Revolutionibus*, but rather are features of the 'Copernican' system that are left for others to derive. Moreover, to the degree that *De Revolutionibus* is actually revolutionary in and of itself – as opposed to *revolution-inducing* – by modelling his text on

Ptolemy's *Almagest*, reproducing the error of celestial spheres, and decentering the Earth from its place only to re-centre the sun as the centre of the *universe*, Copernicus had already – to paraphrase Jean Laplanche – built in his own Ptolemaic counter-revolution from the very beginning.

The third concession is methodological. Copernicus is decrying to his 'Holiness' the failure of 'the mathematicians' to 'determin[e] the motions of [the Sun and the Moon] and... the other five planets', when he then suggests that – although impossible to observe empirically from our terrestrial vantage point – 'by *assuming* some motion of the Earth, sounder explanations than theirs for the revolution of the celestial spheres might so be discovered'. Copernicus argues that the error in earlier Ptolemaic attempts to resolve the problem of the planets was their simple reliance on the evidence of sensible intuitions, which is why he claims that only by suspending our common (but incorrect) intuition that the Earth is fixed and without motion in space, by severing our domestic sense perception from an approach to understanding reality, and therein by adopting a realist *but* non-empirical method of scientific analysis, can we speculate on the revolution of heavenly spheres such as to disclose their law-like regularity.

Now, the ontological heritage shared by Copernican cosmology and the nascent theory of cognition forwarded by active externalism is perhaps nowhere clearer than in *The Extended Mind*, a collection of essays whose various authors' general theoretical concerns are inspired by Clark and Chalmers's original 1998 essay of the same title (republished and included as the first chapter in the book). The basic position set forth in the essay is the following: while the standard reply to the question of 'where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?' invites two distinct philosophical approaches to cognition – (1) the internalist argument that what is outside the body is also outside the mind, and (2) the passive externalist argument that meaning out in the world carries over to a meaning in the head – there is yet a third approach to the problem, which is, namely, 'an *active externalism*, based on the active role of the environment in driving cognitive processes'. Clark and Chalmers thus argue that while the brain, of course, performs crucial aspects of cognition, we cannot legitimately draw an exclusive

skin/skull boundary for cognition, simply because the human organism is always already involved in the manipulation *of* and manipulation *by* external media (whether linguistic resources or physical objects), and therefore in a very real sense is always thinking with and through the world. Hence their advancement of two concepts, the first of which is a kind of guiding principle, the second an epistemological assertion of fact.

First is *the parity principle*, according to which, 'If, as we confront some task, a part of the world functions as a process which, were it done in the head, we would have no hesitation in recognizing as part of the cognitive process, then that part of the world is (so we claim) part of the cognitive process.' Second, which is really a derivative thesis of EM, is a conception of 'the human organism [a]s linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction, creating a *coupled system* that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right'. Clark and Chalmers argue that once we grasp the formative role of our contingent and portable environment in constraining and fostering the evolution and development of cognition, 'we see that extended cognition is a core cognitive process, not an add-on extra'.

That this applies to cognitive processing is clear enough. However, Clark and Chalmers propose to take this a step further by contending that systemic coupling applies to all mental states (whether conscious or not) – such as beliefs, experiences, desires, emotions and so on – and that 'All the components in the system play an active causal role, and they jointly govern behaviour in the same sort of way that cognition usually does. If we remove the external component the system's behavioural competence will drop, just as if we removed part of its brain.' To elaborate neatly the parity principle and systemic coupling as a so-called 'normal' instance of belief embedded in memory, concomitant with the mind's extension into the world, Clark and Chalmers invoke the thought experiment of 'Inga and Otto': A friend tells Inga that there is an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, which Inga decides to go see. After thinking for a moment, and then recalling (from memory) that the Museum is on 53rd Street, Inga proceeds to walk to 53rd Street. Presumably, Inga believes that the Museum is on 53rd Street prior to retrieving from memory the location of the Museum, for although it was not an *occurrent* belief, the information in the belief was nonetheless sitting somewhere, simply waiting to be accessed by Inga. Now consider Otto, who suffers from a mild case of Alzheimer's disease, and, like so many who do, greatly relies on environmental information to

help him structure his life. Otto keeps a notebook of information that he carries around, and when learning new information, carefully records it therein for later retrieval – which is to say that Otto's notebook is coupled to his person such that it plays the same role Inga's biological memory plays for her. Otto too decides to go to the Museum upon hearing of the exhibition; he consults his notebook, which tells him that the Museum is on 53rd Street. And, like Inga, Otto then proceeds to walk to 53rd Street.

The point here is not only that in relevant respects the cases of Inga and Otto are analogous (i.e. Inga's biological memory and Otto's notebook both function as the retrieval of a belief), but, more importantly, the case of Otto serves as a mere particular example of the manner in which the human organism is constantly coupling with the external environment by extending its mind out into the world to perform crucial cognitive functions. Whether counting on one's fingers, or with a ruler or calculator, brainstorming with others around a table by 'throwing out' ideas, manipulating physical and computational artefacts (whether as children fitting objects into like-shaped sockets, or rotating computer-generated geometric images, as in the game of Tetris), or simply performing mental activity through words and symbols: in all of these cases, the external, portable and contingent features of our environment are coupled to the human organism in a manner that effectively usurps the internalist's skin/skull boundary definition of cognition. And this fact does ontologically matter. As Clark and Chalmers rightly argue, decentring cognition and other mental states from the brain and body 'is not merely making a terminological decision; it makes a significant difference to the methodology of scientific investigation. In effect, explanatory methods that might once have been thought appropriate only for the analysis of "inner" processes [must now be] adapted for the study of the outer' as well.

This brings us to three quasi-Copernican concessions implicit in the various essays in *The Extended Mind*, the first of which is historical. While Andy Clark ('Memento's Revenge: The Extended Mind, Extended') and Robert A. Wilson ('Meaning Making and the Mind of the Externalist'), among others in the book, clearly view EM's proposition of the decentred mind as making an important scientific contribution, in 1998 Clark and Chalmers had already conceded that in certain respects there was nothing particularly revolutionary about its original thesis: the reason for this is that not only is Clark and Chalmers's *not* the first attempt in the broader science of the subject to

break with an internalist conception of the mind by decentring mental states from the biological brain (Clark and Chalmers had readily listed ‘a growing body of research’ that points to EM; and indeed, the entire tradition of psychoanalysis is premised on the exocentricity of nonbiological mental states), but providing proof for such a thesis wasn’t even their principal objective. Anyone who has read Clark and Chalmers will know that with the exception of some preliminary and passing mention of portability, contingency, extended desire, and the like, the text is clearly (and understandably) directed to cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind who were, like C&C, working with the problem of individual cognition. As a result, the truly radical assertion of the mind’s contingent decentring (rather than simply the mind’s extension into and causal coupling with the world) is little more than a mere peripheral conclusion they had inadvertently backed into as a necessary analytical step towards resolving such a problem. Richard Menary (‘Cognitive Integration and the Extended Mind’) and several other contributors in *The Extended Mind* make this point by distinguishing first-wave EM, which in certain respects is more conservatively concerned with the parity and causal coupling between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ resources, from second-wave EM, which emphasizes complementarity and cognitive integration as a hybrid process, whereby cognition is constituted by manipulation of and by environmental vehicles.

Related, then, is a second, analytical concession. Despite the ostensibly radical impact of decentring the mind from its skin/skull-boundary for a number of disciplinary approaches to cognition (e.g. cognitive science, philosophy of mind), historically marked by their *common intuition* that consciousness is an exclusively intrinsic process that only ever takes place within such a boundary, and despite an obvious improvement over the latter’s strict quasi-Ptolemaic ontology – whereby the brain is the engine of cognition, cognition the centre of the mind, and the mind qua brain the centre of the cognitive world – it seems that Clark and Chalmers are charged with the task of not merely warding off attacks from the more traditional adherents to internalism (such as those versions forwarded by Fred Adams and Ken Aizawa in ‘Defending the Bounds of Cognition’, and Robert D. Rupert in ‘Representation in Extended Cognitive Systems’), but, like Copernicus himself, had perhaps already inadvertently built in their own hidden Ptolemaic counter-revolution from the beginning. Don Ross and James Ladyman (‘The Alleged Coupling-Constitution Fallacy and the Mature Sciences’), for instance, object

to the surreptitious metaphysics infusing the language of a certain Clark and Chalmers-inspired version of EM, itself a relic of what they call (relying on the work of George Lakoff) ‘the implicit doctrine of containment’, whereby the world is conceived of as a kind of container of fixed, finite objects that alter their location and properties over time. In this respect, both internalism and first-wave EM are symptomatic of what Ross and Ladyman label ‘the metaphysics of domestication’; and, as they put it, ‘our view is straightforwardly opposed to any thesis that minds are, as a matter of fact, partly located outside people’s heads. We don’t think that there is any such matter of fact, as a special case of there being no fact about where minds are located at all.’ Of course, by implication, many of the contributors to *The Extended Mind* share Ross and Ladyman’s critique that an analytical problem with first-wave EM is its Ptolemaic relics, which is to say that – by virtue of emphasizing the *extension* of the mind (notice here: a surreptitious presupposition that the mind is *initially* intracranial) ‘out’ into the world, and therein requiring a factual, functional parity between an ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ world for causal coupling to occur – it sought to depict an ontologically radically decentred (Copernican) and infinite subjectivity, in which the whole empirical ruse of internal–external boundary breaks down, in egocentric, finite, fixed, Ptolemaic terms.

The third concession, then, is methodological. John Sutton (‘Exograms and Interdisciplinarity: History, the Extended Mind, and the Civilizing Process’), for instance, demonstrates what a further commitment to the inaugural spirit of EM’s Copernican revolution might look like, by elaborating the principle of complementarity and the manner by which otherwise disparate biological and non-biological resources become integrated into extraordinarily complex, socially distributed cognitive systems. Indeed, its methodological impact for our traditional, egocentric conception of the mind – which is a standard premiss from the inaugural (Cartesian) moment of modern philosophy all the way through contemporary (and so-called ‘cutting edge’) economic behaviouralism – is difficult to overstate. What are the true ontological consequences of suspending (what internalists, such as Adams and Aizawa, and Rupert, defer to as) our common, sensible intuitions that the mark of the cognitive is exclusive to nonderived intrinsic content, when developing a scientific approach to understanding the conditions of possibility for the reality of our mental states? Sutton alludes to a preliminary answer: ‘Seeing the brain as a leaky associative engine, its contents flickering and

unstable rather than mirroring the world in full, forces attention to our reliance on external representations in the technological and cultural wild.'

And so here we arrive at one of the extended, fascinating ontological consequences of adopting such a methodology. If, as Clark and Chalmers argue in their original essay, 'external coupling is part of the truly basic package of cognitive resources that we bring to bear on the world', and if systemic coupling is a particular instance of the more general matter of cognitive integration, the unreliable portability of such integration presents to us an image of our cognitive world that is infinite *but* flickering and unstable. That is to say, if an integrated system is both the definition of the cognitive *and* provides the conditions of possibility for cognition, as such, and yet if such integrated systems are not contained, insulated, fixed and stable,

but rather portable, contingent, (at times) unreliable and infinite, then Otto surely isn't the only one horrified at the prospect of deintegration. Herein lies the truly fascinating ontology to be derived from EM: it reveals the world of the subject as a special form of outer darkness, filled with potentially portable but often unstable nonbiological vehicles, not only subject to incessant manipulation, but wholly manipulative in-themselves. Can it be that the originally analytic disciplines like cognitive science and the philosophy of mind – with their seemingly incessant search for law-like regularity – now speak to us of a world of the subject that is flickering and unstable? And if so, is not the true mark of the cognitive a sort of perpetual anxiety, as the subject stands in the face of the contingency of the infinite?

**Benjamin James Lozano**

## Martian poet

Tim Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2010. x + 163 pp., £29.95 hb., 978 0 674 04920 8.

In what he calls (with some nod or wink, one supposes, to originary delay) a 'prequel' to his earlier work of eco-criticism, *Ecology without Nature*, Tim Morton here ventures further into the domain of 'dark ecology'. Still very much present are key themes of the earlier work: the dismissal of the concept of Nature as a misleading ideology and the film noir version of environmental thinking. But as the title of the new work indicates, we are now also invited to acknowledge the all-pervasive shadow cast by what he calls 'the ecological thought'. In contrast to 'environmental rhetoric', which Morton rejects (although without providing any examples of it) as altogether too 'sunny, straightforward, ableist, holistic, hearty and "healthy"', the 'ecological thought' is 'intrinsically dark, mysterious, and open, like an empty city square at dusk, a half-open door, or an unresolved chord'. We are also told that the ecological thought is a 'virus' that infects all other areas of thinking, and that it has to do (along with much else) with: love, loss, despair, compassion, depression, psychosis, amazement, wonder, openmindedness, doubt, confusion, scepticism, space, time, delight, beauty, ugliness, disgust, irony, pain, ideology, critique, self, society, consciousness, awareness, coexistence, art, philosophy, literature, music, culture, science, gender, sexuality, factories, architecture, economics, you, me, and the interconnection of all beings.

It is, then, a 'Big' and very embracing thought, and one whose thinking is presented as a condition of salvation or redemption. But I have to confess that coming upon this kind of condensed account of it at an early stage in Morton's book was for me not propitious, indeed put me rather too much in mind – fittingly, perhaps, for a 'dark' ecology – of one of those long nights in which all cows are grey. The mist descended and I was left groping around for conceptual guidance. Some of the more particular discourses that go into the making of Morton's thought about the 'ecological thought' do, however, eventually take form, beginning with the argument that we must do ecology without 'Nature'. I have a lot of sympathy with this claim, particularly when construed as an invitation always to be alert to our ideological constructions and conceptual mediations. Morton is right to rubbish simplistic endorsements of a nature viewed as either 'cute' and 'cozy' or as something 'wild', wholly pure and separate from us. He is also right to note the historic role of the idea in shoring up oppressive and hierarchical social arrangements. However, these are not very novel criticisms. And he himself discriminates too little. He does not, for example, discuss the formal and logical reliance of his own argument on *some* concept of the 'natural' in contradistinction to those of the 'artificial', the 'cultural' and the 'human' that he employs quite

happily throughout his book. Nor does he address the normative tensions in ridding his version of ecology of any idea of nature while continuing to invoke such terms as 'alienation' or 'pollution' or 'authenticity', and while moving regularly into elegiac mode about the fate of the earth and 'our' (specifically human?) responsibilities for it. Nor does he appear to want to recognize 'nature' conceived as the physical and biological powers and processes presupposed in any 'interconnection' of organisms. In his discussion of Kim Stanley Robinson's trilogy about 'terraforming' Mars, we are told that there is no Nature on Mars, nothing pre-given, everything in the way of water, atmosphere and plant life has to be 'artificially' created by the 'terraformers'. But this kind of talk completely overlooks both the 'nature' that is 'pre-given' in the very existence of Mars in the first place, as it does the natural provisioning instantiated in air, water and photosynthesis whether introduced by us onto Mars or not.

But it is not only that Morton is resistant to pursuing the implications of his own rhetoric into these conceptual regions. He also targets a straw version of environmental thinking that is belied by the actual sophistication, complexity and diversity of contemporary eco-discourse. Morton tells us that he won't be doing any 'close green reading' in his book, and one can approve his reluctance to get bogged down in academic citation. But given how thin his text is on examples of the errors he so confidently dismisses in others, some readers will wonder about his own status as a guide. They may also question his conjurings of mythical constituencies to suit the axe he wants to grind: who, for example, are these people who associate Wordsworth with 'green Wellington boots, muddy Volvos, and quaint nooks of mythical Olde England'? Who are the 'we' who want ecology 'to be about location, location, location'; or who think of 'interconnection' as 'warm fuzziness'?

A further curiosity is Morton's passion for the Google Earth and Apollo optics on our blue and fragile planet. Very keen though he is to steer us away from any Cartesian thinking of 'Nature' as an object from which we ourselves are removed, Morton favours the bird's eye view on the 'totality' that you can only get from a distant and separated perch in space. And it is because Milton provides this 'immense viewpoint', he tells us in one of his less felicitous poetic references, that he wants to use him 'to kick off the discussion'. In the same context he recommends us to Buddhism and the mind-blowing extraterrestrial insights of Tibetan cosmology. But the ethnocentric presumption

of Yankee power to push other cultures around is itself fairly stunning when we find him alighting on the thought that 'should we wish to send astronauts to Mars, we could do worse than train Tibetans and other indigenous peoples for the ride. They would only have to learn to push a few buttons.'

In line with a dominant tendency of American environmentalism, Morton is inclined to identify ecological sanctity with sorting out our attitudes to other living creatures – and learning to love the 'inhuman' in all its more repellent and 'evil' aspects. The main focus, in other words, is not on the ravages of turbo-capitalism and high-speed shopping-mall culture (although these are occasionally noted as culprits in passing), but on getting us to appreciate the ongoing evolution and interaction between all biotic beings, however offensive we may find them. In this context, he introduces the idea of the 'strange stranger' (a development of Derrida's *arrivant*) to replace that of 'animals' with its difficult connotations. Drawing on Levinas to mediate Darwin, he tells us that we are all entangled in the web of intrinsically strange life forms – a web of 'strange strangers' who become stranger the more we know about their interconnection with us. Though sketched rather than developed, the idea prompts some of the more thought-provoking and sustained passages of the book, where Morton reads Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and some of the Wordsworth ballads as reflecting the poetic intimacy with 'strange stranger' thinking that he sees as intrinsic to the 'ecological thought'. Here, too, however, one misses any real discussion of the now varied and substantial body of eco-critical commentary on the English Romantic poets.

Equally, there is too little discussion of how the recognition of 'strange strangers' and their interconnection is supposed to bear on the resolution of ecological crisis. There are aspects of Morton's argument where he appears to distance himself from any posthumanist dissolution of human distinction and accountability. But for the most part he sounds very posthumanist in his emphasis on the unexceptional or nugatory qualities of human beings; in his readiness to consider AI and robots as part of the 'mesh'; and his defence of other animals as having previously excluded 'human' capacities, notably those of language and aesthetic response. Sentient beings, he tells us, may well be machines, and vice-versa. AI could have personhood, humans might be nonpersons. And despite all his emphasis on the need for the 'ecological thought', Morton suggests that consciousness should be downgraded, and considered as a quite lowly activity. The imagination

is probably not unique to us either. Marx is just wrong to distinguish between ‘the worst architect and the best of bees’. Sweeping and highly contentious as these claims are, none of them receives more than a very cursory discussion.

Problematic, too, is the general invitation to endorse socio-biological naturalism when it comes to thinking about our current condition and how to move beyond it. Ecology and its ‘crises’ are frequently talked of as if they were simply manifestations of the evolutionary web of life within which all creatures are equally meshed, and humanity is but one of the species caught up in the tangle. This is not to say that there is no political advice, although that given seems inconsistent and often rather peculiar. We are warned off recycling for fear of fending off the immensity of ecological crisis. On the other hand, recycling can, it seems, illuminate ‘the mysterious curvature of social space–time’ marked by the bend in the tube beneath the toilet bowl, by showing us where our shit goes... Elsewhere, we are told that ‘things will get worse before they get better, if at all’ and that ‘we must create frameworks for dealing with a catastrophe that, from the evidence of the hysterical announcements of its imminent arrival, *has already occurred*’. But we are also briskly advised that the real job of saving the planet belongs to ‘sound science and progressive social policies’. And out of the melancholy comes quite a lot of confident, not very ironic, and ‘ableist’ advice to the effect that we shall cope. Indeed, Morton tells us, ‘everything is ultimately workable’, and ‘the ecological society to come will be much more pleasurable, far more sociable, and ever so much more reasonable than we can imagine.’ What could be more jolly than that?

**Kate Soper**



## Weightwatchers

Hervé Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, trans. John Howe, Verso, London and New York, 2010. 188 pp., £14.99 hb., 978 1 84467 310 0.

Hervé Juvin, economist and president of Eurogroup Institute, a management consultancy firm, has written a strange, urgent essay that tells us, in no uncertain terms, that Europe has ‘just invented a new body’ and that we are living through ‘the first civilization of well-being’. The recent cuts might lead us to question the second proposition, but the first might bear some thinking about. We are by now used to the idea, filtered down through Foucault, Agamben, Hardt and Negri (via, it should be said, a neglect of second-wave feminist theorizing about the body), that we live in a thoroughly biopoliticized age, in which the body is a criss-crossed site of regulation, legality, potentiality and conditioning. Yet Juvin’s claim has little to do with this particular set of topics, and far more to do with a kind of paradoxical future-oriented nostalgia for the bodies of ages past in an age when life-expectancy (at least for some) has massively increased, and where these new bodies can be tweaked, cut and medicated into some sort of quasi-permanent youth. What, in other words, are the social and political ramifications of a life lived without the imminent fear of death?

Live slow, die old: Juvin attempts to explore what this biological-environmental trend might mean, when, for example, relationships begun in one’s twenties might conceivably last (or not last) for the next eighty years, when there are, apparently, ‘many, men and women both, who do not know what to do with the dragging days of a life that has forgotten how to end’. The earlier, omnipresent, reminders of finitude, both rep-

resentational and literal – war, serious illness, heavy labour – have, for many, vanished, and humanity (at least the richer part of it) has become seemingly invincible: 90 per cent of the French aged 60–80 apparently say that they are in good health and enjoy life, ‘at an age when most of their recent ancestors were dead’. And why shouldn’t they? Recent cultural critiques have seen the baby boomers held in contempt for their apparently selfish behaviour and their

squandering of revolutionary ideas (free education!) in the name of greedily hoarding all the houses, even if it means their own children will labour under massive debt and an inability to live anywhere. But this kind of generational bad-mouthing misses the structural shifts in postwar economics, preferring to blame those fortunate to live in a period of relative prosperity for doing the obvious and taking advantage of it. (It's not yet clear, however, what the libidinal investment in taking it away from everyone who comes after might be – an attempt to preserve a feeling of historical specialness?) Nevertheless it is this generation, the one that 'conquered co-education, that made May '68 and voted Doors, Beach Boys or Deep Purple' that has become 'the vector for the advent of the body'; that is, the 'last' generation (the role of the USA in this generational thesis is strangely opaque; Juvin barely discusses it).

Juvin's book, if not then a biopolitical treatise, exactly, does share certain themes with a peculiarly French approach (Levinas, Baudrillard, Debray) to the problem of historical nihilism, and exhibits signs of a by now familiar worry about the absence of religion, or at least of religious structure:

Religion maintained a vertical connection between God and humans ... and it regulated the horizontal links between humans. The market came to substitute its universal and accountable reason as rule, language and mode of exchange. It also linked what had never been linked before, connected those who had never thought that they had anything in common. That link is broken. The market still deals with the horizontal link but now it is the body that connects with other things, that establishes frontiers and reinvents separateness; because it is complete, and so long as it is complete, it becomes the face of God, of otherness, of the same and the other.

This brave new world of the body, then, is mildly horrifying. 'My skin says everything about me; it is me' says Juvin, sounding like a slogan for face cream. If this dermal theory of value is proved true, however, and if this is the only truth, then this measure will indeed cancel out all other virtues: we have entered into, thinks Juvin, the final stage 'of the dictatorship of desire as a driving force behind the market and growth'. (It is hard on occasion not to think of Juvin's argument as a kind of theoretical systematization of the novels of Michel Houellebecq.) Yet there is a peculiarly Marxisant moralizing at play here too: family ties have been broken in favour of the sexualized couple, and work too has removed men and women from any 'natural' link to reproduction (as if there ever were one). The body becomes the only real 'asset', our

'whole inheritance', a kind of 'physical capital' against a backdrop of a casual indifference to big ideas or the meaning of our own mortality. Juvin addresses the gendered dimension of this centralizing of the body to some small extent (women are prey to being understood in terms of their bodily presentation somewhat more than men are, admits Juvin), but there is little discussion around the complex web of arguments that make up the 'feminization of labour' debate, for example, or of the asymmetrical way in which women are massively more likely to be mistreated precisely when they are regarded as little more than the sum of their parts. The essay begins, on this point, with a paean to the peasants of rural Brittany who were 'worn out, broken by hard labour, at sixty. Let's not even mention the women: after the age of thirty or thirty-five, what remained to them of what we call womanhood?'

Juvin's essay walks a tightrope with the pits of reactionary moralism on one side and misplaced nostalgia on the other. The centre cannot hold. We cannot really be wistful for an age of brutalizing work (as if that work had disappeared anyway, as opposed to moved beyond the borders of eternal-life Europe), nor can we constantly tell people off for attempting to make the most of themselves in a world in which we are told to be constantly networking, selling ourselves, and making the most of it. Juvin hints that the New Man (and Woman) of Communism has found its unnatural home in the endless creation of new desires under capitalism, is created and sustained by these desires, yet the political analysis is too often gestural, albeit tantalisingly so.

*The Coming of the Body* is ultimately the attempt to argue that the body has become the site, the last site, of all value:

After gods, after revolutions, after financial markets, the body is becoming our truth system. It alone endures, it alone remains. In it we place all our hopes, from it we expect a reality which elsewhere is leaking away. It has become the centre of all powers, the object of all expectations, even those of salvation. We are those strange, hitherto unknown humans: the people of the body.

No more history, no more personalities, no more religion. Postmodernism has finally found its home, and it turned out not to reside in architecture, art or cinema, but in the strangely taut skin of a plastic-surgery patient. (The work of David Cronenberg, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* and the television series *Nip/Tuck* might thus be better examples of Juvin's fleshy end of history than a Calvino novel or a Philip Johnson building.)

The futurological dimensions of Juvin's argument are perhaps the strongest, even if it is here that the more dubious elements of his argument fall out. Freedom, democracy and the state are all 'at risk' from this new transformation: the new moralism of the body, the all-consuming imperative to enjoy. There appears to be little room for attempts to reclaim such *recherché* things as personality and character, those old humanist hallmarks, not least because souls have dissolved into skins. Little room either for collective politics, as the collective has, according to Juvin, been mobilized entirely by the demand to enjoy one's own body 'until its dying day'. Do we need a new group *momento mori*? Juvin suggests madness might be 'the only freedom left' (certainly, if madness means not shaving your legs or brushing your hair – which these days it probably does). In a slightly Hobbesian turn, Juvin suggests that 'the fierce joy of drawing blood, the good fortune of killing an enemy' might be enough to remind us that we exist. Perhaps he has a point, so long as we're talking about class war. For Juvin, however, there appears to be little hope in this direction: the body has squished all else ('Dreaming about revolution is as forbidden as making it'). Only a morbidly obese God can save us now.



**Nina Power**

## Sticks and stones

Thomas Müntzer, *Sermon to the Princes*, trans. Michael G. Baylor, introductions by Alberto Toscano and Wu Ming, Verso, London and New York, 2010. 176 pp., £8.99 pb., 978 1 84467 320 9.

Thomas Müntzer didn't mince his words: 'donkey-cunt doctor of theology', 'hell-based parsons', 'whoremongering priest', 'diarrhoea-makers', 'little straw doctors of theology', 'evil clergy' and 'snakes' are just some of the labels he reserved for his opponents in the church. As for his erstwhile comrade-turned-sworn enemy, Martin Luther, by the time of the Peasant's War in 1524 Müntzer was describing him as an 'overlearned scoundrel', a 'shameless monk', 'a basilisk, a dragon, a viper', 'Father Pussyfoot', a 'malicious black raven' and 'Doctor Liar'.

From our contemporary political vantage point where ad hominem attacks like these are generally equated with censorious, fascistic tendencies, there is something shocking about the vitriol of Müntzer's denunciations, especially from the pen of a theologian. Indeed the decrying of such 'fanatics' (*Schwärmer*) in the early modern world has recently been discussed

by Alberto Toscano as a pivotal moment in what would become an enduring trope of anti-revolutionary discourse. And even though by the time of the peasants' insurrection Luther was himself imploring the Princes' armies to 'stab, smite' and 'slay' every one of those involved in the 'intolerable' rebellion, the weight of negativity continued to rest on Müntzer's side, as he marshalled his sharp tongue to spur the peasant masses into revolt. As such, it was not just because of Müntzer's insurrectionary actions but also because of his violently intolerant language deployed against the existing institutions on earth – the absolute partisanship of his demands on behalf of the oppressed – that he was so decisively condemned.

Yet, is there actually more here, other than this rhetorical short circuit between radicals past and present, which would really justify placing Müntzer alongside compendiums of the writings of figures such as Robespierre, Mao and Castro in Verso's *Revolutions* series? There are two levels on which one could doubt that there is – an anxiety seemingly built into Verso's presentation of the text itself. First, and most strikingly, the book contains not one but two introductions, by Toscano and by the Italian collective Wu Ming, as if to attempt to add extra value to the release and buttress the impression of the book's relevance. Second, these two introductions read at odds with one another, precisely on this question of the historical specificity of Müntzer and of 'fanatical' discourse.

To take the introductions in order of their presentation, Toscano's scholarly contribution draws on his recent book, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea*, and places Müntzer in light of his appropriation by later revolutionary writers such as Engels and Bloch, but also in regard to his notoriety within the anti-fanatical canon. In this respect, Toscano's critique presents the accusation of fanaticism inaugurated in response to Müntzer's rebellion as an ahistorical cliché regurgitated ad nauseam by conservatives of all stripes, from Edmund Burke to the ideological cold warriors of the twentieth century. At the same time, Toscano's answer is not simply to adopt the flip side of the antinomy and forward a strident historicism in response. Rather, by working broadly within the paradigm of the communist invariant proposed by Alain Badiou, Toscano describes Müntzer as a 'communist precursor' to the Situationists and the alter-globalization movement. His response, then, is a tempered historicism which alleges an ideological determination to immediate elisions across time and place, yet also wants to hold on to the anachronistic, anticipatory character of a universal longing for equality instantiated in Müntzer's rebellion: at once utterly modern in its radically egalitarian ends, but framed within the theological, discursive world of the sixteenth century. Poignantly, Toscano's account of how Müntzer's name is continually resurrected at revolutionary junctures in European history refrains from simply cheering the glorious – failed – rebellions with which his name has become associated. He ends with the observation that "Red Müntzer days" may still lie ahead. Whether they will be breathtaking anticipations or doomed anachronisms remains to be seen.'

The poignancy of this reflection is brought into sharper relief by Wu Ming's contribution. Wu Ming is an Italian writing collective responsible (under the pseudonym Luther Blissett) for the 1999 historical novel *Q*, featuring Müntzer as a central character. At the peak of the alter-globalization movement they were close to the Mexican Zapatistas and the protest movements which gathered in response to meetings of international organizations like the G8 and the IMF. Their introduction is not just an attempt to explain their appropriation of Müntzer during that time, but also a reflection on the rights and wrongs of a movement culminating in the death of Carlo Giuliani in Genoa in 2001.

In many ways Wu Ming's contribution reads as frozen within the era of 1990s' 'New Times'; shot through by the pervasive cultural desire to avoid

the 'hopelessly worn-out twentieth-century modes of thought', a refusal of the 'old dichotomies such as Reformist vs Revolutionary, Vanguard vs Masses, Violence vs Non-violence' and the rejection of 'linear, traditional left-to-right scale thought'. In place of these 'worn out' political modalities, through Müntzer's story Wu Ming explain that they attempted to foster a new activist mythology around his story. The concomitant of this sense of radical disjuncture from twentieth-century certainties is their adoption of a broad historical levelling, in so far as they claim 'If we listen to what the sixteenth century has to say, we encounter anarchists, proto-hippies, utopian socialists, hardcore Leninists, mystical Maoists, mad Stalinists, the Red Brigades, the Angry Brigade, the Weathermen, Emmett Grogan, punk rock and Comrade Gonzalo'. And vice versa. Reflecting on the alter-globalization movement, they argue that 'Müntzer's ghost appeared at the centre of the mobilization because a general metaphor was taking shape in its midst: empire was described more and more often as a castle besieged by a manifold army of peasants.' Although adopting a direct historical short circuit, they also concede however – in the fatalistic register of post-modern activist despair – that 'There was no real siege going on, as you can't besiege a power that's everywhere and whose main manifestation is a constant flow of electrons from stock exchange to stock exchange.' In that one line is encapsulated all the contradictions of a movement that already seems so long ago: the release from twentieth-century limitations of thought unleashing an extraordinary creative outpouring, but accompanied by a level of political analysis lacking transformative potential. As such, it is not surprising that they end by retreating to vaguely religious moral platitudes: 'Salvation lay in being open-minded, honest and comprehensible. Salvation lay in keeping away from sectarianism.'

Is there, then, a value in reading Müntzer for more than the historical specialist today? Yes and no. Beyond the informative introductions the reader might be disappointed by the lack of historical or conceptual content in Müntzer's writings – the fact that they give us literally nothing to work with today in thinking about politics. Yet the text does serve as a reminder of the proximity of the expression of radical politics, whilst, simultaneously, drawing attention to the gaping historical chasm separating actual political situations across time and place.

**Nathan Coombs**