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# Heads of cabbage and mouths full of water

On corporate slaughter

**Mark Neocleous**

In 1998 Simon Jones, a student at the University of Sussex, signed up with Personnel Selection to earn some extra cash. Sent to work for Euromin at Shoreham dockyard, he was given the job of unloading bags of stones by attaching the bags to chains hanging from the inside of the grab of a crane. Two hours after starting work an ‘accident’ occurred in which the jaws of the grab closed around his head. His friend Sean Currey, who was working with Jones that day, said that the incident happened so fast that Currey was not aware of it until he heard a grunt and turned round to find himself looking into Jones’s eyes, realizing only moments later that the crane grab was where the rest of Jones’s head should have been.

In the initial investigation police arrested the general manager James Martell and the crane driver, but both were subsequently released without charge and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decided not to prosecute, despite the fact that Euromin was breaking a string of health and safety regulations: no training or supervision was provided; ten weeks previously the grab being used had had hooks welded to the inside so that it could be used open (a highly irregular practice which the company had introduced to save time and thus money without having carried out any risk assessment); the ‘banksman’ guiding the crane driver spoke little English; the crane driver could not see inside the ship’s hold; and the grab and chains were being brought in too low over the hold. A judicial review of the case in 2000 ordered the CPS to reconsider their decision, which it finally agreed to do some nine months later. The eventual trial in 2001 cleared Martell and Euromin of manslaughter but found the company guilty of two breaches of health and safety regulations. Their punishment was a fine of £50,000.

A one-off? In the first five years of New Labour rule there have been over 2,500 deaths at work, with the official figures for the number of deaths rising by 32 per cent in 2001. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has estimated that at least 40 per cent and possibly as many as 70 per cent of these deaths were due to corporate failings. Note that these figures do not include deaths that are widely suspected to be work-related: in the last five years of the 1990s, for example, over 6,000 people – most of whom had been workers in construction and insulation industries – died of mesothelioma, a disease resulting almost exclusively from inhaling asbestos. In addition to deaths at work, in the last fifteen years at least 1,000 members of the public in Britain have died in incidents suggesting corporate failing of some sort (including, for example, 193 at Zeebrugge, 31 in the King’s Cross fire, 35 in the Clapham train crash, 51 in the sinking of the *Marchioness*, 96 at Hillsborough stadium, 7 in the Southall rail crash, 31 in the Ladbroke Grove rail crash, and 4 in the Hatfield rail crash). Add these figures

together and tally them with figures from across the world, including the thousands killed in single ‘accidents’ such as Bhopal in 1984 (in which approximately 6–7,000 people were killed immediately with an estimated 22,000 dying in directly related deaths up to 1999), and it soon becomes clear that history is indeed a slaughter bench, with capital its most active participant.

Few if any of these ‘incidents’ have resulted in prosecution, and fewer still in successful prosecution. As the law stands it is virtually impossible to prosecute firms and their directors successfully: in the last ten years only 11 companies have been prosecuted for manslaughter in Britain; only 4 of these prosecutions have been successful. When it comes to safety at work, directors have no legal obligations – safety is the responsibility of ‘the company’. But because firms can only be prosecuted if a director or senior manager is prosecuted, companies have been more or less immune from prosecution. Because of the complex organizational structures of most firms, it is rare that any single person can be found entirely responsible. Moreover, the police lack any specialist training for investigating workplace deaths or deaths brought about by what appear to be corporate failings; investigations fall to chronically underresourced HSE inspectors.

The obvious response to the above has been the demand for a new crime of corporate manslaughter. The moment for such a law seemed to have arrived in Britain in 1997, when the Labour Party won power having promised to introduce a corporate killing law. Six years later, with the country still waiting, Home Secretary David Blunkett has finally indicated the government’s intention to publish a Bill by the end of 2003. The fact that it is to be accompanied by yet another consultation exercise suggests to campaigners that either nothing will happen (this will be the third such exercise since 1994; the previous two collapsed following ‘representations’ from organizations such as the CBI), or that there is no chance of a new law until after the next election. Nonetheless, a wide range of socialists, anti-corporate protestors and trade unions have recognized that increased awareness following a series of unsuccessful attempts to prosecute corporations in a range of high-profile cases, combined with the government’s need to be seen to be doing something, mean that the time is right to push for a new law in this area. It is time to ‘put the suits in the dock’ as one step on the road to the more general curbing of corporate power.

The key question, however, is whether such a law would work. Campaigners in this area have pointed out that only the managers or directors of small firms have ever been successfully prosecuted. What they fail to realize is that this is likely to *remain* the case even after new legislation. To understand why, and to see the political implications, a little detour into company law is necessary.

### **The company *persona***

As capital developed in the industrial age it became clear that the classical legal form of property ownership – *persona res* – was inadequate for the capital form. It became clear that capital needed a special legal status, arising from the nature of capital as such. This special legal status is the incorporated company and the institution of limited liability, both of which are a product of massive changes in company law in the nineteenth century.

The Joint Stock Companies Registration and Regulation Act (1844) drew a clear distinction between joint stock companies and private partnerships by providing for the registration of all new companies with more than twenty-five members or with transferable shares. At the same time, it provided for incorporation through the act of registration alone rather than a special Act or Charter. The Joint Stock Companies Act (1856) and then the Companies Act (1862) further allowed incorporation with limited liability to be obtained by just seven persons signing and registering a memorandum of

association. Even though this was intended to apply to joint stock companies, it became clear that by reducing to seven the number of persons required to form an association, and not specifying a minimum number of shares, the scope of the company legal form could potentially include small partnerships and one-person enterprises. The decision of the House of Lords in *Salomon v. Salomon and Co. Ltd.* (1897) validated the one-person enterprise in Britain, and the Limited Partnerships Act (1907) formally defined and recognized the private company as the legal form of capital.

The historic significance of these changes for the intensification of capital accumulation was enormous. The joint-stock company is often interpreted as either a measure of convenience designed to protect the interests of individual investors (viz. economics), or as a key moment in the developing separation between ownership and control (viz. sociology). But both these interpretations fail to grasp its real significance, which lies in the fact that what was being developed was a special legal *persona* for capital. To grasp the nature of this special legal *persona* we need to distinguish between the company as an economic and as a legal form. By 1855 the company legal form (that is, incorporation with limited liability) was confined to the joint stock company economic form and deliberately withheld from economic partnerships and one-person enterprises. Yet by 1914 the company legal form had become the normal form of enterprise in English manufacturing, due to private partnerships turning themselves into private limited companies. The meaning attached to the term 'company' was thus transformed: from denoting an association of a particular *economic* nature with no connotations as to legal form, it has come to signify an association of a particular *legal* status with no connotations as to economic form. Between 1844 and 1914, then, the company or corporation was constituted as a new form of *persona* for capital.

An important dimension to this *persona* is that companies came to be distinguished from the persons who form them. Where the 1856 Act regarded persons as forming *themselves* into an incorporated company, the 1862 Act saw persons as forming a company *by them* but not *of them*. The earlier Act identified the company with the members; the later Act identified the company as something separate from and external to them. From this point on, companies have been referred to as 'it' rather than 'they'. At the same time it became clear that the shareholder has no property in, or right to, any particular asset of a company other than the share. All the shareholder can claim as a right is to have the assets of the company administered in accordance with the constitution of the company and, crucially, a right to a share in the surplus value produced through the company's consumption of labour power. In effect, the development of company law had produced a new form of legal subject, the private corporation, and a new form of property, the share. A dual separation was effected between companies and their shareholders and between shareholders and their shares. Limited liability thus established the corporation as a *new and independent legal subject* every bit as real in law as the subjects of the classic legal form, *though totally removed from those subjects*. Capital, in other words, had become a fully fledged 'person' in law.

## The company mind

Why is such a development important for understanding the problems in prosecuting capital? When in *Salomon v. Salomon* the House of Lords held that a corporation is a person distinct from individual persons who compose it, it also held that corporations, unlike human persons, could not commit torts which demand a guilty intention, nor crimes which require *mens rea*. In doing so it raised a question initiated by Pope Innocent IV's decision at the Council of Lyon in 1245 – that, having no soul, the corporation could not be excommunicated – but which brings us straight into the juridical heart of the power of the modern corporation: can we speak of 'the mind' of the corporation? The initial answer provided by the law was 'no'. In *Edwards v. Midland*



*Railway* (1880), for example, an action for malicious prosecution against the railway company, Justice Fry held that ‘it is absurd to suppose that a body corporate can do a thing willfully, which implies will; intentionally, which implies intention; and maliciously, which implies malice. They are all acts of the mind, and one is no more capable of being done by a corporation ... than the other.’ This position held strong well into the twentieth century.

However, in a landmark ruling in 1956 (*H.L. Bolton [Engineering] Co. Ltd v. T.J.*

*Graham & Sons*), Lord Denning claimed that companies ‘may in many ways be likened to a human body. They have a brain and a nerve centre which controls what they do. They also have hands which hold the tools and act in accordance with directions from the centre.’ As a consequence, one can speak of the mind of the company. But in a crucial caveat the way of determining the mind of the company was to identify its *actual human* controllers. ‘Directors and managers ... represent the directing mind and will of the company, and control what they do. The state of mind of these managers is the state of mind of the company and is treated by the law as such.’ Denning’s caveat made it virtually impossible for corporations over a certain (very small) small size or directors to be successfully prosecuted. In the case against P&O European Ferries for the sinking of the *Herald of Free Enterprise* in 1987, for example, it was widely known that the roll-on/roll-off ferries then in operation needed redesigning. One had capsized in 1982 killing six people, and a paper at the 1985 conference of the Royal Institute of Naval Architects pointed out that a much bigger disaster was likely to happen if a redesign, incorporating new bulkheads which would enable passengers to escape, did not take place. Yet when the prosecution against the five senior employees collapsed, so the case against the company went too.

It is the very nature of company law as it currently stands that led to the failure of the prosecutions in these and virtually all other cases. In these cases the temptation to find the senior figures who made the important decisions is entirely understandable. But if, for whatever reason, they cannot be identified, then any prosecution will fail. The implications of this for any campaign for a new law of corporate killing or manslaughter are enormous, because any new law is unlikely to change this. Campaigns to ‘put the suits in the dock’ under a new law will stumble at precisely the point at which the law currently stumbles: large organizations being what they are, it is normally impossible to identify which individual or individuals were responsible for any particular decision. Thus no person is punished. Cases will remain almost doomed to fail except for one-person or very small companies in which the ‘controlling mind’ can be easily identified. Moreover, it seems clear (at time of writing) that the present government’s intention is that new legislation should be deliberately framed to avoid directors of large companies ending up in prison.

Campaigners in this area like to argue that all that is needed is the political will: if only the government would take seriously the promise it made in 1997 then massive changes could be achieved (in what would surely be a popular act). And yet there is a

sense in which the failure of politicians even to begin anything in this area is a doffing of the cap to the astonishing social and juridical power capital has been granted with its corporate *persona*. The law which shaped the modern corporation as a new form of legal person has been reluctant to admit that the same persons can commit illegal acts and recognizable harms. The law, in other words, has been structured in a way that it is far more accommodating to corporate subjects than to human ones. In this way the ruling class has more or less defined capital as beyond incrimination: the ‘harms’ committed by corporations are treated as the result of a failure to follow regulations and procedures and thus are not ‘crimes’ in the way that laypersons might think. Apropos of right-wing attacks on ‘welfare scroungers’ and ‘the idle poor’, one might say that it is the corporation that has acquired plenty of rights but few responsibilities. Capital has used the corporate form to its advantage by avoiding some of the most obvious disadvantages of being a legal subject, namely responsibility for one’s acts.

For these reasons any campaign in this area might be better advised to target the corporate subject itself (as well as its human ‘controlling minds’). The Left, in other words, needs to get its head around the power entailed by the status of the corporate subject. If we are to take seriously the idea that the corporation is a person in its own right, then corporate actions should not always be identified with the actions of individuals and it does not always make sense to hold a human being responsible for the offences committed by the corporation. It is often pointed out that because a company is a creature of the law with no physical existence, it cannot be tried for murder, as the only punishments available to the court on conviction are life imprisonment or the death penalty – were it available. Thus the only penalty that can realistically be imposed on a company in English law is a fine and/or compensation order. Maybe we need to start thinking through the possibility of more than a fine. Since imprisonment, like excommunication, is impossible for the corporation, the logical step for campaigners would be to argue for a death sentence for corporate subjects: the ‘execution’ of corporations when their deliberate ‘wrongdoings’ cause human death, and the seizing of their assets. It might be objected that the ‘human’ victims of such punishment would, of course, be the shareholders. But then at least shareholders might start exercising some of their powers in making sure that the corporations on which they rely for their dividends show at least a modicum of respect for human life.

I realize, of course, that within the context of bourgeois law such a suggestion is absurd, not least because implicit within it is the death of capital. But it is precisely this absurdity which draws attention to the problems faced in making corporations properly accountable for their actions and, more generally, highlights the tensions within any socialist campaigns to use the law against capital. It needs to be remembered that, like capital, the law was not established for the purposes of justice.

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel comments that in the absolute freedom of Terror death appears to have no inner significance or meaning, each dying at the guillotine or in their ‘Republican Marriage’ – in which couples were tied together and drowned – ‘the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water’. Modern death at the hands of corporations has become something like that: the heads of workers are crushed, party-goers are drowned, and capital just carries on, perpetuating its own special form of Terror.

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# A new world art?

## Documenting Documenta 11

**Stewart Martin**

Documenta 11 was one of the most radically conceived events in the history of postcolonial art practice. It is exemplary of the influence of postcolonial discourses on critical art practice over the last twenty years in breaking profoundly with the colonial presuppositions of the nineteenth-century tradition of ethnographic or anthropological exhibitions of non-Western art as primitive culture. It exhibited contemporary art from across the globe in accordance with a profound critique of the orientalism and neocolonialism that this task faces, which in many respects went beyond that of previous landmark shows, such as the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris, or the 1993 *Whitney Biennial* in New York. It presents a watershed in the history of Documenta – one of the pre-eminent exhibitions of contemporary art, held in Kassel, Germany, every five years – the first to be curated by a non-European, with an unprecedented presence of artists from outside Europe and North America, and an extensive transformation of Documenta's geographical and intellectual constitution. However, despite predictably extensive coverage, the critical reception of Documenta 11 so far has been severely delimited.

It is now over a year since Documenta 11 closed its exhibition – your last chance to see the show was 15 September 2002 – and it has long since drifted out of the consciousness of art journalism. It is no longer *de jour*. And yet, all reviews of Documenta 11 to date have been premature, since only now, over a year on, has it completed the programme of placing itself in the public realm, with the publication of the last in its series of volumes. These volumes are not

supplementary, since it is the distinctive curatorial innovation of Documenta 11 to constitute itself through a series of five 'Platforms', of which the exhibition – which traditionally has been the centrepiece of Documenta – is only one. These Platforms were intended as a displacement of the temporal and spatial centrality of Documenta's site in Kassel, that would actualize Documenta 11's postcolonial critique of the geopolitical constitution of the historical avant-garde. They mostly consisted of themed conferences, with occasional workshops and film and video programmes. The location, name and date of the Platforms were as follows: Platform 1, 'Democracy Unrealized', was held in Vienna, 15–20 April 2001, and Berlin, 9–30 October 2001; Platform 2, 'Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation', New Delhi, 7–21 May 2001; Platform 3, 'Créolité and Creolization', St Lucia, 13–15 January 2002; Platform 4, 'Under Siege: Four African Cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos', Lagos, 16–20 March 2002; Platform 5, the 'Exhibition', Kassel, 8 June–15 September 2002.

The volumes of the proceedings of these conferences are the only public form of the Platforms, for those unable to attend them, besides the website.\* They need to be examined as constitutive parts of the enterprise of Documenta 11. This has not been possible until now. It is questionable whether they would have been considered had they been available to reviewers originally. Few of the contributions to these extensive volumes even attempt to address art and they draw on a wide range of intellectual disciplines and knowledges

\* [www.documenta.de/](http://www.documenta.de/) The volumes are: Okwui Enwezor et al., eds, *Democracy Unrealized, Documenta 11\_1*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002; Okwui Enwezor et al., eds, *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation, Documenta 11\_2*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002; Okwui Enwezor et al., eds, *Créolité and Creolization, Documenta 11\_3*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2003; Okwui Enwezor et al., eds, *Under Siege: Four African Cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos, Documenta 11\_4*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002; Okwui Enwezor et al., eds, *Catalogue, Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002. Armando Silva, ed., *Urban Imaginaries from Latin America, Documenta 11*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2003 was also published under the imprint of Documenta 11.

outside of conventional art theory and art history. While this is by no means unprecedented, it presents a massive extension of the already formidable task of assessing the artworks exhibited. And while there have been reviews of Documenta 11 that refer to Platforms 1 and 2, there is little sense that the absence of the other volumes is decisive. Indeed, some reviewers have maintained that the non-exhibition Platforms are superfluous.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear that this is a serious misconception of the project of Documenta 11.

### **Avant-garde or postcoloniality?**

The immense scale and complexity of Documenta 11 is a formidable challenge to any attempt to assess it as an integrated event. It was certainly the intention of the curators to frustrate reductive unifications. Nonetheless, if Documenta 11 is intended as a relatively coordinated and consistent project, as the curators make clear that it is, then this curatorial intention provides a point of departure for the attempt to apprehend it. This may be liable to objections about the general overvaluation of curators that has become so prevalent recently – according to which artists and artworks are reduced to the materials of the curator/super-artist – but the assessment of an exhibition as novel in organizational structure and in the selection of artists as Documenta 11, would be naive if it did not examine the curator's intentions, albeit critically. The texts by the lead curator, Okwui Enwezor, are of particular interest here, especially his essay 'The Black Box'.<sup>2</sup> This is partly because of his organizational status, but also because, as one might expect, of all the curators' texts it offers the most programmatically comprehensive conception of the radical artistic and political claim of Documenta 11. It achieves this by addressing one of the decisive questions that is implicitly imposed by the historical site of Documenta itself: how do the kinds of postcolonial artistic practice and discourse selected for Documenta 11 relate to the history of avant-garde art that Documenta has, more or less problematically, tended to exhibit and be identified with? Enwezor's answer is radical, if not altogether novel or historically accurate:

While strong revolutionary claims have been made for the avant-garde within Westernism, its vision of modernity remains surprisingly conservative and formal. ... [T]he political and historical vision of the Western avant-garde has remained narrow. The propagators of the avant-garde have done little to constitute a space of self-reflexivity that can understand new relations of artistic modernity not founded on Westernism. The foregoing makes tendentious

the claims to radicality often imputed to exhibitions such as Documenta or similar manifestations within the exhibitionary complex of artistic practice today.<sup>3</sup>

From this equation of avant-gardism and Westernism, Enwezor derives the programme of Documenta 11 as a rupture in this culture, at one of its historic sites, and the institution of an alternative artistic culture of postcolonialism or postcoloniality.

The equation is a crude mixture of falsity and truth. There are few more unifying claims about the heterogeneous art practices described as avant-garde than that they constitute radical critiques of Western culture, including the culture of imperialism and colonization. Think of the surrealism of Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, or, more dramatically, the non-Western influences on the work denigrated by the Nazis in the 'Degenerate "Art"' exhibition of 1937. Enwezor appears to have reduced the avant-garde to Greenberg's highly sanitized and selective account of modernism, which traces a canon of Western art that is certainly indifferent, if not antagonistic, to any 'primitivistic' influences (although Greenberg did not even do justice to the art he sponsored, with both Picasso and Pollock profoundly influenced by non-Western art). But Enwezor's equation is constituted in relation to a critique of avant-garde art's orientalism according to which its critique of Western culture was not simply derived from, for instance, Africa or East Asia, but involved their phantasmatic projection by the West, which thereby, ironically, sustained a colonial culture in the very attempt to overcome it. Enwezor is indifferent to the complexities of these oriental critiques of the West, as some reviewers have noted.<sup>4</sup> But to fixate on this blindness is to overlook a fundamental shift that is at stake here in the structure of this critique of orientalism. On the one hand, this involves a certain radicalization of the critique of orientalism that rejects the implicitly colonial logic of incorporating or including the marginal or the other, and that instead insists on a politics and strategy of empowering the marginalized without making it partake of the centre, while displacing the centre as the arbitrator of empowerment. On the other hand, it concerns a historical transformation in the political context of the traditional sites of avant-garde art, namely the move from European colonialism to a period of decolonization and postcolonialism, as well as the emergence of novel forms of global imperialism. Enwezor's contention is that, despite the anomalies and exceptions, contemporary postcolonialism is a political form that fundamentally postdates the historical avant-gardes and that, as a consequence, the political task of

responding to contemporary postcolonialism demands a fundamentally new sense of radical art.

By postcolonialism and postcoloniality Enwezor does not only mean the general political status of societies that have emerged from colonialism and that are still undergoing processes of decolonization. Rather, like many others, he understands postcolonialism as the break from the narrative or teleology of development that, whether positively or negatively, remains bound to a legacy of colonialism. The cultural and political logic of postcolonialism is therefore understood as a rupture and displacement of the relations of centre and margin, which are taken to dominate colonialism. It involves cultural forms that have developed outside of a strict relation of identification with, or opposition to, an imperial state. However, for Enwezor as for many others, postcolonialism is not exhausted by the recovery of national or individual sovereignty. Rather it introduces a new form of relations of difference. This is the global form that Enwezor emphatically ascribes to postcoloniality. In certain respects, this tends towards an exaggeration of the legacy of European colonialism. But it is bolstered by a diagnosis of the form of capitalism that has emerged from the Cold War and is now entering an eternal War on Terror, as a new, intensively globalized form of (strictly speaking, 'non-colonial') imperialism, which thereby generalizes and intensifies the condition of postcoloniality. Enwezor borrows Hardt and Negri's analysis of *Empire* in order to generalize the condition of postcoloniality by analogy with their characterization of the multitude – as a global political counter-power, emerging immanently from the globalization of transnational capital – while overdetermining this notoriously indeterminate category as a politics of postcoloniality.

This globalization of postcoloniality accounts for a number of the cultural and political features attributed to it. Enwezor emphasizes the spatial and temporal condensation that characterizes many aspects of globalization, in which distances and times are shortened to the point of near immediacy. This underpins the move from a geopolitics of centre and margin to one characterized by the immanence of the margin and the centre in which these relations do not dissolve completely, but are nonetheless destabilized and transformed in their dynamic relation, producing condensations, displacements and equivalences of margin and centre.<sup>5</sup> Enwezor refers to how modern communications technologies facilitate this immanence of margin and centre and constitute an everyday life, inflected by globalized relations of postcoloniality.<sup>6</sup> He also alludes to how these transformations of spatial and temporal experi-

ence generate a transformation of subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> This informs his discussion of September 11. True to the transformed dynamics of global political forms, it is understood as the claim of an alternative world culture (Islam), not merely a marginal, nationalist culture, which is made at the very centre of the dominant world culture (North American capitalism), in an act that presents 'the full emergence of the margin to the centre'.<sup>8</sup>

Without identifying with this Islamism, Enwezor proposes a refunctioning of the name 'Ground Zero' that hijacks its deployment in the wars for a 'New World Order' and proposes it as the slogan for the regrouping of an alternative, postcolonial world. He thereby engages in an exemplary hegemonic strategy, proposing Ground Zero as a cipher in relation to which an inherently complex political constituency can combine to form an alternative global polity. (Given that Documenta is usually numbered according to roman numerals – the last was Documenta X in 1997 – the correspondence of Documenta 11 and September 11 is striking, although it is not explained as such.) Enwezor proposes Documenta 11 as a cultural formation of this project, aligning it explicitly with the combination of postcolonial and anticapitalist movements that have emerged recently.<sup>9</sup> This is the political act that Documenta 11 itself is intended to perform: the irruption of a central location of the art world by an alternative world art, the full emergence of the margin to the centre.

If we consider this political positioning of Documenta 11 as an agenda for a new form of radical art, it becomes apparent that it indicates transformations of a number of fundamental conceptions of the radical avant-garde. This is particularly clear if we relate it to the profoundly influential conception of 'historical avant-gardes' outlined by Peter Bürger, which emphasizes the revolutionary project of the early avant-gardes (especially, Dada, surrealism and constructivism) to expose art as the product of bourgeois institutions – the museums, galleries, art market and attendant discourses – and engage in the emancipatory dissolution of art into a life free from capitalist social relations.<sup>10</sup> This politicized project of a total transformation of social relations is distinguished from 'neo-avant-gardes' that attempt to continue the artistic heritage of the original avant-gardes, but in the knowledge that this revolution of art and everyday life is no longer at stake. The neo-avant-gardes therefore tend towards a parody rather than a reinvention of the historical avant-gardes. There are a number of ways in which Documenta 11 is conceived as a rearticulation

of this discourse. In relation to the historical avant-garde's claim for a total revolution of social relations, Documenta 11 proposes a new, postcolonial configuration of this totality of social relations, which is not historically the same as that available to the historical avant-gardes, or politically identical with the fight against imperialism as these avant-gardes conceived it. There is therefore a new political ontology of totalization at stake today. In the terms of phenomenological ontology, Documenta 11 discloses a different world to that disclosed by the historical avant-gardes. This infuses the other forms of totality at stake here: a transformation of subjectivity and everyday life is induced by the inflection of the condensed, displaced and equivalent spatio-temporal relations of a globalized culture. Documenta 11's Platforms engage in a re-territorialization of an art institution according to these transformed dynamics, which are not reducible to the critique of inside and outside, centre and margin, that characterizes the imperial metropolitan context of the historical avant-gardes.

Yet there is an obvious sense in which Documenta 11 remains caught in the predicament of a neo-avant-garde. Despite its political rhetoric, it is funded by national institutions and capitalist corporations.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the potential of its claim that the revolutionary force of postcoloniality is immanent, it is also currently deeply subordinated. There is also a sense in which its transformation of the avant-garde's discourse of totalization does not merely bring it to an end, but produces a critical renewal of it. In short, then, there is a persistent sense in which Documenta 11 proposes a radical transformation of avant-garde art, while remaining deeply entwined within its traditional problems. But in order to articulate this sense more concretely, we need to consider the actuality of Documenta 11 and examine its Platforms in the relative independence that they demand.

## **1\_Democracy unrealized**

Platform 1 sets out to examine issues surrounding the emergence of democracy as the hegemonic political form of contemporary globalization, particularly as it has been articulated by the neoliberal capitalism that has emerged since the end of the Cold War. More critically, the platform is intended as an examination of the ways in which democracy serves as an ideology of political Westernization that sustains the very undemocratic dominance of the economic interests of the leading capitalist nations, especially those of Europe and North America. It is the contradiction or tension between the ideology and the actuality of

international democracy that explains the attention to democracy's 'unrealized' condition and the way in which the Platform responds to the general preoccupations of Documenta 11.

Almost without exception, the contributors to Platform 1 assume democracy to be the most appropriate political form for the tasks of a globalized postcolonial politics. The closest to an exception to this rule is perhaps Bhikhu Parekh, who draws a sharp distinction between democracy and liberalism in order to argue that today's liberal democracies should respond to the challenge of multiculturalism by an increase in the liberal respect for individual freedoms and further neutralize the cultural presuppositions of the state.<sup>12</sup> But this is addressed solely to liberal democracies and therefore ignores the political predicament of many postcolonial states. This liberal objection is matched, at the other end of the political spectrum, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's communism of the multitude.<sup>13</sup> They conceive the multitude as an immanently self-relating multiplicity, which is thereby understood as incompatible with antagonistic and representative political forms, which they attribute to conventional forms of democracy. Instead they argue that the politics of the multitude is a form of self-realization or 'absolute democracy'. But this remains abstract with respect to the elaboration of historical forms of postcolonial politics. The most widely canvassed position is probably that of a constitutively unrealizable democracy that would enfranchise the complex constituencies of a postcolonial globe through refusing any realized or substantive totalization of the political community.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who have done most to theorize a constitutively unrealizable conception of democracy as a radicalization of the political, both contribute essays, but these are very formal and do not address the question of a globalized postcolonial politics. Laclau's essay argues for democracy as caught between tendencies to autonomy and heteronomy, and Mouffe sketches the concept of a democratic public sphere as constitutively agonistic, which may allude to the problem of a global public sphere, but only refers explicitly to rethinking the federalist conception of Europe.<sup>14</sup> It is largely left to Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha to elaborate this political theory more explicitly in relation to postcolonial politics, both effectively proposing an openness to the infinite play of difference. Immanuel Wallerstein is among the few contributors to consider democracy as a political project that was yet to be fulfilled and so is 'unrealized' in the more straight-

forward sense, arguing that, when considered at the level of world history, democracy (in the sense of a demand for equality) has been increasingly realized up to the present, and that this has led to an impending crisis for the structural inequalities that characterize capitalism. His diagnosis is not intended to defer political action into long-term historical movement, but to anticipate an impending political struggle over democracy, in which its currently assumed legitimacy would give way to a critical struggle.

These contributions all remain extremely abstract with respect to actual political organizations or politi-



cal disputes in which a postcolonial democracy is at stake. But this is corrected, in part, by texts from a number of political organizations: *kein mensch ist illegal*, Multiplicity, *Arquitectos Sin Fronteras-España*, and *Demokratische Offensive*. It is perhaps unfortunate that these are all European organizations and there is an obvious disparity between their aspiration to global enfranchisement and their political activities. But this is consistent with the geopolitical condensation of locality and globality that is a theme of Documenta 11. Platform 1 was held in Vienna and Berlin. Nonetheless, there is a lamentable absence of more extensive groupings, such as the World Social Forum that has emerged in opposition to the World Economic Forum.

As is characteristic of the Platforms more generally, very few of the contributors even attempt to write about art or address the artistic context of Documenta. Of the twenty-six papers, only those by Boris Groys and Iain Chambers do so substantively.

Emblematically, the text by the group Multiplicity, who exhibited at Platform 5, makes no mention of art at all. This is characteristic of the eccentric logic of much of the discourse surrounding contemporary art. However, it leaves a number of decisive questions about the political situation and strategy of Documenta 11 unaddressed, especially in relation to the history of avant-garde art. I have addressed some of these issues above and others will be dealt with below, in connection with the other Platforms, as their distributed form demands. But it is worth noting here that the complex history of relations between political discourse and

avant-garde art has in many respects been dominated by a more or less dissident communism. This raises the question of how Platform 1's discourses on democracy relate to communism; in particular, how they relate to the communist critique and politics of anti-imperialism that infused the historical avant-gardes. Traces of this prehistory are detectable in the communist sentiments of Hardt, Negri and Žižek, but they make no address to avant-garde art. Groys comes the closest, but he does so through a very dubious aesthetics of anticapitalist politics as essentially ascetic.<sup>15</sup> This is a blind spot of Documenta 11,

intensified by its indifference to art history and the history of avant-gardes.

## 2\_Experiments with truth

Platform 2 is an attempt to deal with the novel conceptions of right and justice that have emerged in response to aggression perpetrated by states on their own people, as well as others, and which, to that extent, fall outside of juridical processes circumscribed by the sovereignty of the nation-state or, at the very least, create a crisis for it. To this end the volume deals with the theoretical and historical predicament of the development of universal human rights, from its institutional inception in the Nuremberg trials after the Second World War (1945–46), to the institution of a permanent International Criminal Court. The volume is also preoccupied with a number of other experimental juridical processes established to institute a solution to the contradictions of national justice, in particular

the various Truth and Reconciliation Commissions that have been established, not only in South Africa, but also in the former Yugoslavia and Argentina.<sup>16</sup> It is largely in the context of these institutions that the volume addresses the concept of transitional justice as a novel juridical form geared towards negotiating a transformation of political forms, such as the end of apartheid in South Africa. The main controversy that emerges is whether transitional justice is part of the generation of a less nationalist or statist conception of law, which is increasingly needed, or whether it is an ideology that depicts a narrative of organic change, but which conceals key political decisions or struggles. For example, Ruti Teitel argues for the former, with respect to post-apartheid South Africa, claiming that processes of transitional justice, like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, enable the state to re-establish its legitimacy in circumstances of constitutional crisis, where this demands convicting itself of illegal acts.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, Boris Buden argues that the truth and reconciliation processes in the former Yugoslavia are part of a depoliticizing ideology of post-communist neoliberalism, which conceals the political decisions that are at stake and which results in a general impoverishment of democratic political culture.<sup>18</sup> This tension between juridical and political responses is expressed across the Platforms, with Mouffe also arguing against the privilege of juridical or moral forms of resolving social disputes.

Platform 2's preoccupation with these juridical forms may appear to be somewhat removed from the principal themes of Documenta 11, but on reflection it is apparent that they are significant for the emergence of global forms of political legitimacy and citizenship central to the novel forms of postcolonial political culture that Documenta 11 addresses.<sup>19</sup> In this context, the controversy over human rights therefore takes two forms: a controversy over whether juridical processes are adequate to empower a postcolonial and global citizenship; and a controversy over whether they conceal political processes, particularly whether or not they are just the veil for a neo-imperialism.

Besides juridical forms, Platform 2 also addresses a number of more experimental theoretical and cultural issues that surround or underpin these forms, incorporating essays on questions of trauma, witnessing, memory, testimony, narration, and so on. It is largely in this context that the Platform addresses art, although, as with the other theoretical Platforms, this is limited to a few contributions. Susana Torre's article discusses a number of contemporary memorials that negotiate the public construction of memory and

thereby justice.<sup>20</sup> For instance, Jochen Gerz's *2146 Steine – Mahnmal gegen Rassismus* (2146 Stones – Monument against Racism) in Saarbrücken, Germany, which replaces seventy cobblestones in a major public space with identical cobblestones inscribed with the names of obliterated Jewish cemeteries in Germany, but on their underside so that they are invisible to the passer-by. Alfredo Jaar's article discusses his series of artworks about the indifference of the media Western to the massacres in Rwanda and the challenges of his attempts to depict and bear testimony to it.<sup>21</sup> Some of this work was also exhibited at Platform 5. Jaar is in many respects exemplary of a heritage of avant-garde art that is evident in the artworks exhibited at Platform 5. The form of politicized art practice that he has developed – exemplary of the set of concerns addressed by Documenta 11 – is made possible by a course of formal and ontological transformations of what can and cannot be considered an artwork, which pay a particular debt to conceptual art and its radical exposure of art to its contextual discourses. This has enabled Jaar to give his lecture in a form that is appropriate to a conference. However, it also expresses issues of justice in forms that are awkwardly expressed in juridical discourses. It is at the limits of juridical discourse that it establishes itself as an art practice, not merely through the prescribed use of a medium or space. It is in this sense that criticisms of post-conceptual art as a collapse into other cultural forms – criticisms that pervade the reception of Documenta 11 – are misconceived.

### **3\_Créolité and creolization**

Many of the issues surrounding postcolonial culture and the processes of cultural 'mixing' and exchange that have become characteristic of contemporary forms of globalization, were pursued in Platform 3 through the examination of the concepts of *créolité* and creolization. The concept of *créolité*, or creoleness, was introduced by three Martinican intellectuals, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant – in their 1989 publication *Eloge de la Créolité*, translated in 1990 as *In Praise of Creoleness* – in order to theorize the socio-economic, cultural and creative form of creole languages that have emerged within the Caribbean Basin. It was proposed in order to demarcate the specificity of these forms with respect to more general forms of cultural mixing, and as an alternative to the racialized concept of negritude developed by Aimé Césaire, which, following Fanon, they reject as the replacement of a European illusion of primitivism with an equally illusory myth of the African. Creoliza-

tion is a concept that Edouard Glissant has proposed as a corrective to *créolité*, emphasizing the processual, open-ended and expansive character of creole cultural formations that extend well beyond the Caribbean to a generalized process of globalization. As he puts it in an epigraph to the volume's Introduction, 'The whole world is becoming creolized.' Conversely, Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant insist that *créolité* is a form of autonomization, emerging from a wider process of creolization.

This precarious debate about the specificity and universality of creole cultural form – traversed by questions of literary form, linguistics and political history, among others – structures many of the articles and contributions in the publication of Platform 3. It also structures the relation of this Platform to the other ones. The formation of a specific, localized culture, through processes of colonial and post-colonial transculturation, on the one hand, and the transculturation of a general process of contemporary globalization, on the other, is a tension that profoundly inflects the whole project of cultural analysis and politics informing Documenta 11. This remains implicit in most of the contributions. But Platform 3 does deal more explicitly with art than Platforms 1, 2 or 4, especially in relation to creole poetry and literature – Derek Walcott addressed the conference a number of times – as well as through such forms as Jamaican dancehall music. Isaac Julien showed his films and discussed them, including the film he was to show at Platform 5, *Paradise Omeros*. And Petrine Archer-Straw explicated a number of relations between avant-gardism, primitivism and colonialism through a discussion of 'negrophilia' in Parisian avant-garde circles of the 1920s, in comparison to a certain reversal of this in the re-appropriation of primitivism among contemporary Caribbean artists – although, in many respects these artists seemed to engage in a reinvigorated negritude.<sup>22</sup>

Many essays and much of the discussion – which was published in the volume as a series of 'Open Sessions' – revolves around the definition and clarification of the concepts of *créolité* and creolization in relation to various meanings and allusions associated with creole forms, as well as in terms of diaspora, hybridity, *métissage* and miscengenation. This includes instructive comparisons and distinctions of creole as the generation of a 'third' language, distinct from the mixing of the two languages from which it emerged. In the case of the Caribbean the creoles are distinct from the dominant colonial language of French, English or Spanish, on one side, as well as the

dominated African languages of the plantation slaves, on the other. The specific linguistic form of Caribbean creoles is therefore also determined by particular political formations, which seem to be decisive. Even the meeting of separate cultures in the context of European enslavement of Africans in Central America is not adequate to explain the emergence of creoles, as Virginia Pérez-Ratton points out in relation to Costa Rica, where the arrival of slaves in the 18th century did not produce creole languages. She argues that this was due to their small numbers (relative to the Caribbean), their arrival from the Antilles rather than Africa, and their employment as domestic servants, which meant that 'under the master's roof' *métissage* took place rapidly; all of which resulted in the complete suppression of alternative languages or contexts for the formation of a creole language.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, in the port of Colón in Panama, on the coast of the Atlantic, despite a high degree of ethnic mixing among Hindus, Chinese, Arabs, blacks and Europeans, there is no real linguistic mixing, but a near total bilingualism of English and Spanish. Indeed, the volume is littered with anomalous linguistic communities.

A number of contributors were undeterred from thinking more broadly about the relation of these forms of creole culture to broader processes of cultural formation, whether in relation to diverse linguistic forms – such as Spanglish in New York or the tentative emergence of Euroenglish across the European Union – or in relation to global processes of cultural exchange and resistance. Given this context, it is surprising that there was no reflection on the globalization of American English through computer and media technologies. Stuart Hall's contributions are notable here. While insisting on the Caribbean specificity of *créolité* and creolization in certain respects, he also presents these processes as exemplary or limit-cases of cultural change *tout court*, opening a perspective onto the processes of globalization as a contemporary political project. Hall emphasizes the relation of these questions to a political engagement with the present, that is, to a desire and a project of hope and transformation, which make them irreducible, if not indifferent, to empirical verification and specification. Moreover, this is set within the context of a diagnosis of the novel form of globalization that has become evident since the mid-1970s, a phase of transnational neo-Liberalism, distinguished from the initial, colonial and postcolonial phases of globalization. In this he probably does most to articulate the relation of this Platform's concerns to the project of Documenta 11

as a whole. Indeed he provides a striking formulation of what is at stake in its reception:

We will see ... whether Documenta 11 is greeted as an interesting diversion, written off as a momentary interruption, a moment of the exotic, a temporary deviation from what 'art' is really about; an interlude of 'cultural diversity' in the onward march of Western civilizational discourse. Or whether it represents a more permanent break in the regime which governs the international circulation of the artwork.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4\_Under siege

The project of Platform 4 was to analyse the contemporary African city as exemplary of the various and complex effects of postcolonialization and globalization. The Platform presents investigations and analyses of a collection of African cities – not only Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos, as the title suggests, but also Pikine, Marrakesh, Kisangani, Addis Ababa and Douala, among others – that are currently constituted by dramatic transformations in their urban form and that, as such, present themselves as symptomatic of fundamental changes in relation to modernization, particularly in so far as this modernization presents a sedimented form of cultural Westernism. It is in this context that the editors call for a rethinking of Africa's urban spaces and practices, as a way of rethinking the social constitution of a postcolonial urban citizenship that is taken to be symptomatic of a new global trend.

In general, the essays are committed to criticizing the practical and theoretical effects of the 'Westernized' mode of modernization to which African cities have been subjected, stretching from European colonialism, through the processes of decolonization and independence, and up to the generally disastrous policies of the International Monetary Fund and the 'structural adjustment' programmes inaugurated by the World Bank since the 1980s. This more or less tragic narrative is the prehistory for the common undertaking by the Platform's contributors to rethink radically the horizon of development for the postcolonial African city. For most contributors, this takes place through a reconsideration of 'failed' urban forms, which, instead of treating them as failures, looks at them in terms of an alternative to received paradigms of urbanization. This demands not just a closer look, but a new sense of what is being looked for, and therefore a new conception of urbanization. This introduces a methodological theme of the Platform that is conspicuously indebted to Merleau-Ponty. As AbdouMalig Simone

argues, in terms of the received Western conceptions of urbanization, many of the emergent urban forms of contemporary African cities are rendered invisible.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, he argues that invisibility has become the pervasive condition for the citizens of cities such as Lagos and Douala, because their activities are often occluded by what is considered significant by received models of urbanization and urban behaviour.

For Rem Koolhaas – whose paper on Lagos derives from a large research project that he has directed on the contemporary city, *Project on the City* – the transformation of urban studies at stake here is radical: 'Taken together, these studies [from *Project on the City*] suggest that the notion of the city itself has mutated into something that is no longer Western.'<sup>26</sup> Koolhaas's interest in Lagos concerns the symptomatic significance of its exceptional transformation: in fifteen years it will be the third largest city in the world, able to support a colossal population despite the apparently terminal decay and breakdown of the programme of modernization undertaken in the 1970s after a period of postcolonial affluence from its oil fields. This combination of decay and population explosion has become characteristic of Africa's exponential urbanization. Largely as a result of rural decline, 40 per cent of Africa's population live in cities today, with population increases in cities such as Lagos, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam or Kinshasa dramatically exceeding the world's metropolitan growth. Through the metaphor of a camera's field of vision, Koolhaas describes how, on his first trips to Lagos, what appeared close up as apocalyptic rubbish heaps, chronic overcrowding and dysfunctional transport systems subsequently, and from a different angle, revealed complex systems of recycling and highly sophisticated strategies of trading that enable the sustenance of millions of people in a deeply impoverished environment. In this sense, Lagos's emergence as one of the world's largest cities is built on conditions that depart radically from the 'Western' model of urbanization.

This revised conception of urban studies brings into view many of the so-called 'informal' activities of these cities, which are conventionally disregarded as supplementary to the essential activities of urban citizens. This is especially the case in cities where the state's power has declined to the point that its formal structures conceal informal but habituated conventions that effectively determine urban life.<sup>27</sup> It is in this context that certain themes of global and postcolonial citizenship developed. Antoine Bouillon's examination of identity in post-apartheid Durban is particularly interesting here, insofar as it is an example

of political tensions that have emerged between a global and a postcolonial citizenship.<sup>28</sup> It discusses not just how black South Africans, who remain impoverished after apartheid, have rationalized an animosity to immigrants according to a nationalistic ideology – that is inscribed geographically in relations to the city – despite the fact that their nationalism is forged explicitly on the anti-apartheid movement’s premiss of universal human rights.

In certain respects, *Under Siege* is the Platform that responds most directly and concretely to Documenta 11’s preoccupation with postcolonial globalization. The selection of African cities obviously affects profoundly the kind of postcolonial urbanization at stake, but the curators are explicit about this and do not propose the Platform as exhaustive of the topic. However, except for an interesting essay on Nigerian home videos, this Platform is also even more indifferent to questions of art than any of the others.<sup>29</sup> And yet, in raising the issue of the contemporary city in this form, Platform 4 proposes a novel critique of the relation of the city to avant-garde art that is profoundly significant. If the aspiration to overcome the institutional autonomy of the museum or gallery is taken to be one of the decisive gestures of the historical avant-garde, it has been the city that has nearly always awaited this escape with problematic demands of its own. Equally, if the modern institutional autonomy of art can be traced back to the Louvre’s relocation of artefacts from Napoleon’s imperial campaigns, and in particular from the ‘beautiful city’ of Rome, then the city can be seen to frame the beginning and end of art.<sup>30</sup>

More topically, it is clear that art museums and exhibitions have become popular ways in which to advertise cities within a global economy, partly for tourism, but also as part of the establishment of these cities as nodal points in the increasingly flexible and transnational movement of capital. Documenta stands in a peculiar relation to this history. Its periodic form – every five years – was conceived as an attempt to overcome the avant-garde’s objection to the classifying form of the museum, without obviously going so far as to abolish it altogether.<sup>31</sup> Kassel is also both an exception to, and proof of, the significance of art shows in establishing a world city: it is only because of Documenta that Kassel is known internationally. Within this situation, Documenta 11’s dedication of a Platform to African cities can be interpreted as a profound critique of the urban presuppositions of the historical avant-garde. Although Kassel is hardly Paris or New York, the displacement of Documenta’s urban site into these postcolonial cities, in the context of

their emergent global significance – which takes place literally in so far as Platform 4 was held in Lagos – performs a critique that, on the one hand, reveals the Western, imperial urban site of the historical avant-gardes, and, on the other, resonates with the new urban politics of contemporary globalization.

### Urban Imaginaries of Latin America

Although published under Documenta 11’s imprint, *Urban Imaginaries of Latin America* is not formally attached to any particular Platform, but it is undoubtedly very close to Platform 4 in its concerns and should be examined as such. It serves to supplement the African bias of Platform 4, presenting studies of Asunción, Barcelona, Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Havana, La Paz, Lima, Mexico City, Montevideo, Panama City, Quito, Santiago de Chile and São Paulo.<sup>32</sup> *Urban Imaginaries* is far more unified in its form than the volumes published from the Platforms, as one would expect from the publication of a research project. It assumes the protocols of conventional social science, with texts clarifying its hypothesis, theoretical presuppositions and methodology, written by the director, Armando Silva – although the theorization is generally very poor, particularly in the recourse to psychoanalysis, and it tends to undermine rather than enhance what is, otherwise, a fascinating project. As its title suggests, the aim of the project is to examine the imaginary dimension of urbanization within the cities under consideration, not merely as an unreal form of social perception or illusion, but as a substantive mode of the constitution of urban spaces and practices. As such, it is oriented against a purely objective or physical conception of urban forms and systems – exhausted by the building of roads, residential areas, parks, and so on – and, instead, develops a form of urban analysis that examines the city as the formation of a social imaginary, invoking the imaginary city as an object of analysis. The project has a further critical and emancipatory dimension in so far as it is oriented towards the enfranchising of citizens’ imaginary constitution of public space, as an alternative or corrective to the norms imposed or induced by a city’s physical environment, in so far as that is overwhelmingly forged by the state. The volume includes numerous studies of urban fantasies and imaginary constructions, in practices such as graffiti, forms of dance and protest.<sup>33</sup>

Silva itemizes a number of methodologies or techniques through which urban imaginaries may be examined. These include ‘points of view’, understood not merely as opinions, but as the ‘operation’ of a



In this relation to public art, *Urban Imaginaries* responds more directly to questions of art than *Under Siege*. And, although the psychoanalytical presuppositions of the project are confused, the project suggests a social scientific institution of the kinds of psychoanalytically informed urban practices developed by avant-garde groups such as the surrealists and, in particular, the situationists and their quasi-scientific practice of ‘psychogeography’.

gaze, in which the imaginary relation of an observer to an urban space is revealed. These are examined through what Silva refers to as ‘visual sketches’, which are various forms of figuring, symbolizing or constructing an image of the city. Largely, they are derived from the imaginary associations that roads, neighbourhoods or spaces acquire, such as the different colours, ambiances or genders with which certain streets are associated.<sup>34</sup> These are collated through polls, and various statistical representations of these are included throughout the book. While many of the imaginary forms are subterranean and unofficial, the book also includes studies of high-profile media representations of the city, as well as a fairly extensive collection of postcard depictions of the cities. Silva also refers to the significance of the study of ‘family histories’, although there is little evidence of this in the book. Part of the volume displays a series of identification card portraits of people from these cities as part of their image culture, without any information about who is being depicted. Finally, a number of ‘parallel representations’ are cited. These take the form of public interventions, modelled on the critical function of public art events, which attempt to disrupt the received mediation of the city. Silva refers to a project on public radio, in which pivotal historical moments in a city’s life are spliced into radio programmes in the style of an oral memory. The research project has also bought a monthly page in a paper circulated with *El Tempo*, in which they attempt to review the news of the month in images.

This encourages the reconfiguration of urban space according to psychic associations and desires induced by moving through the city. Guy Debord understood this as an emancipatory form of urbanism, partly in the specifically historical context of breaking free from the military presuppositions of Paris’s urban modernization. Such a historical contextualization of urbanism is absent from the conception of *Urban Imaginaries*. But in the light of the historical critique of colonial and postcolonial urbanization developed in *Under Siege*, we could begin to imagine a corrective: a postcolonial psychogeography.

## 5\_Exhibition

Enwezor insists that the exhibition of Platform 5 – which has traditionally been the only site of Documenta – should not be understood as the result or destination of the other Platforms. Their unavailability until after the exhibition ensured that this would not be the case. But, contrary to the dismissal of the theoretical Platforms as irrelevant to the exhibition by certain critics, reviewing the exhibition in conjunction with them is revealing, although not in the sense that they explain the exhibition and its works in the instrumental form of a methodology. The exhibition is far too complex for this, as are the foregoing Platforms, and many of the artists provide theoretical contextualizations of their own work that resist such a connection. But the Platforms do generate a set of debates in relation to which one’s experience of the exhibition may be inflected and, in important respects,

enriched. This relation is probably most straightforwardly informative in some of the photographic work. David Goldblatt's photographs of post-apartheid South Africa are illuminated by the questions of post-apartheid citizenship addressed in *Experiment with Truth*. The photographs of Lagos by Muyiwa Osifuye resonate with the context of urban studies presented in *Under Siege*, as does Ravi Agarwal's photographs of casual labour in India. But there are also works that seem directly to contradict the themes or ethos established by the other Platforms, or at least to go against their grain. Constant's utopian urbanism sits ambivalently among the critiques of Westernism presented by *Under Siege*. His models are fantastically unconventional, while still partaking of a kind of planned utopianism largely absent from *Under Siege*. In this sense, the aged and faded inclusion of these works from the late 1950s and 1960s seems to be critical of them. But this is certainly not the case in the fantastic urban landscapes of Bodys Isek Kingelez, who lives in Kinshasa but whose urban imagination projects a utopianism largely absent from the sensibilities of the urbanism of *Under Siege*, although perhaps not of *Urban Imaginaries*. And yet his use of readily available materials speaks a certain distance from cutting-edge modernity.

The materials and formal strategies of much of the art display a range of practices that have become characteristic of contemporary art since the breakdown of the medium-specific narratives of modernism in the 1970s. In one sense this breakdown is a rather 'Western' affair. However, it has resulted in an experimental openness that has destroyed a number of conventions that previously excluded work developing outside the leading art centres by ascribing it a purely ethnographic status. This is particularly apparent in the montage of high- and low-tech practices. In some instances these are characterized by cultural contexts, or perhaps preconceptions. Compare Feng Mengbo's videogame with the simple arrangement of books, images and artefacts in a room by Georges Adéagbo. There was also a conspicuous use of photography, video and video projection that often directly or indirectly invoked the news media. It is noticeable that Platform 5's larger exhibition catalogue opens its pages onto a series of news images from a number of familiar, dramatic recent events: bombings in Palestine and Israel, Ground Zero, anti-globalization demonstrations, and so on. This image culture seems archetypal of the condensation of spaces and times that Enwezor attributes to everyday life in the age of postcolonial globalization. In certain respects, this is the combined

effect of the exhibition as a whole. It is less the experience of ethnographic wonder or shock that is prevalent here, than the both strange and familiar experience that results from the critical assemblage of the spaces and times that constitute our everyday life today, indeed our subjectivity.

Various works deal with the vicissitudes of global passage and communication. Allan Sekula's series of photographs and texts, *Fish Story*, documents the lie in the popular image of contemporary global capitalism as a virtual and rapidly moving substance, depicting aspects of the massive industrial cargo ships that actually transport goods and that generate forms of manual labour that persist as if regardless of its obsolescence. Tsunami.net is a group of computer artists that have developed a programme that demands that one is actually in the physical locality of the server that hosts the website you wish to visit in order to access it, thereby subverting the virtual forms of accessibility generated by the Internet. There are photographs of the members of the group travelling, with computer and receiver in their backpack, in order to visit a website. Certain artists made works that deal with the specific locality of Kassel. This may seem to contradict the eccentric logic of Documenta 11, but there are some ingenious solutions to this. Jens Haaning exchanged a light bulb between a street light in Kassel and a street light in Hanoi. This minimal, largely invisible exchange presents a kind of internationalist reinvention of Dan Flavin's constructivism, elegantly expressing the kind of equivalence of distant spaces that is symptomatic of various aspects of globalization. Thomas Hirschhorn constructed a monument to Georges Bataille in a predominantly Turkish, working-class residential estate on the outskirts of Kassel. This involved a library, café, play area and media centre, all run by local kids. Hirschhorn narrated this as a displacement of the central exhibited spaces of Kassel, thereby reiterating Documenta 11's project in Kassel's own back yard amidst its own immigrant communities. Ironically, the surrealist fantasy of the primitive becomes the memorial with which to criticize Documenta 11's own limits.

It is evident that Documenta 11 remains entwined in the legacies of a heritage of radical avant-garde artistic practice in a number of complex ways, many of which it conceals from itself. With respect to Bürger's influential distinction of historical and neo-avant-gardes, Documenta 11 is ambivalent. On the one hand, like the neo-avant-gardes, it proposes a radical revolution in the institutions of art, while

presupposing them in various ways. Documenta 11 is proposed as the *détournement* of the spectacular visibility of Documenta, in order to pursue a destructive critique of Documenta. But this is par for the course of contemporary exhibiting. Otherwise, let's face it, Documenta wouldn't have let it happen. However, like the historical avant-gardes, Documenta 11 is conceived in conjunction with a radical political project that promises a dramatic transformation of social relations. Moreover, it does this through a conception of the totality of social relations that is distinct from the historical avant-gardes and therefore not merely a parody of them. But this political project of a globalized postcolonialism that is to replace the project of communism remains currently highly indeterminate, leaving Enwezor's artistic gambits in debt to a future that demands a formidable struggle. If we are to judge Documenta 11 in a way that is less directly indebted to such a future, then it is as a watershed in the development of a postcolonial art practice. It is certainly not unprecedented in conception. The discourses of postcoloniality have been well established over the last twenty-five years. Its novelty is more curatorial and opportunistic. It articulates the unity of the discourses and practices of postcolonialism and avant-gardism on the global stage provided by Documenta.


## Notes

1. Axel Lapp's review in *Art Monthly* is symptomatic of this problem. Referring to the inaccessibility of the non-exhibition Platforms, he complains: 'since they could not normally be attended by visitors to the exhibition (one was closed to the public altogether) and since the publication of their proceedings will not be completed before the end of the show, this contextualization will only be virtual and will only happen with hindsight. This later aggrandisement of the exhibition through theoretical discourse seems quite unnecessary. "Platform 5" could well stand on its own.' *Art Monthly* 258, July/August 2002, p. 8.
2. Okwui Enwezor, 'The Black Box', in *Documenta 11 – Platform 5: Exhibition*, pp. 42–55.
3. *Ibid.* p. 47.
4. See Anthony Downey, 'The Spectacular Difference of Documenta 11', *Third Text*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2003, pp. 85–92.
5. Enwezor does not fully address the complex persistence and dissolution of postcolonial relations of margin and centre. But, as I have tried to indicate, there is a sense in which this problem can be negotiated via an Althusserian concept of contradiction, whereby a structural relation (for Marxism, superstructure and infrastructure; for postcolonialism, margin and centre) is not completely dissolved but subject to various forms of overdetermination. See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster, Verso, London and New York, 1969.
6. Enwezor writes that postcoloniality 'exceeds the border of the former colonized world to lay claim to the

modernized, metropolitan world of empire by making empire's former "other" visible and present at all times, either through the media or through mediatory, spectacular, and carnivalesque relations of language, communications, images, contact, and resistance within the everyday.' Enwezor, 'The Black Box', p. 45.

7. *Ibid.* p. 44. Enwezor is indebted here to the link made between postcolonial everyday life and regimes of subjectivity in an article by Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, 'Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis', originally published in *Public Culture* 16, Winter 1995, but which is reprinted as part of Platform 4 in *Under Siege*, pp. 99–128. See discussion of *Under Siege* below.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
9. 'As the battle with the forces of "terrorist" elements continues apace in Afghanistan and elsewhere – as Palestinians fight Israeli hegemony in the Occupied Territories; as anti-globalisation groups battle the police in Genoa, Seattle, Montreal, and other cities in Europe and North America; as protesters in Argentina, Turkey, Nigeria, and all across the developing world engage the pernicious policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – there is a view today that Ground Zero represents the clear ground from which the margin has moved to the centre in order to reconceptualize the key ideological differences of the present global situation.' *Ibid.*, p. 48.
10. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984.
11. While Documenta is funded by the German state and various German art foundations, it also has a number of corporate and charitable sponsors, which include the Ford Foundation, the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, Deutsche Telekom, Finanzgruppe (whose advert says: 'Artistic freedom is a fundamental right. And we feel free to promote it.'), Volkswagen, and others.
12. Bhikhu Parekh, 'Deepening Liberal Democracy', in Enwezor et al., eds, *Democracy Unrealized*, pp. 55–66.
13. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, 'Globalization and Democracy', in *ibid.*, pp. 323–36.
14. Chantal Mouffe, 'For an Agonistic Public Sphere', in *ibid.*, pp. 87–96; and Ernesto Laclau, 'Democracy between Autonomy and Heteronomy', in *ibid.*, pp. 377–86.
15. Boris Groys, 'Beyond Diversity: Cultural Studies and Its Postcommunist Other', in *ibid.*, pp. 303–22.
16. See, respectively, Albie Sachs, 'Different Kinds of Truth: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission', in Enwezor et al., eds, *Experiments with Truth*, pp. 43–60; Gurjot Malhi, 'An Experiment in International Justice: The Philosophy, Methodology and Working of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia', in *ibid.*, pp. 195–204; and Maria Jose Guembe, 'The Search for the Truth Before the Courts', in *ibid.*, pp. 231–40.
17. See Ruti Teitel, 'Transitional Justice as Liberal Narrative', in *ibid.*, pp. 241–60.
18. See Boris Buden, 'Truth and Reconciliation Are Not What We Really Need', in *ibid.* pp. 65–79.
19. This is indicated by the source of the title 'Experiments with Truth', which is derived from the processes of decolonization and postcolonialism addressed in Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.
20. See Susana Torre, 'Constructing Memorials', in Enwezor

- et al., eds, *Experiments with Truth*, pp. 343–60.
21. See Alfredo Jaar, 'It's Difficult', in *ibid.*, pp. 289–310.
  22. See Derek Walcott's contributions, 'Exasperating Theory', 'More than Criticism', and especially, 'The Length of the Breath', all in Enwezor et al, eds, *Créolité and Creolization*, respectively, pp.19-20, pp.43-6, pp.241-44. See also Isaac Julien, 'Creolizing Vision', *ibid.* pp.149-56; Petrine Archer-Straw, 'Paradise, Primitivism, and Parody', *ibid.* pp.63-76.
  23. See Virginia Pérez-Ratton, 'Central America and Creolization: The Invisible Caribbean?' in *ibid.* pp.77-86.
  24. Stuart Hall, 'Creolization, Diaspora, and Hybridity in the Context of Globalization', in *ibid.* p.198. See also his 'Créolité and the Process of Creolization', *ibid.* pp.27-42, and various of his contributions to the 'Open Sessions'.
  25. See AbdouMaliq Simone, 'The Visible and the Invisible: Remaking Cities in Africa', in Enwezor et al., eds, *Under Siege: Four African Cities*, pp. 23–44.
  26. Rem Koolhaas, 'Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos', in *ibid.*, p. 175. *Project on the City* has otherwise concentrated on the Peal River Delta between Hong Kong and Macao. See Chuihua Judy Chung, Jeffrey Inaba, Rem Koolhaas and Sze Tsung Leong, eds, *Great Leap Forward*, Harvard Design School Project on the City, Taschen, Cologne, 2002. For a review of this project see Fredric Jameson, 'Future City', *New Left Review* 21, May/June 2003, pp. 65–79.
  27. See Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman's discussion of Cameroon in 'Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis', *ibid.* pp. 99–126.
  28. See Antoine Bouillon, 'Between Euphemism and Informalism: Inventing the City', in Enwezor et al., eds, *Under Siege: Four African Cities*, pp. 81–98.
  29. Onokome Okome, 'Writing the Anxious City: Images of Lagos in Nigerian Home Video Films', *ibid.* pp. 315–36.
  30. For an account of this imperial origin of modern art, see Hans Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, trans. H. Atkins, Reaktion Books, London, 2001. It should be noted that Belting is principally concerned with a particular myth of the masterpiece, rather than the avant-garde dissolution of art into life.
  31. See Manfred Schneckeburger, *Documenta: Idee und Institution*, Bruckmann, Munich, 1983, pp. 7–28.
  32. Note the exceptional inclusion of Barcelona among these Latin American cities, Silva, ed., *Urban Imaginaries from Latin America*.
  33. See for instance Miguel Ángel Aguilar, 'The Full, Imagined, and Invisible Centre of Mexico City', in *ibid.* pp. 152–69; Armando Silva, 'Graffiti, Humour and Citizens of Latin America', in *ibid.*, pp. 212–23; Guillermo Maricaca, 'Bodies of Air: On Three Chola Dances', in *ibid.* pp. 240–47; Valeria Silvina Pita and Alejandra Vassallo, 'Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo: From Dictatorship to Democracy', in *ibid.* pp. 248–61.
  34. See, for instance, Natalia Fernández and Teresa Velázquez, 'Barcelona: Resonance, Smells, and Chromatisms', in *ibid.*, pp. 176–91.



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# Enigma variation

## Laplanchean psychoanalysis and the formation of the raced unconscious

**Shannon W. Sullivan**

In *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills argues that contemporary structures of white domination in the West operate by means of an epistemology of ignorance for white people.<sup>1</sup> White people suffer from cognitive dysfunctions such that they cannot understand the racially (and racistly) structured world in which they live and, indeed, helped create. For Mills, while no person of any race is self-transparent, becoming a white person entails a particularly extreme form of self-opacity regarding issues of race that corresponds with an egregious misunderstanding of the world. Because of the racialized moral psychology created by the racial contract, white people are, ironically, often unable to see race and racism.

I begin with Mills because, although it does not make use of psychoanalysis, his work suggests both how and why psychoanalytic theory can be of help to critical race theory's project of examining race for the purpose of challenging racism and white privilege. While the white cognitive dysfunction described by Mills sometimes operates preconsciously, his concept of the epistemology of ignorance also points to the vast pools of human thought inaccessible to consciousness, and thus unconscious. This refers not to a mere gap or empty space; rather, it is something that is actively, dynamically produced, and which stubbornly maintains its existence. This means that as unconscious, racism's effectiveness is found in its ability to perpetuate itself as something invisible and unknowable. As Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks writes, 'It is precisely this unconscious resiliency of race that invites psychoanalytic exploration.'<sup>2</sup> A critical race theory that omits the unconscious operations of race and racism touches on only the tip of the iceberg that is white privilege. This is not to say that white privilege is only psychical. But the importance of the economic, political, geographical, and other aspects of white privilege should not lead us to overlook the

psychological impact that race and racism have on people of all races.

My task in this article is to demonstrate how the work of French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche can be used to provide a fruitful understanding of how the unconscious becomes raced and, correspondingly, how race and racism operate unconsciously.<sup>3</sup> But why Laplanche when other work on the possible intersections between psychoanalysis and critical race theory has already been begun?<sup>4</sup> I argue here that Laplanche's theory of seduction provides an account of the formation of the unconscious most useful for critical race theory's purposes. Freud's model of the unconscious is never entirely free of an asocial biologism, and Lacan can say little about the Other whose desire produces my own. In contrast, Laplanche's theory presents the unconscious as initially and continually formed in relationship with concrete others in a sociopolitical world. Although it focuses on sexuality, Laplanche's work can be extended to include race and racism as well, and can shed light on the particular ways in which a racialized white psyche that is ignorant of its own racialized knowledge is formed and thus might be reformed differently.

It is Frantz Fanon, as much as Freud or Lacan, whose psychoanalytic work resonates with that of Laplanche. Fanon's concept of sociogeny adapts psychoanalysis and phenomenology to argue for the ongoing importance of sociopolitical environments in the development of unconscious racism.<sup>5</sup> Both Fanon and Laplanche allow us to understand race ontologically. This does not mean that racial categories are biologically determined or scientifically necessary. Just the opposite: they are historical, cultural, temporal aspects of human existence, but that does not mean that they are not of ontological significance, for the ontology of the human being – what (human) being is – is not composed of eternal and unchanging character-

istics. As Linda Martín Alcoff has argued, ‘The fact that race has lost its scientific credibility does not entail, then, that it has lost its ontological status, since ... ontology [need] not imply a reference in a transcendental reality.’<sup>6</sup> The world could have developed such that categories of race and practices of racism never existed.

Part of the power of both Fanon’s and Laplanche’s work is that it explains how oppressive structures such as white domination take root existentially in people’s personal lives. Racism has a long history of perpetuating itself through political, economic, national, educational and other institutions that are much larger, so to speak, than any individual. Yet part of the way that these institutions are able so effectively to privilege white people and exploit non-white people is through the development of individual attachments and commitments to them. This is where a socially attuned psychoanalysis can be of particular help to critical race theory: it can help us understand both how people become personally invested in racist institutions and structures and how they might try to combat this ‘interior’ investment through a transformation of their relationship to the ‘external’ world. Much more than the transformation of the individual is needed to eliminate racism, but changes to larger, impersonal institutions will ultimately be effective only if the roots they have planted in people’s psychosomatic habits have been dug up.

Laplanche’s seduction theory is not unique in its ability to help identify those roots. As well as Fanon, John Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy also emphasizes the co-constitutive relationship of ‘external’ environment and ‘internal’ psyche.<sup>7</sup> Laplanche’s distinctive contribution, however, is his detailed examination of the specific ways that body, psyche and world transact to create the unconscious. Even though Laplanche’s work never discusses race, it implicitly extends Fanon’s sociogenic account of the ‘epidermalization’ of racism,<sup>8</sup> and goes much further in explaining exactly how other people magnetize the psychophysiological skin of a child, generating its unconscious out of this process.

### **The enigmatic message**

Laplanche’s theory of seduction explains the formation of the infant’s unconscious by means of seduction by adults. Laplanche’s use of the term ‘seduction’, however, does not refer to a physically sexual (and abusive) act that takes place between an adult and an infant. This, of course, was the central component of the seduction theory that Freud entertained early in his career to explain his patients’ hysterical symptoms, but

that he subsequently abandoned to develop his theory of infant sexuality. For Laplanche, adult seduction of the infant is a real event, and in that sense he thinks that the early Freud was on to something that was unfortunately lost in his move away from seduction theory. What Freud did not see, however, is that the event of seduction involves the transference of enigmatic messages about sexuality from adult to child, not a sexual act in the usual sense of the term.

The enigmatic message, when Laplanche sometimes also called the enigmatic signifier, is a communication from the unconscious of an adult to an infant or child, the meaning of which is unknown to or hidden from both. By means of bodily expressions such as gestures or grimaces – perhaps also, though rarely for babies, by means of spoken words – the adult implants a message about sexuality in the child, at least a portion of which the child cannot comprehend.<sup>9</sup> The child tries to understand the message, and indeed sometimes succeeds in part. The parts that she does not understand are repressed. They are the remainders of the attempted translation of the message that form the child’s unconscious.<sup>10</sup> The etymology of the verb ‘to seduce’ (*seduire*) helps indicate why Laplanche describes this process as seductive: in seduction, the adult attracts, leads, or draws the infant in an irresistible fashion down a path that is aside or astray from ones to which the child understands how to respond.

Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* can be read as providing an illustration of the process of seduction. Morrison demonstrates how the story’s narrator, a nine-year old black girl named Claudia, and her older sister, Frieda, are tuned into the adult world around them, receiving its messages even though they do not fully understand them:

Frieda and I are washing Mason jars. We do not hear their [the adults nearby] words, but with grown-ups we listen to and watch out for their voices.... The edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre.<sup>11</sup>

Morrison reveals an adult world full of unintended bodily gestures and tones that communicates a great deal of enigmatic meaning to the children in it. From the sound of parents’ and neighbours’ voices, Claudia and Frieda know that something is up, but they do not fully understand the edgy mood that filters from the living room into the kitchen. The incomprehensible portions of the adults’ messages – which, in this case,

involve the yearning and later angry revulsion generated by a newly arrived boarder in Claudia's home – will become part of the girls' unconscious.

Morrison's example also brings out the important role that the body plays in the transmission of enigmatic messages. Along with the timbre of voice – itself a bodily effect – it is the comportment of adults' faces, hands and feet that communicates to the children. A tensely pursed mouth, an anxiously tapping foot, a worriedly wrung hand convey the gravity of their family's world to Claudia and Frieda even though they do not fully know why the situation is grave and cannot understand the words used by the adults to discuss it.

It is not just adult bodies, moreover, that are involved in communicating enigmatic messages. Laplanche also describes the messages as implanted in the bodies of the children who receive them. He explains that 'the signifiers brought by the adult [to the child] are fixed, as onto a surface, in the psychophysiological "skin" of a subject in which the unconscious agency is not yet differentiated.'<sup>12</sup> A child is not born with an unconscious; such psychical complexity is not created until a later point in the process of seduction. Early in that process, in the moments of the initial creation of the unconscious, the enigmatic messages operate in and through the child's body. For Laplanche, the body that receives these messages is not a mere lump of matter. Even prior to the formation of an unconscious, the body is already being invested with meaning. Some areas of the body – notably the mouth, genitals and anus – are receiving more intense attention from

caregivers than others, due to the infant's feeding and excreting and its caregivers' cleaning up after both. This attention enables 'the binding of component instincts to *determinate zones in the body*', a binding that is not reductively biologicistic since 'there is no initial or natural opposition between the instinctual and the intersubjective, or between the instinctual and the cultural.'<sup>13</sup> The 'exterior' surface of the body is already becoming magnetized with cultural meanings prior to the development of an 'interior' unconscious. It is this differentially charged, psychophysiological skin that receives the first enigmatic messages transmitted by adults.

Initially, then, the unconscious is not yet differentiated from the body. Or, rather, since the unconscious proper does not yet exist, we should say that the body serves as what will later become the unconscious, once the process of attempted translation has begun and has produced untranslated remainders. While Laplanche does not elaborate the point, an implication of his claim about the body's role in seduction is that the differentially magnetized body continues to play an important role in the function of the unconscious once it is formed. This might be understood as a reworking of Freud's intriguing claim that 'the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but it itself the projection of a surface.'<sup>14</sup> By this, Freud meant that the ego is formed out of sensations that spring from the body's surface. In a similar fashion, we might say that Laplanche is interested in how the unconscious is first and foremost a bodily unconscious. For Laplanche, the body is the first site of the influence



and power of the unconscious; it becomes the primary site for psychophysiological investments and intensities that originate from the adult world.<sup>15</sup>

To this point, I have focused on the child's inability to understand the message coming from the adult, but equally important to Laplanche's theory is that the adult also does not understand the full meaning of the message communicated to the child. The message is enigmatic precisely because of its double opacity:

These signifiers are not rendered enigmatic by the simple fact that the infant does not possess the code that he will need to acquire.... The issue is rather that the adult world is entirely infiltrated with unconscious and sexual significations, of which *the adult too* does not possess the code.<sup>16</sup>

Enigmatic messages are not intentionally sent to a child by an adult. Certainly intentional messages also exist. But it is the messages that the adult does not mean to send, does not realize that she is sending, and the meaning of which she does not herself fully understand, that are the material that is transformed into the infant's unconscious. These messages, Laplanche explains, 'are frequently ones of violence, savagery, castration, and anality', and they are conveyed by phenomena such as 'a smile (in Leonardo), an angry gesture, a grimace of disgust, etc.'<sup>17</sup> They can also be found in the tone of voice, the angle of a hand, and the positioning of the feet mentioned by Morrison's Claudia. The adult world is sending unconscious enigmatic messages to children all the time, and it is these messages – not the more transparent, consciously intended ones – that have the greatest psychosomatic effect on children because they metabolize into unconscious remnants that have a potentially lifelong impact on how children will interact with the world.

### **The seduction of white privilege**

Already we can see how, for Laplanche, a person's environment is crucial to the formation of his or her unconscious. The other, in other words, is at the core of who I am. This other, moreover, encompasses more than the mother and the father – the adult components of the Oedipal triangle that are so crucial to Freud's account of the development of the infant's psyche. Laplanche is highly critical of Freud's 'familialism':

The fact that a child is brought up by *parents*, or even by *its* parents, is, ultimately a *contingency*.... *Ultimately*, and whatever distortions may result from the fact, it is possible to become a human being without having a family; it is not possible to do so without encountering an adult world.<sup>18</sup>

Laplanche is also critical of Lacan's rendering of the other as abstract, impersonal, and purely linguistic.<sup>19</sup> The other of Laplanche's theory of seduction is a variety of concrete adult others: the entire array of the social, political, economic, aesthetic, material and psychological adult world that helps compose the adult unconscious. While it might be a contingent fact that much of this adult world comes to the infant through the messages of its parents or other primary caregivers, what is being transmitted is not just a familial meaning, but also a complex tangle of local and global significations. This means that, for Laplanche, no absolute line can be drawn between 'external', impersonal institutions and the 'internal', personal psyche. To speak of the unconscious is necessarily to address the social institutions and practices – in the case of racism, one thinks especially of slavery, colonialism, apartheid and forced segregation, economic exploitation and immigration – that help structure it.

In the complex tangle of transmitted meanings, Laplanche focuses on enigmatic messages concerning sexuality. His central example is the breastfeeding mother, whose own unconscious sexual pleasure and desire expressed through breastfeeding comprise a message that is passed on to the nursing child.<sup>20</sup> In his emphasis upon the non-familial adult world, however, Laplanche leaves open the possibility of focusing on different enigmatic messages, such as those concerning race and racism. Objecting to psychoanalysis's pejorative uses of the term 'culturalism', Laplanche claims that 'certain psychoanalytic parameters – all psychoanalytic parameters – may vary as a result of cultural differences.'<sup>21</sup> If the infant's unconscious is formed through its inevitably failed attempt to translate the enigmatic messages sent to it by the adult world, and given that the adult world historically has been and continues to be both structured by categories of race and riddled with racism, the infant's unconscious will inevitably be partially formed by race and racism. An adult world that privileges whiteness helps produce a child's unconscious, which also privileges whiteness by sending the child messages about race that often are opaque to both child and adult alike.

Morrison's novel helps develop this point, demonstrating how the beauty ideals that support white privilege in the USA can be seductively communicated to black girls in particular. When Claudia receives a blue-eyed baby doll for Christmas, she reports that

From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish.... Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed

that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured.

When Claudia dismembers the doll to try to find inside the beauty which she does not see outside, the adults are saddened and outraged: 'Tears threatened to erase the aloofness of their authority. The emotion of years of unfulfilled longing preened in their voices.'<sup>22</sup> The adults' tears and tone of voice arguably transmit an enigmatic message to Claudia about the importance and power of whiteness in the adult world of the USA. The message is unknown to the adults, who, certainly conscious of the existence of white racism against black people, are unaware of how their intense desire to share in whiteness proudly swells in their voices as they speak of the blue-eyed doll. And the message is equally opaque to Claudia. She is able to translate the part of it that says that the doll is very precious, but not able to translate its larger, more significant part, which is that whiteness is something desirable and that white standards of beauty are something that black females in particular should strive to achieve. Claudia's dismembering of the doll can thus be understood as a physical manifestation of the psychological process of failed translation and repression. Trying to understand why the doll is so valuable by tearing open its hidden inside, Claudia finds nothing and leaves herself only destroyed remnants of something that she has failed to comprehend.

The physical remnants of the doll are refuse that can be quickly thrown away. The psychological remnants of the message, however, are not so easily discarded. They too are waste products, but they are retained rather than eliminated, forming part of Claudia's unconscious. These untranslated remnants of the enigmatic message of white privilege lead Claudia to hate and want to dismember blonde white girls like Shirley Temple and light-skinned black girls like her schoolmate Maureen Peel: 'all the time we knew that Maureen Peel was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us.'<sup>23</sup> Here is a knowledge that is unknown, remainders that are unabsorbed: Claudia cannot understand at this point in her life what that *Thing* is. The *Thing* that is white privilege, and specifically white beauty ideals for black women, becomes a powerful, unconscious aspect of her life. Claudia learns to cope with it self-destructively by loving the whiteness that she once hated: 'It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement.'<sup>24</sup>

The fact that the breast is an erogenous zone for most women helps make plausible Laplanche's claim that unconscious messages about sexuality and sexual pleasure are communicated from mother to child, including infants and babies who are much younger than Claudia. Less obvious is how enigmatic messages about white privilege could be transmitted to a child in its first few months. If messages about sexuality are somatically transmitted during the act of breastfeeding, what is the particular mechanism through which messages about race operate? Morrison's reference to cleanliness suggests an answer to this question. Caring for a baby involves a great deal of cleaning its body, such as wiping off saliva, food, tears, urine, faeces. I hypothesize that these activities are a crucial site for the transmission of enigmatic signifiers about white privilege. In the USA and elsewhere, at the same time that cleanliness attempts to ensure bodily hygiene it conveys opaque messages about the meaning of hygiene in terms of white purity and black contamination.

Non-white people have long been associated with dirt, filth and pollution by white people. On one level, this association speaks of the (allegedly) lack of bodily cleanliness of those such as Jews, black people, Latinos, and others. In the USA and elsewhere, their skin is seen as dark and oily because unwashed, and they are perceived as having a particular racial smell that is born of filth.<sup>25</sup> On another, related level, their (alleged) dirtiness is a sign of a more intangible – though perceived as no less real – uncleanness. Their inferiority to white people is found in their moral, spiritual and mental impurity. These associations between non-white people and defilement took an extreme form in the genocidal murders of Jews, Roma and others by Nazi Germany, which were produced by 'the necessity to sweep clean the world'.<sup>26</sup> They also exist, however, in the less spectacular form of unconscious habits of connecting whiteness with cleanliness and blackness with impurity and, furthermore, policing the boundaries between the two so as to maintain a strict separation. In the USA and elsewhere, blackness functions as the abject, which means not only that it is (allegedly) filthy but also that it threatens the boundaries between the clean and the dirty.<sup>27</sup> It must be kept at bay through acts of cleansing if the contamination of whiteness is to be prevented.

These racist associations are part of the adult world into which infants have been socialized for hundreds of years, especially in the USA and Europe. Just as messages about sexuality are transmitted to a baby through the process of breastfeeding, messages about

race are transmitted to a baby through the process of cleaning it. (And the situation is even more complex than this simple comparison indicates, since messages concerning sexuality, especially the alleged uncleanness of female genitals, are also likely transmitted through acts of cleaning.) This is not to claim that an adult caregiver is consciously thinking about the racial significance of cleanliness as she wipes up her dirty baby. In all likelihood, that idea is the furthest thing from her (conscious) mind. Yet messages about racial hygiene that she does not intend to transmit to the baby are nonetheless implanted in its psychophysiological skin. A baby of any race growing up in a white privileged world begins at an early age to introject messages about the purity of whiteness and the abjection of blackness. A baby of only a few months may already have begun to develop unconscious habits of white privilege, even before she understands what that is.

### **Against Crusoeism**

Following Laplanche, I have deliberately referred to the leftover components of Claudia's attempt to understand the gift of the blue-eyed doll as remnants, rather than as enigmatic messages or signifiers. This is because, for Laplanche, there is no direct implantation of adult messages into the child's unconscious. A process of translation, which Laplanche often describes in terms of digestion and metabolism, always takes place and means that a disjunctive relationship between the adult's and the child's unconscious exists. This is significant because without such a disjunction the adult's unconscious would be replicated identically in the child, and then in the child's child, over and over without end. There would not be, in other words, any possible change or difference across generations in people's unconscious lives. Thus Laplanche cautions us not to 'disregard the break, the profound reshaping, which occurs between the [adult and the child], and which may be likened to a metabolism that breaks down food into its constituent parts and reassembles them into a completely different entity.'<sup>28</sup> Just as the waste products that result from digestion are both formed out of and greatly different from the food with which the process began, so too the remnants of Claudia's attempt to understand her family's gift of the doll are made up of *and* profoundly reshape their unconscious investments in white beauty ideals (evidenced in Claudia's later delight in cleanliness). The unconscious operations of white privilege are neither static nor simply repetitious. They transform

themselves across time and generations even as their function of race-based oppression persists.

It is significant that Laplanche uses the term 'repression' for these processes of translation and metabolism.<sup>29</sup> For Laplanche, in contrast with Freud, the unconscious is wholly created by repression. That is to say, the infant is not born with an initial unconscious that is then later built up by means of subsequent acts of repression. Laplanche acknowledges that 'this is the first point in my thought that would not be accepted by all psychoanalysts, many of whom would think that there is something biological and primary that is unconscious, which I don't believe because it would have to come from phylogenesis.'<sup>30</sup> The effect of implicitly accepting an account of the unconscious as primary can be seen in some psychoanalytic accounts of prejudice that claim that at least some unconscious racism is onto-psychologically hard-wired and thus that attempts to eradicate it are pointless and naive.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Laplanche's conception of the unconscious as wholly formed by the repression of unmetabolized remnants of adult messages enables critical race theory to be psychoanalytically informed without endorsing an ahistorical and acontextual view of racism as natural and inevitable.

One of the reasons for Laplanche's rejection of phylogenesis is his rejection of what he calls 'Robinson Crusoeism'. This account of the relationship between individuals and their world, common to much of philosophy as well as psychoanalysis, starts with the lone, isolated individual and then tries to build out from it to its surrounding physical, cultural, social and other environments. Inherent to Robinson Crusoeism, then, is both an atomistic conception of the individual and the positing of a dualistic relationship between 'inside' and 'outside'. As Laplanche's bodily digestion metaphors already indicate, however, inside and outside cannot be sharply separated or contained. The food that is outside the organism enters inside it, both becoming part of the inside and being reconstituted by the inside into another form that will exit outside. And just as, physiologically, inside and outside are always mixing such that each helps constitute the other, psychologically insides and outsides also engage in what I will call a transactional relationship (a term to which I shall return shortly). From the beginning, the baby's outside that is its caregivers' unconscious is helping constitute the baby's psychical inside, and in turn the baby's unconscious will have effects on the outside world as it guides the growing child's actions in it. Thus, both psychologically and physiologically, there is no 'solitary baby-Robinson'.<sup>32</sup> As Laplanche

explains, when trying to understand the development of the child *'the problem of becoming aware of or open to [the outside world] is a false problem'*.<sup>33</sup>

Freud's theory of phylogenesis is one of the misguided results of this false problem. As John Fletcher has remarked, Laplanche understands Freud's appeal to phylogenesis 'as something like a theoretical symptom, a false synthesis, produced by the attempt to escape a conceptual impasse, the imprisoning either/or of the external event and the innate constitution'.<sup>34</sup> If solitary baby-Robinson really exists, totally isolated from the world around her, then one is forced to posit innate structures and/or contents to explain the presence and development of the unconscious. Rejecting the dualism between inside and outside, however, one need not claim with Freud that the individual inherits memory traces of past events in the life of the species: 'The idea of an organism initially closed upon itself, and only then opening itself to the object (or constructing it, even?) is one of the modalities of biological idealism or solipsism' that should be refused.<sup>35</sup>

My use of the term 'transaction' to describe the dynamic, co-constitutive relationship between the bio-psychical organism and its environments is deliberate, even though Laplanche adamantly rejects the seemingly similar concept of interaction. As he explains, the communication between adult and infant 'is not interaction. It is a one-way action. It is one-way only on the sexual [that is, the unconscious] level.' Laplanche does not deny that interaction (transaction) occurs on physiological levels, but he insists that the infant does not reciprocally contribute to the adult's unconscious as the adult does the child's. This, again, is because the infant has no unconscious prior to its receipt and attempted translation of the adult's enigmatic messages. And even once the infant begins to metabolize an unconscious, it is still relatively passive in comparison to the adult because 'the active one has more "knowledge", more unconscious fantasies than the passive infant.' Thus, for Laplanche, the initial 'communication situation' between them could never be described as an interaction because it 'is neither bilateral, nor symmetrical'.<sup>36</sup> Prioritizing the centripetal movement from the adult to the child does not mean that centrifugal and then reciprocal movements are impossible, but those later movements are always guided by the initial, inward-directed vector.<sup>37</sup>



One of the reasons that Laplanche rejects interaction as a model for understanding the formation of the unconscious is that he suspects that it is just another way of denying that the other is the primary mechanism of the self. Ipsocentrism, as Laplanche calls it, 'centres on the person'. In contrast to ipsocentrist operations such as projection and foreclosure, Laplanche prioritizes 'mechanisms where it is the other who is the subject of the mechanisms', namely implantation.<sup>38</sup> Laplanche thus attempts to shift psychoanalytic theory away from the first (and even the third) person to the other: the other, not the person herself, should be the focus of those who want to understand her.<sup>39</sup> As Laplanche presents it, interaction smuggles back in the centrality of the person, making it co-primary with the other in the formation of the unconscious.

I do not disagree with Laplanche's description of the psychological asymmetry between adult and child, although I think it is important to note that even at a young age, the relationship quickly becomes transactional – a claim that Laplanche sometimes seems to deny. While the child's psyche contains relatively few undigested remnants, the child is always already actively engaged in the world, and thus her budding unconscious very quickly begins to produce effects on her life and the life of those around her. Patricia Williams offers a striking example of this point in her lectures for the BBC, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future*.

When he was three, her son's nursery-school teacher was concerned that the boy was colour-blind. Yet a visit to the ophthalmologist quickly reassured Williams that her son's vision was perfect. Williams eventually figured out that when the children in the nursery argued over race-related issues – such as whether a black kid could play the good guy in their games – the teachers at the predominantly white school repeatedly told the children that colour makes no difference at all. As a result of Williams's son's mis-translation of this remark, when he was asked what the colour of the grass was, for example, he replied either that he didn't know or, more cynically, that it made no difference.<sup>40</sup>

Here is an example of an enigmatic message about race forming the child's unconscious that in turn has an effect on the adult world around it. Of course, this message is not wholly enigmatic. There is a consciously intended message being sent verbally to the child from the adult: race and colour should not matter when assigning roles in children's games. With that conscious message, however, is also an unconscious message about the white teacher's anxieties surrounding race. The message sent to the child is not just about children's games, but about the (alleged) inappropriateness of race: of noticing race, of talking about race, of having a race, 'as though it were an especially delicate category of social infirmity – so-called – like extreme obesity or disfigurement', Williams explains.<sup>41</sup> There is a message about silence contained in the adult's spoken words (and, it is likely, in the teacher's facial expressions and bodily comportment as well, chiding the squabbling children, but Williams omits these details). Although spoken language is used, a 'silencing is passed from parent to child [that] is not only about the teaching of restraint; it is calculated to circumnavigate the question [of race] as though it had never been asked'.<sup>42</sup>

I would argue that this is the part of the message that was opaque to both Williams's son and his teacher. The children knew that race mattered; it was already deeply affecting the way that they divided up the world between good and evil. The enigmatic message sent to the children was that race matters so much that 'we' (read: adult white people in the USA, which are posited as the standard of normality to which everyone else should aspire) dare not even discuss it. For her son, one can speculate that this means that discomfort with racialized colour has become part of his unconscious and shapes his everyday actions in the world even when they do not seem to involve race at all. And if his unconscious includes remnants of anxiety about

racialized colour, then it is conceivable that in his gestures and bodily movements he too will send enigmatic messages about race and colour to others. As Laplanche claims, 'the adult-child relation is eminently suited to reawaken the conflicts and desires coming from the unconscious' because it is a situation in which the early remnants that helped form the adult's unconscious tend to be reactivated.<sup>43</sup> He gives the example of a man having his son circumcised, which can reactivate all sorts of untranslated unconscious remnants that remained after his own circumcision.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, a child's unconscious message about the shameful secret of race can reactivate and reinforce the early unconscious lessons that most adults in the USA – whether white, black, or another race – received as children about the inappropriateness of race (from a white-privileged perspective). This does not mean that the relationship between adult and child is initially interactive – the chicken precedes any particular egg, after all – but it very quickly becomes so, and thus we should not place as heavy an emphasis on the child's psychical passivity as does Laplanche.

### **The transactional unconscious**

Another point in Laplanche's theory that merits caution is its emphasis upon the other's contribution to the self as utterly foreign or alien to the self. For Laplanche, 'the unconscious [is] an alien inside me, and even one put inside me by an alien'. The alien unconscious is absolutely indigestible, 'a foreign body hard as iron', as Laplanche puts it, or 'an irreducible strangeness',<sup>45</sup> in Fletcher's words. Laplanche insists on this alienness to prevent a return to ipsocentrism and the corresponding Robinson Crusoeism. He is concerned about the tendency, in Freud's work and elsewhere, to 're-assimilate and reintegrate the alien', which closes down 'the path leading from the other thing in us to the other person who is its origin'.<sup>46</sup> For Laplanche, softening the hard kernel of the unconscious into something that can be incorporated into the self narcissistically recentres the self as its own primary psychical mechanism and solipsistically isolates the self from anything or anyone other to it.<sup>47</sup>

Laplanche presents a false dilemma on this point: either the self-centredness of ipsocentrism or irreducible alienness of the other. Both horns of this dilemma are complicit with – or perhaps, one might say, the result of – an atomistic conception of the self. In both cases, the self is presented as originally and fundamentally separate from the other. Even the alien unconscious of the self, which originates from the other, is like a hermetically sealed bubble with an

impermeable skin whose otherness never mixes with the self even though it is inside it. No wonder, then, that Fletcher can describe Laplanche's account of the other's intervention in the self as 'the effraction or breach of the organism or psychic entity from the outside ... the breaching of a limit or a boundary, both in its initial impact and in its deposit, "the internal foreign body".<sup>48</sup> That the other can – or, rather, must, if it is to have an influence – breach the limit of the self only demonstrates how the self has been conceived of as fundamentally separate, as something initially self-contained that later can be broken into.

Laplanche's position on the irreducible foreignness of the other is in tension with his insistence that the problem of how to open the infant to the world is a false problem.<sup>49</sup> The open infant is permeable, always absorbing, such that boundaries between inside and outside cannot be conceived of as rigid (which is not to say that they completely disappear). Laplanche would agree in so far as this claim is restricted to a physiological level, but he tends to limit the infant's porous, fuzzy-edged relationship with the world when it comes to the psychical. On the one hand, Laplanche is very critical of body–mind dualisms that would separate the mental from the physical. As he claims, the human being is 'a *bio-psychical being*, and the idea that an infant is a pure organism, a pure machine on to which a soul, a psyche or whatever else, has been grafted is an aberration'.<sup>50</sup> And yet he also claims that the initial relationship between adult and infant is 'established on a twofold register: we have both a vital, open and reciprocal relationship, which can truly be said to be interactive, and a relationship which is implicitly sexual, where there is no interaction because the two partners are not equal'.<sup>51</sup> The first register is the physiological level of self-preservation; the second is the psychical level of seduction – and Laplanche is very deliberate in his use of the language of 'level' to suggest a hierarchy whose components are 'sharply distinct' even as they are 'clearly connected'.<sup>52</sup> Laplanche's prioritization of the other, which in and of itself is not troubling, leads him to posit an absolute difference on the level of the psychical between other and self that seals each off from the other. And yet, as his bodily metaphors for the process of seduction suggest, such hard lines between the physiological and psychical cannot be drawn. The 'waste product' that is the unconscious is not a hard kernel that passes through the body's digestive tract only to emerge from the process identical to how it began. As Laplanche himself has insisted, the psychical digestive process

transforms the initial content, leaking away some aspects of it and soaking into others, with an end result that is neither wholly foreign nor completely familiar, that is new in such a way that it is constituted by elements of the old. The unconscious is, in other words, transactional. This is not to deny the initial priority of the adult over the infant, but to claim that the other should not be thought of as atomistically separated from the self, and cannot be so thought by relapsing into solipsism and ipsocentrism.

For these reasons, Laplanche's characterization of the formation of the unconscious as a perversion of a child by a deviant adult – as seduction, in other words – is itself problematic. Laplanche explains that

In the primal situation we have, then, a child whose ability to adapt is real but limited, weak and waiting to be perverted, and a deviant adult... Here, we have seducer and seduced, perverter and perverted. Someone is moving away from the straight and narrow; we have here ... someone who has been led astray and 'seduced'.<sup>53</sup>

My primary concern here is not with the sexually loaded language of seduction and perversion, which Laplanche retains from Freud in order to demonstrate his debt to Freud's early seduction theory. Rather, my concern is that even – or, I should say, precisely – in their more mundane senses of turning someone away from the path she is supposed to be on, 'seduction', 'perversion' and 'deviance' imply that the unconscious engagement of adult and child is something odd, abnormal or extraordinary – something, in other words, that is not supposed to happen in the typical course of a child's life, as if there were a 'straight and narrow' atomistic path devoid of adult influence that an infant could follow as she matures. At times, Laplanche glosses 'perverse' as 'unknown' and 'deviant' as 'split', which combats his account's suggestion that seduction is atypical. The adult is perverse in that she herself does not know what unconscious messages she sends to others; she is deviant in that she is split into the conscious or preconscious parts she knows and the unconscious part that she does not.<sup>54</sup> Helpful though these (infrequent) suggestions are, they do not entirely erase the atomistic implications of terms such as perverse and deviant. While any particular transaction between a child and its world can be sexually inappropriate, transactional engagement as such is not. It is the typical, 'appropriate' activity of any live organism, and for human organisms in particular, transaction is just as psychically as it is physically necessary for life to exist.<sup>55</sup>

## And on...

This is true, moreover, throughout a human being's life. At times, Laplanche suggests that seduction happens in roughly the first year or two of infancy, after which the unconscious is fully formed and seduction ends. Translations and retranslations can and should take place after this point, according to Laplanche, but they are processes that rework the initial enigmatic messages absorbed in a person's first couple of years, not ones that contribute new messages to the unconscious. On this view, an unconscious core is created in the first twelve to twenty-four months of life, whose formation does not continue into childhood and beyond.

Peter Osborne argues that Laplanche draws the line at approximately the end of year one because an infant is more biologically dependent on caregivers during the first year than afterwards. In Osborne's words, the adult 'cathects the infant in the course of the interactions which sustain it as a biological entity during the first year of its life'. The message implanted in the infant 'both demands translation and is untranslatable, since the child has no sense of desire beyond self-preservation, at this point.'<sup>56</sup> Once the intense period of biological sustenance is (allegedly) complete, enigmatic messages are no longer being sent from adult to child. With their termination, the child then enters a lifelong process of attempting to translate and retranslate the untranslatable bits of the messages that were metabolized into his or her unconscious.

For his part, Laplanche suggests that the infant's acquisition of language plays an important role in marking the end of seduction. As he remarks, 'The *primal situation* is one in which a newborn child, an infant in the etymological sense of the word (*in-fans*: speechless), is confronted with the adult world.'<sup>57</sup> Criticizing Lacan, he adds, 'if we identify the deepest stratum of man, namely the unconscious, with verbal language (or what we call language in the strict sense), we adopt an explicitly anti-Freudian stance.'<sup>58</sup> Laplanche thus argues that seduction takes place in the period of an infant's life prior to its ability to speak. The unconscious is not structured as a language or formed out of language, as Lacan claims. Just the opposite: the advent of language marks the end of the formation of the unconscious via seduction. Although Laplanche objects to Lacan's particular emphasis upon language, he implicitly agrees that the ability to use it marks an extremely significant event in a child's life.

While twelve months is early for infants to begin speaking, Osborne's explanation of the primal situation of seduction in terms of self-preservation nonetheless

complements Laplanche's language-based account. The story presented by their collective remarks is thus: somewhere around one or two years old, an infant's biological dependency upon caregivers for self-preservation decreases and its ability to use language begins. Leaving the maternal realm of bodily care and speechless existence, the infant breaks free of the adult's enigmatic messages and ends the seductive process of the formation of its unconscious.

On this account, the examples of Morrison's Claudia and Williams's son cannot count as situations of seduction because nine and three years of age, respectively, are beyond the cutoff point of twelve to twenty-four months. The children in these situations are no longer biologically dependent on caregivers in the way that a young infant is, and they understand and use language even if they do not always comprehend everything adults say. In their cases, the unconscious must be presumed already to exist, and the puzzling (from their perspective) adult behaviour that they try to translate has to be seen as a factor in the secondary process of retranslating the contents of the unconscious, not part of the primal process of seduction. The children must be understood as reworking the white privilege that is already present in their unconscious, not as continuing the process of forming raced unconscious habits.

There are at least two reasons to question this account. First, Laplanche himself occasionally suggests that children beyond infancy are involved in processes of seduction. In yet another objection to Lacan about the role of language in the formation of the unconscious, Laplanche asks,

What maintains the alienness of the other? Can one affirm here, with Lacan, the priority of language? If, for my part, I speak rather of a 'message', this is for at least two well-defined reasons: *first*, the message can just as easily be non-verbal as verbal; for the baby it is principally non-verbal.'<sup>59</sup>

By singling out the seduction of babies, Laplanche's emphasis on the non-verbal nature of enigmatic messages sent to them implies that human beings other than babies also receive enigmatic messages.

My suggestion that the process of seduction extends beyond young infancy is supported by Laplanche's remarks on Freud's analysis of fantasies of a child being beaten. Using 'a conceptual arsenal ... derived from the generalized seduction theory: message, translation and partial failure of translation', Laplanche appeals to the case of the beaten child to demonstrate (against Freud) that repression is not a process of memorization, but rather a function of the inevitable failure of the child's digestion of the other's enigmatic

messages. Laplanche uses the case to make a number of points about his theory of seduction, but what is relevant for my purposes here is that he considers it to be 'exemplary in showing a process of repression [understood via the seduction theory] at work'.<sup>60</sup> For Laplanche, the people analysed by Freud in this case developed unconscious (and then conscious) fantasies involving a beaten child because of the transmission of enigmatic messages from an adult when they were children.

Turning to the text of this 'exemplary' case itself, one finds that Freud plainly states that the age of the children who developed sexual fantasies about another child's being beaten is between two and five years. In some broad remarks about the purpose of psychoanalysis, Freud explains that

analytic work deserves to be recognized as genuine psycho-analysis only when it has succeeded in removing the amnesia which conceals from the adult his knowledge of his childhood from its beginning (that is, from about the second to the fifth year).

He adds that 'It is in the years of childhood between the ages of two and four or five that the congenital libidinal factors are first awakened by actual experiences and become attached to certain complexes', only after which do the fantasies manifest themselves.<sup>61</sup> While Laplanche never explicitly endorses this aspect of Freud's case, he also never objects to it – and this even though Laplanche's goal is to refute its problematic aspects (for example, its explanation of the beating fantasy in terms of amnesia surrounding an actual childhood experience). Laplanche's silence is significant.

The most compelling reason to think that seduction extends into childhood and beyond, however, is found in Laplanche's emphasis upon the openness of the human organism to its environments. Human beings are never atomistically closed off from the world. Their existence – psychical, as well as physical, for the two cannot be sharply divorced – is necessarily transactional. This means that human dependence upon others does not end once babyhood is over. As feminists have long argued, the developmental story of a human's initial dependence upon caregivers that gives way to independence as an adult is deeply problematic.<sup>62</sup> Especially in some of its psychoanalytic versions, it associates dependence with the murky realm of the mother in which distinct beings do not exist and from which the infant violently separates itself and is able to become an independent language-user thanks to the intrusion of the father into the mother–infant

dyad. In addition to its troubling support of patriarchy, such a story problematically assumes that the 'normal' development of human beings involves eliminating (or, at least, greatly reducing) one's transactional interdependence upon others.

Laplanche emphasizes the role of dependency in seduction when he claims: 'The dependency of young human on adults, which is much more marked than in other species, fosters the delay that is at the origins of humanization, i.e., the early sexualization of human beings.'<sup>63</sup> I do not disagree that human babies are more dependent on adults for longer periods of time than the young of many other species, or that the 'delay' created by this marked dependency enables seduction. I also would agree that much of the formation of the unconscious probably occurs during early childhood. But, given the ongoing transactional openness of the human organism to the world, I cannot agree that the formation of the unconscious completely stops once a child gains some independence from its caregivers. Human (inter)dependency on others never disappears, even though it takes different forms throughout a person's life and even though it is true that human babies are particularly dependent on adults for their survival. Given that human dependency on others for their psychical and physical wellbeing is what enables the process of seduction to take place and given the fact this dependency continues, with variation, throughout human life, seduction cannot be said to end after infancy.

In my view, Laplanche's criticisms of Robinson Crusoeism and ipsocentrism mean that his classically psychoanalytic focus on early childhood should not be understood as an implicit dismissal of later childhood and even adulthood as irrelevant to the 'core' of the unconscious. We can continue to use Laplanche's term 'primal seduction' to refer to the earliest, and probably most intense, period of transmission of enigmatic messages from the adult world to a child, but this term should not be taken to imply a sharp break between it and the seductions that take place later in life. This is not to say that attempts to (re)translate early enigmatic messages do not occur in later childhood and adulthood, but to argue that those attempts are accompanied by, and are most likely closely related to, additional moments of seduction that continue the initial formation of the unconscious.

I realize that these claims might seem to 'water down' the distinctively psychoanalytic elements of Laplanche's seduction theory. Refusing to treat the seductive line between infancy and later childhood (and even adulthood) as absolute might appear to make

Laplanche's account too sociological, robbing it of its psychoanalytic foundations. I think, however, that this refusal is in the spirit of much of Laplanche's own work. In his embrace of culturalism and his rejection of a biological or otherwise inherited unconscious, for example, Laplanche has indicated his willingness to diverge from many 'standard' psychoanalytic doctrines. Even more to the point is Laplanche's emphasis on the ontological role that the environment plays in the psychosomatic constitution of human existence. This emphasis lends great support to, if not necessitates, the claim that seduction is an ongoing event in human life. With this emphasis, Laplanche has created a major tension within his theory: the claim that seduction (which is predicated on ontological permeability) ends after early childhood works against the claim that human beings are ontologically open to their environments. As I see it, the tension between these positions is best resolved by the view that seduction extends beyond infancy.

Why does it matter for critical race theory whether we think of the self's relationship with the other as transactional? In my view, doing so is crucial to understanding both how categories of race and practices of racism help constitute the individual unconscious and how the raced and racist unconscious impacts the world around it. This impact can be for better or worse, and viewing the unconscious as transactional does not guarantee that it will be for the better. It does, however, increase the chances that the impact will be positive because it allows us to understand the unconscious as productive, rather than representational.<sup>64</sup> The unconscious remnants of messages that children misunderstand do not mirror or copy the adult world from which they originate. Laplanche clearly agrees,<sup>65</sup> but his account so emphasizes the psychological passivity of the infant that the active side of its unconscious tends to be neglected in his account, which blocks the asking of important questions about what is being produced by the unconscious and whether something different can be produced instead. The unconscious has powerful 'external' effects, helping create the material, economic, social, political and cultural world in which we live. Nowhere is this truer than in the case of racism and white privilege.

That racism and white privilege often operate unconsciously does not, however, mean that they cannot be eliminated or mitigated. While no one can directly access his or her unconscious in a conscious intent to alter it, each of us can make at least some deliberate decisions about what sorts of environments we will

inhabit and, through activism and other political work, attempt to transform. The particular environments we inhabit and work to change can indirectly impact what sorts of psychic 'food' will be taken in for attempted digestion and repression.<sup>66</sup> The aim here, as Laplanche explains in a different context, is not to re-create an initial, 'pure' stage of infancy prior to enigmatically racist messages. Rather, it is to detranslate (by both conscious and unconscious means) some of the initially misunderstood messages about race so that new translations and seductions might take place.<sup>67</sup>

This is not to suggest that we have unlimited access to and influence on the digestive remnants that compose the unconscious. Laplanche would argue that even though the unconscious is wholly created through an individual's engagements with her social and other environments, parts of it can and often do become so isolated that they are then functionally outside of societal reach.<sup>68</sup> I agree with Laplanche that one should not blithely assume that the process of transforming the unconscious will be easy or completely successful. And I think that in any particular situation, one will always run up against limits beyond which transformation cannot occur. But I cannot agree with the acontextual claim that there exists a segment of the unconscious that necessarily lies beyond the influence of the 'external' world. Such an *a priori* declaration both assumes that we already know how much change the unconscious is capable of and discourages the concrete attempts at change that are the very means by which we might discover the limits of those attempts. In my view, rather than block those efforts, a psychoanalytically informed critical race theory should encourage them by heuristically asking, what are the current possibilities for and limits of the transformation of the unconscious built of remnants of white privilege? And it must insist that the answer to that question will only be given through the work of transformation itself.

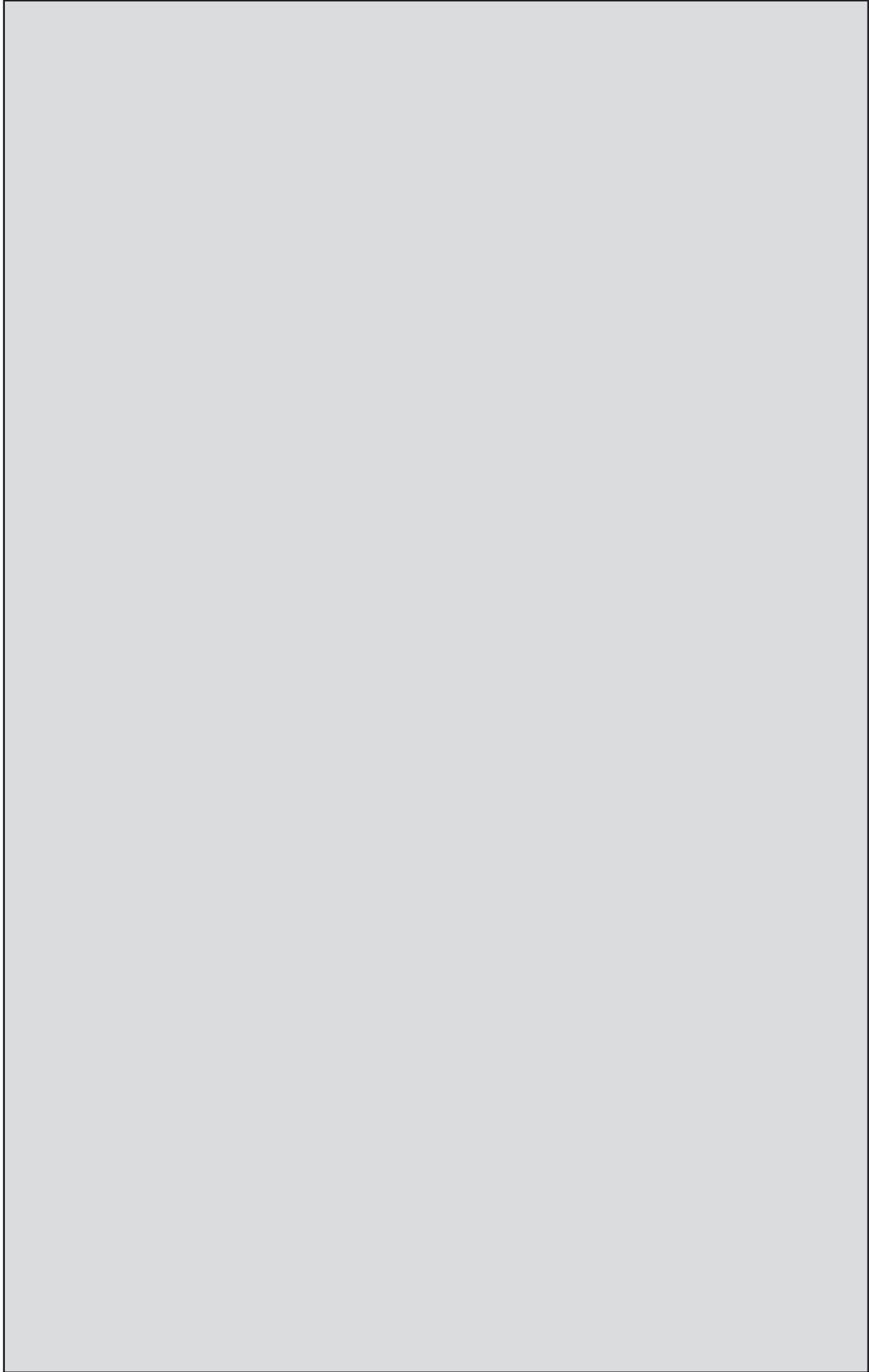
## Notes

Thanks to the editors and anonymous reviewers of this essay for helpful feedback on earlier drafts.

1. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1997, pp. 18, 93.
2. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*, Routledge, New York, 2000, p. 14.
3. The few essays in English on Laplanche that target philosophers include the final chapter of Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, New York, 2000, and Philippe Van Haute, 'Fatal Attraction: Jean Laplanche on Sexuality, Subjectivity, and Singularity in the Work of Sigmund Freud', *Radical Philosophy* 73, September/October 1995, pp. 5–12. See also the

- articles collected in a special issue on Laplanche in *New Formations* 48, 2003. Perhaps it is worth noting that before training with Lacan, Laplanche studied at the École Normale Supérieure with Merleau-Ponty and Hippolyte and received highest commendations on his Aggrégation de Philosophie (John Fletcher and Martin Stanton, 'Biographical Sketch', in John Fletcher and Martin Stanton, eds, *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation and the Drives*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1992, p. 225). See also 'The Other Within: An Interview with Jean Laplanche', *Radical Philosophy* 102, July/August 2000, pp. 31–41.
4. See, for example, Elizabeth Abel, 'Race, Class, and Psychoanalysis? Opening Questions', in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds, *Conflicts in Feminism*, Routledge, New York, 1990, pp. 184–204; Michael Vannoy Adams, *The Multicultural Imagination: 'Race', Color, and the Unconscious*, Routledge, New York, 1996; Gwen Berger, 'Politics and Pathologies: On the Subject of Race in Psychoanalysis', in Anthony C. Alessandrini, ed., *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, Routledge, New York, 1999, pp. 219–34; Tina Chanter, 'Abjection and Ambiguity: Simone de Beauvoir's Legacy', *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2000, pp. 139–56; Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1993; Christopher Lane, ed., *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998; Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*; Shannon Sullivan, 'The Unconscious Life of Race: Freudian Resources for Critical Race Theory', forthcoming in Jon Mills, ed., *Rereading Freud: Psychoanalysis through Philosophy*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 2004; and Elisabeth Young-Bruhl, *The Anatomies of Prejudice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1996.
  5. Shannon Sullivan, 'Ethical Slippages, Shattered Horizons, and the Zebra Striping of the Unconscious: Fanon on Social, Bodily, and Psychological Space', forthcoming in Ronald Sundstrom, ed., *Philosophy and Geography*, Special Issue on Race, Space, and Place.
  6. Linda Martín Alcoff, 'Philosophy and Racial Identity', *Radical Philosophy* 75, January/February 1996, p. 7.
  7. See, for example, Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 2001; and, with a particular focus on race, Shannon Sullivan, '(Re)construction Zone: Beware of Falling Statues', in William Gavin, ed., *In Dewey's Wake: Unfinished Business of Pragmatist Reconstruction*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 2003, pp. 109–27.
  8. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, Grove Press, New York, 1967, p. 11.
  9. Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, Routledge, New York, 1999, pp. 73, 183, 108.
  10. Jean Laplanche, 'The Kent Seminar: 1 May 1990', in Fletcher and Stanton, eds, *Jean Laplanche*, p. 25.
  11. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, Pocket Books, New York, 1972, pp. 15, 16.
  12. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 136.
  13. Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, trans. David Macey, Basil Blackwell, Cambridge MA, 1989, pp. 142, 137, emphasis in original.
  14. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, W.W. Norton, New York, 1960, p. 20.
  15. Given this point of origination, the bodily surface that becomes internalized in the formation of the unconscious is not merely that of the infant. In some significant way, it also includes the body of the adult other. On this issue, see Laplanche, *New Foundations*, p. 49.
  16. Jean Laplanche, 'The Drive and its Object-Source: Its Fate in the Transference', in Fletcher and Stanton, eds, *Jean Laplanche*, p. 188, emphasis in original.
  17. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, pp. 171, 108.
  18. Laplanche, *New Foundations*, p. 124, emphasis in original.
  19. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 226 n15.
  20. *Ibid.*, pp. 127–8. It is important to note that even though it is Laplanche's favourite example of seduction, the breast is not necessarily a privileged site for that process. Laplanche's example of the breast is not, in other words, a covert return to familialism: 'The example of the breast is perhaps only a fable, particularly for the modern child who increasingly has infrequent contact with it. It [merely] has the advantage of making clear on what basis the constitution of the first *source-objects*, these interiorized or rather introjected objects, occurs' (p. 128).
  21. Laplanche, *New Foundations*, p. 91.
  22. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, pp. 19, 20, 21.
  23. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
  24. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
  25. For an early and prominent example of this claim in Western intellectual history, see Immanuel Kant's explanation of 'why all Negroes stink' (Kant, 'Of the Different Human Races', in Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lott, eds, *The Idea of Race*, Hackett, Indianapolis IN, 2000, p. 16). While I do not wish to neglect the particular histories of different races, the idea that non-white people have a racial smell specific to their race is a common feature of white racist domination. On the Jews' alleged racial smell, see Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1988, p. 78.
  26. Polish psychiatrist Antoni Kepinski, quoted in Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*, Basic Books, New York, 1986, p. 147. For a description of the Roma (Gypsies) that links their alleged uncleanliness with their perceived blackness, see Helsinki Rights Watch, *Struggling for Ethnic Identity: Czechoslovakia's Endangered Gypsies*, Human Rights Watch, New York, 1992, pp. 69, 84, 122.
  27. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p. 69; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 1994, p. 192.
  28. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 160.
  29. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
  30. Laplanche, 'The Kent Seminar', p. 21.
  31. See, for example, Jon Mills and Janusz A. Polanowski, *The Ontology of Prejudice*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1997, pp. 1, 11. See also Lawrence A. Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture, and the Child's Construction of Human Kinds*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1996, which claims that us–them distinctions are biologically given, which do not have to result in racism but are the ineradicable foundation for it. For criticism of a similar problem in Young-Bruhl's *The Anatomy of Prejudice*, see Shannon Sullivan, 'Pragmatism, Psychoanalysis, and Prejudice: Elisabeth Young-Bruhl's *The Anatomy of Prejudice*', *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2001, pp. 162–69.

32. Laplanche, 'The Drive and Its Object-Source', p. 190.
33. Laplanche, *New Foundations*, p. 93.
34. John Fletcher, 'The Letter in the Unconscious: The Engigmatic Signifier in the Work of Jean Laplanche', in Fletcher and Stanton, eds, *Jean Laplanche*, p. 104.
35. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 126. See also Laplanche, *New Foundations*, p. 75.
36. Jean Laplanche, 'Interview: Jean Laplanche Talks to Martin Stanton', in Fletcher and Stanton, eds, *Jean Laplanche*, p. 10.
37. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 195.
38. Laplanche, 'The Kent Seminar', p. 36. See also p. 37. Laplanche uses 'implantation' rather than 'introjection' because he claims that introjection also is ipsocentric. This is one reason why Laplanche would disagree with Kleinian theory, despite their shared emphases on the early months of infant psychical life and the infant's psychical taking in of (part of) the (m)other, especially the breast.
39. Jean Laplanche, 'The Freud Museum Seminar: 3 May 1990', in Fletcher and Stanton, eds, *Jean Laplanche*, p. 57. This explains Laplanche's objection to phenomenology, which he views as attempting 'to restore to the human being his quality of "first person" subject' and 'to find the intentionality of a subject at the heart of all psychical acts' (*Essays on Otherness*, p. 113).
40. Patricia Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1997, p. 3.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
43. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 93. See also Laplanche, *New Foundations*, p. 103.
44. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 93 n24.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 114, 62 n21.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 114.
47. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva does not soften the kernel, but she nonetheless risks collapsing the other into the self (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, especially pp. 1 and 192). Laplanche is critical of accounts of otherness, among which I think he would include Kristeva's, the 'essential point' of which is 'to rediscover and recognize oneself in them' (Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 173).
48. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 44.
49. Laplanche, *New Foundations*, p. 93.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 93, emphasis in original.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
52. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, pp. 237–8, 237 n9. Laplanche's discussion here refers to four different levels of time – the time of the world, the time of the living being, the time of memory and the individual project, and the time of human history and society – not of self-preservation and seduction, per se. However, self-preservation clearly is an instance of level II (the living being) while seduction is an instance of levels III and IV (the individual project and humanity as a whole). Levels III and IV are 'clearly connected' with level II in that the former are built upon the latter (just as level II is built upon level I), but that connection does not minimize their 'shar[p] distinct[ion]'. As Laplanche claims, 'only the relation between levels III and IV is more complex than the simple ideal of superimposition would suggest' (p. 237 n9).
53. Laplanche, *New Foundations*, pp. 103–4; see also p. 108.
54. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, pp. 97, 212; *New Foundations*, p. 103.
55. This issue points to a similar problem in Charles Mills's work: his depiction of white people's ignorance of racism as a psychical *dysfunction*. This characterization tends to suggest that there could exist a properly functioning psyche that would not have an unconscious and thus that the solution to unconscious racism is to (try to) eliminate the unconscious. For Laplanche's objection to the idea that the unconscious is pathological, see Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, pp. 70, 212.
56. Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, p. 104. See also Jacqueline Lanouzière, 'Breast-Feeding as Original Seduction and Primal Scene of Seduction', *New Formations*, 2003, vol. 48, p. 54.
57. Laplanche, *New Foundations*, pp. 89–90, emphasis in original.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
59. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 73; emphasis in original. I omit the second reason because it is not relevant here. For the record, it is that 'emphasizing "language" effaces the alterity of the other in favour of trans-individual structures' (p. 73), a point discussed above.
60. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 154.
61. Sigmund Freud, 'A Child Is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, The Hogarth Press, London, 1955, vol. 17, pp. 183, 184.
62. Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1993, offers one of the best-known criticisms of this developmental story. For criticisms that do not support gender stereotyping as Gilligan's account tends to do, see Lorraine Code, 'Naming, Naturalizing, Normalizing: "The Child" as Fact and Artifact', in Patricia Miller and Ellin Scholnick, eds, *Toward a Feminist Developmental Psychology*, Routledge, New York, 2000, and Cynthia Willett, *The Soul of Justice: Social Bonds and Racial Hubris*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 2001.
63. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 126.
64. On this point, there are close and important connections between Laplanche's seduction theory and Deleuze and Guattari's account of the unconscious in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1983), and *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987).
65. Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 90.
66. Laplanche emphasizes that the 'binding schemata' for the new translations are 'not invented out of the blue: they are supplied ... by an entire social and cultural environment' (Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, p. 165).
67. *Ibid.*, pp. 164–65.
68. Laplanche, 'The Drive and its Object-Source', pp. 182, 191. These parts are what Freud calls the id. For Laplanche, Freud was right about the id's inaccessibility even though he wrongly argued the point based on the id's supposed origin in inherited memory traces.



# Kristeva and *The Idiots*

Cecilia Sjöholm

The thematic obsessions of filmmaker Lars von Trier are as dubious as they are relevant to contemporary thought: unconditional love, feminine sacrifice, childish gestural provocations and victimization are contrasted with the neurotic fears of normality and authoritarian abuses of power. It has been said by various film critics that the issues raised in his latest movie *Dogville* could be read as a continuation of questions evoked in and by *The Idiots*, a film from 1997, and that it shows a new maturity in terms of political and social engagement. But one wonders if the term 'maturity' ought ever to have a place in the writing that continues to emerge around the films of von Trier. Engagement, maybe; but even then there is little reason to pretend that the interest of his films should lie in a conscious enactment of a political standpoint.

So where should it lie? Perhaps in its politicization of an 'elsewhere' in relation to political discourse, an 'elsewhere' which has also been the focal point of French philosophy since the 1960s. (Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, Michel Foucault and others have all evoked a politics of transformative practices, challenging and transgressive perhaps in relation to a normative order of discourse.) In fact, the case of *The Idiots* is interesting not least because it stages a return to the ideas of the revolt of the 1960s, and in a way that becomes a sort of travesty. Rather than being situated in the feverish excitement of the Paris of 1968 it is set in the sleepy Danish suburbia of the 1990s. But the staged revolt is very much a return to the gestures of a pleasurable transgression that was integral to the alternative ways of thinking the political in the 1960s and 1970s. Von Trier has himself described the film as an expression of his own hatred of the living experiments of that epoch: alternative communities and families only cover the pathetic side of dogmatism in suburbia.

Julia Kristeva's idea of revolt as return offers a certain commutability with the regression staged in the film, and allows us also to consider the highly ambiguous effects of that return. Whereas the politicization of another scene has been a concern for most

of the radical philosophers coming out of the Parisian context, few have emphasized, as Kristeva has, the neurotic and perverted pleasures of that revolt and the ambivalences that are already inherent in it. In doing so, Kristeva is not just endorsing a politics of pleasure but also bringing it to its impossible endpoint. Kristeva's thought on the political dimensions of expression become relevant too, in relation to the language of von Trier's film. The rules of 'dogme' filmmaking require technical minimalism: no artificial lights, no make-up, hand-held camera, among other strictures. The result is a cinematic language in which the technical devices are no longer made invisible, but rather allowed to dominate the screen. The graininess and shakiness of the image are features that could perhaps be called a cinematic language dominated by the semiotic. It creates an uncertainty of viewpoint which makes perceptual space uncertain and fleeting, and the borders between perceived object and point of view become compromised and ambiguous. In *The Idiots*, furthermore, the semiotic language of the film is impossible to detach from its theme: a group of people deciding to live together and to act out 'the idiot' within, both in the bourgeois neighbourhood in which they live and with each other. In acting out the idiot, they regress both in public and with each other. Replacing speech with sounds, experimenting in touching each other without inhibitions, they are looking for the moment of 'spassing', the moment when mimicry has transposed into a genuine state of regression beyond normative limits of behaviour.

The reason for the experiment is not, however, obvious. There is no aim in the provocative gesture except provocation itself and the pleasure taken in the 'revolt'. The group goes to restaurants, to job interviews, to a home for the mentally handicapped, on field trips, acting out the gestures and sounds of idiocy only to be received with a mixture of consideration and condescension. The provocation lies in not just the challenge to social norms in behaviour. The characters played in *The Idiots*, inept at communicating or acting in conformity with linguistic and social norms, clearly

threaten not society so much as the identity and sense of self of the people they encounter. Their enjoyment is the embarrassment of others. Consequently, the first half of the film is quite funny, lampooning the fear of bourgeois suburbia in the face of the boundless pleasure to be taken in transgression. The mood changes, however, when the group inverts its efforts to transgress inwards, towards its own members: the much-talked-about group sex scene depicts a half-rape and the atmosphere is increasingly menacing. This becomes obvious in the gradual disintegration of the group itself. One young woman, who has fled from her home, is unexpectedly collected by her father and it is suggested that her problems are not just enacted, but real. The main female character – who, it is revealed, has been attracted to the group in a state of vulnerability after the death of her child, slowly disintegrates to the point of ‘idiocy’ and continues to ‘spass’ after the group has been dissolved. The subversive gesture of *The Idiots* is revealed as a blind alley, undoing not just the repressive norms of a society trying to rid itself of those who are ‘different’. The subversion also undoes those norms that serve to tie the bonds of love and protection. *The Idiots*, with their provocative ‘spassing’, become unbearable not only to the representatives of Danish suburbia but also to the cinema-goers and even, more importantly, to each other. The leader of the group reveals himself as a fanatic with no consideration for weakness, embodying the kind of dogmatism which Kristeva early on diagnosed as political perversion, a symptom of denial rather than intellectual force.

The fascination which attaches an individual to a political idea is, Kristeva argues, the same kind of fascination which attaches an individual to a perverse fixation. But what is lacking in the idiots’ experiment, as in perverse fixation, is the moment of sacrifice in which pleasure is given up: there is no decapitation of the revolt. Instead, the experiment escalates to the point at which a harsh doctrine of enjoyment replaces the pleasure taken in the transgression of phobic social norms. The failure of the experiment indicates that it is not possible to ‘tame’ pleasure and avoid its escalation into the perversity of enjoyment. In this regard, there is in fact not that much difference between the compromised position of the fascist and the subversive gestures of the ‘idiots’. Political perversions are all structured by an ideal which refuses reality in favour of a libidinal or sublimated form of gratification. As Kristeva’s work recognized early on, there is a direct link between the refusal to give up on gratification and the persistence of the abject, shooting through the

demarcation line between subject and object, fascination and horror, heroic subversion and disintegration. At the same time, any politics of pleasure evokes Roland Barthes in his attempt to demythologize pleasure as a simple and rightist concept: the Left has all too often been led to believe that pleasure is a simple residue, at best the price to be gained at the end of a rationalist and concerned emancipatory project.<sup>1</sup>

### **Transgression, pleasure, sacrifice**

The gestural provocation of the ‘idiots’ is allied to the aesthetic of Kristeva herself. The idea of an invisible symbolic order, comprising primarily linguistic and social norms, against which art ‘revolts’ is not far from von Trier’s vision of the ‘idiots’ upsetting sleepy Danish suburbia. And von Trier’s vision could perhaps be said to recall the criticism directed against Kristeva’s valorization of the semiotic: it is precisely in its own efficiency that semiotic transgression may appear politically useless and self-destructive in the end. Most of the ‘idiots’, safely lodged in the house of a well-to-do uncle, are not really putting anything at risk; they are merely enjoying their transgression. But for the subjects who really are exposed to the disintegration of the invisible limits between ‘normality’ and psychosis, the experience is a disaster. In the end, the transgressive gesture does not disrupt social norms, only those who are already crushed by them. The question then would be: in promoting a politics of pleasure – another word for politicizing those other spaces of corporeality and art promoted not only by Kristeva but also by Deleuze and Foucault, for example – are we really putting social norms in question or are we merely enforcing other kinds of divides? Do we respond to the upset with new fetishistic fixations, or are we capable of accepting the ambiguity that any politics of pleasure must be prepared to sustain?

Many critics on the Left (Terry Eagleton, Nancy Fraser, Toril Moi, Jacqueline Rose, to name only a few) have complained about the emphasis on and romanticization of transgression in Kristeva’s work. But it could be argued that what these critics regard as transgression is in fact the negativity at work in subjectivity itself. Overall, there is no conformist, well-adapted subject to contrast with a transgressive mode. Given the inherent pathologies in any society, a politics of negativity will always open towards experiences that are neither ethical nor particularly constructive. As is well known, the figures of focus in Kristeva’s work all tend to be marginal in one way or another; whether they be homosexuals, women, displeasing intellectuals or dandyish poets. Kristeva’s theory of

marginality is often evoked as a revolutionary idea of subversion, or postmodern ethics. Marginal existents, however, are not necessarily political in a recognizable way. The objects of Kristeva's studies are neither particularly revolutionary nor particularly ethical. At best, they tend rather to be unheroic (like Proust and Baudelaire), tragic (like Duras) or unsympathetic (like Rimbaud). At worst, they are fascist and misogynist (like Céline).

Many feminist theoreticians, such as Toril Moi, Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser, have noted the progressive potential in Kristeva's theory of a destabilizing and displacing element in subjectivity whilst at the same time protesting against its lack of social and political definition: how are we to find new forms of solidarity out of a theory that celebrates destabilization and transgression? However, those who have criticized Kristeva for not specifying possibilities for identification and solidarity tend to forego, in their turn, the question of the body and of sexuality. The 'revolt' of marginal practices such as literature, which Kristeva is eager to proclaim, is to a large extent dependent on the involvement of the body. Even so, Kristeva's actual theory of the body is, despite its apparent transparency, rather difficult to assess. It is not obvious what kind of body, precisely, we are dealing with. Is it a vehicle of flesh which is merely lived and felt? A body defined by archaic and infantile qualities, naive vessels of impulsive affects preceding the context of discursive and cultural practices? If so, it would be difficult to argue for the theoretical interest of this naturalized concept of the body. Judith Butler, for instance, considers Kristeva's 'body politic' to be a dead end. According to Butler, Kristeva's whole notion of subversion relies on there being a sphere beyond the paternal law against which the subject reacts. At the same time, however, the very idea of this supposedly corporeal subversive sphere is dependent on the law against which it reacts. We have to cure ourselves, says Butler,

of the illusion of a true body beyond the law. If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, not to its 'natural past' nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities.<sup>2</sup>

Although Kristeva's body politic is indeed open to such criticisms, perhaps one could argue that the body in Kristeva is a model rather than affectation, a condition or situation rather than a specific disposition:

the model, that is, of the *chora*, which makes the subject a site of all those processes of displacement and transposition which Freud calls the primary processes. It is those processes that tend to overshoot the sacrificial logic instituted by the models of political representation. Moira Gatens has shown the need to probe deeper into the relation between the body politic, as it emerged in the modern discourse of the social contract, and the singular body:

Discourses on the body and discourses on the body politic each borrow terms from each other. This mutual cross-referencing appears in their shared vocabularies, for example, 'constitution', 'regime' and 'diet'. A philosophically common metaphor for the appropriate relation between the mind and the body is to posit a *political* relation, where one (the mind) should dominate, subjugate or govern the other (the body).<sup>3</sup>

According to Gatens, this order implies, for example, the rule of men over women. Women were not considered capable of rational thought, or to be autonomous in relation to their bodies, as opposed to men. The problem for Gatens, then, is to find a way to *embody* the modern notion of a body politic, a notion that has paradoxically been constructed around the notion of disembodiment and rationality. Feminist theory often argues that Western thought is governed by dualisms: for instance those between nature and culture, body and mind, passion and reason, but also the dualism between family and state, and most importantly, Gatens adds, the dualism between body and body politic. Political modernity, in the guise of the social contract, has submitted the singular body to the body politic. This means, as well, that the singular body is submitted to a contract, which is secondary to the social contract forming the body politic, submitted to it and not represented by it. The social contract, in fact, is quite restricted and restrictive, exclusionary in its application to a certain kind of body, which is usually male, white, employed, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

Kristeva had already noted in 'Women's Time' the deeply embedded problem of gender in the social contract. The problem of the body, she says, plays itself out in a sacrificial notion of identity. European ideology promotes a logic of identification which is consistent with rationality.<sup>5</sup> This calls for a consistent, irreducible and unquestionable kind of identity, which in turn rests on a sacrificial logic: part of the subject must, in this way, be foreclosed and made inaccessible. The body in which Kristeva is interested is not a body with a sexual or other identity – Kristeva's politics is in fact a challenge to the notion of a body

which is submitted, constructed and domesticated. The interest of the model of the body as *chora* is rather that it challenges culturally and politically formed bodies. Accordingly, she argues against the ‘sacrificial universality’ of the French republic, incorporating the unity of thought as invisible activity, able to master the ‘universe’ as well as the human beings ‘unified’. Whether it is explicitly One paternal God or One abstract principle, the universal is sacrificial, in the sense that ‘every mental representation (sign, idea, thought) abandons, loses or sacrifices matter: the thing or the object to which the representation refers’.<sup>6</sup>

Kristeva’s revolution is not an event, or a vision, but a process, which takes place in and through the subject, rather than in the organization of social and political institutions. The question, however, must be how this ‘semiotic revolution’ can be brought into the service of a politics. At this point we should note that, for Kristeva, although the semiotic revolution is an ongoing process in our cultures, it must also be supplanted by another: that of sacrifice. The semiotic revolution, or intimate revolt, waivers *between pleasure and sacrifice*. Pleasure, because all transgression involves a return to corporeal processes of symbolization; sacrifice, because all revolutions must end with decapitation, which in this case involves a temporary stasis or halt in the movement of destabilization. The body is recuperated only to be lost again. The oscillation between surge, challenge, revolt and subversion, on the one hand, and, on the other, the necessary loss or sacrifice that any revolution will necessarily claim recuperates new possibilities into the moral and political life of the subject. But there are two forms of sacrifice, of which only one is constructive. The first form is imposed by what Kristeva calls the socio-symbolic contract, which is close to what Slavoj Žižek identifies as the sacrifice instituting enjoyment: ‘the subject does not offer his sacrifice to profit from it for himself, but to fill in the lack *in the Other*, to sustain the appearance of the other’s omnipotence or, at least, consistency’.<sup>7</sup> The second form is necessitated by symbol formation and motivated by the drive itself. Sacrifice, to the kind of contract which Kristeva calls an internalized symbolic one, or a Freudian contract, is a condition for symbolization and signification: ‘Sacrifice sets up the symbol and the symbolic order at the same time, and the this “first” symbol, the victim of a murder, merely represents the structural violence of language’s irruption as the murder of soma, the transformation of the body, the captation of drives’.<sup>8</sup> This means that the Freudian internalized contract, rather than defining gender in a socially given form, or

as limitation to sexual forms of identity, will institute a limit of pleasure beyond which one finds *jouissance*. The possibility of transgression is at play in every form of symbolization, but the pleasure of transgression is lost with the erection of sacrificial identities. There are two sides to the sacred and the sacrifice: on the one hand they install social norms and bonds through ritual; on the other, they evoke those uncertain spaces where identity and norms are not yet in place.

This explains why, for Kristeva, there is one more social event which accompanies sacrifice at the institutionalization of the symbol. Art represents this flowing of *jouissance* into language. Poetry confronts the sacrifice of *jouissance*; it brings it back. It transgresses the sacrifice of the body that has to take place in the social order: ‘We thus find sacrifice and art, face to face, representing the two aspects of thethetic function: the prohibition of *jouissance* by language and the introduction of *jouissance* into and through language’.<sup>9</sup> In other words, poetry and art are generated at those very limits where the very sacrifice instituting the possibility of symbolization has been institutionalized. In attaching ritualistic sacrifice to the working of poetry, Kristeva is attempting to show that there will always be practices of enjoyment present at the limits of the dominant social order, practices which will both threaten and challenge the origins of its own institution.

### The abjectal drive

It is for this reason that immature gestures such as the one presented to us by *The Idiots* – a film enacting the ritual returns to such origins – becomes truly challenging. And such gestures are not new; they are, as Kristeva herself has shown in *Strangers to Ourselves*, datable to the origins of sacrificial notions of political representability itself. Hegel already had a reading of Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, published in 1805 in Germany, and in 1821 in France. The novel is a dialogue between a self who is a philosopher and the awkward *He*, an ebullient body acting out everything that is being said in a distorted fashion:

He was prostrate at my feet, his face on the ground, and seemed to be clutching in both his hands the tip of my slipper. He was crying and sobbing out words.... He jumbled together thirty different airs, French, Italian, comic, tragic – in every style. Now in a baritone voice he sank to the pit; then straining in falsetto he tore to shreds the upper notes of some air, imitating the while the stance, walk and gestures of several characters; being in succession furious, mollified, lordly, sneering. First a damsel weeps and reproduces her kittenish ways; next he is a priest, a

king, a tyrant; he threatens, commands, rages. Now he is a slave, he obeys.<sup>10</sup>

For Hegel, the text shows that individuality is unstable until it becomes 'universal'. The nephew is the incarnation of the perversity of court culture or 'pure culture', where consciousness is estranged to itself and split, beyond possibility of being reconciled through universality.<sup>11</sup> For Kristeva, Diderot's text insists on the specific pleasures associated with the split subjectivity of the foreign: 'Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance with which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture.'<sup>12</sup> Living between cultures, between tongues, like an orphan without parents, the foreigner exposes modern 'man' to the contingency of his own identity. In Kristeva's reading, it is not by chance that the nephew's cosmopolitan idiocy is contrasted with universalist demands. The nephew, in fact, tries very hard *not* to be a citizen, *not* to be subjected to sovereignty or indeed to the sacrificial logic of any contract. He is from many disparate places, and origins; a cosmopolite, not through travels, but through the dispersal of his many positions as a subject. Such a strange man, spasmodic to the point of idiocy, she argues, is in fact a reaction against the shortcomings of political institutions and their incapacity to embody symbolic power. In fact, the worse the symbolic institutions seem to function, the more the idiocies seem to multiply.<sup>13</sup> But, ultimately, the political stance incorporated by such a strange personality is, of course, the rejection of the sacrificial logic instituted by the new universalism. There is, in line with this argument, no project of emancipation properly speaking in Kristeva's work: through its very definition the subject-in-process, or what she later calls the subject of intimate revolt, is rejecting freedom and autonomy in the name of universalizable models. It is, rather, aiming to release forces of negativity that emphasize the complexity and heterogeneity of the subject. The poet finds his voice in the inhumanity of 'horror, death, madness, orgy, outlaws, war, the feminine threat, the horrendous delights of love, disgust, and fright'.<sup>14</sup> In fact, all literature is abyssal in one sense or another, written at the limits of a discourse between subject and object: 'double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject'.<sup>15</sup> But, rather than regarding this as a symptom of, for

instance, xenophobia, abjectal art in this vein could be seen as a challenge to the ideologies of completeness and totality, which in turn foster racism and misogyny. The abjectal drive is a drive of contamination, breaking down distinctions between inside and outside, the known and the unknown, self and 'other'. Given that logic, we may perhaps look at Kristeva's politics of pleasure, such as it has been enacted by idiots in Hegel's time as well as our own, with new eyes: the return of pleasure is, perhaps, not a bad principle to be upheld against much darker ones.

## Notes

1. Barthes describes this polarization in terms of intellectuality against pleasure, reason against sensation, cold abstraction against life. This polarization, according to Barthes, leads the Left to emphasize method, reason, commitment, to the detriment of a pleasure that has become close to immoral. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, Hill & Wang, New York, 1975, pp. 22–3.
2. Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 93.
3. Moira Gatens: *Imaginary Bodies*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 53.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
5. Julia Kristeva: 'Women's Time', in Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p. 194.
6. Julia Kristeva: *Crisis of the European Subject*, trans. Susan Fairfield, The Other Press, New York, 2000, p. 101.
7. Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 70.
8. Julia Kristeva: *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. M. Waller, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984, p. 75.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
10. Quoted in Julia Kristeva: *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Léon Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 136.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 145–6.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
13. The English translation reads: 'The strange man, spasmodic and pantomimic, would be the inhabitant of a country without power, the sociological symptom of a political transition. If he claimed strangeness to the point of idiosyncrasy ("the older the institution the more the idioms; the worse the times become, the more the idioms multiply"), would it not also be because political institutions that are undergoing a crisis no longer assure the symbolic identity of the power and the persons?' *Ibid.*, p. 140.
14. Julia Kristeva: *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p. 137.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

### The right to party

Raoul Vaneigem, *A Declaration of the Rights of Human Beings: On the Sovereignty of Life as Surpassing the Rights of Man*, trans. Liz Heron, Pluto Press, London, 2003. 133 pp., £45.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 0 7453 2022 8 hb., 0 7453 2022 8 pb.

Praised in *Le Monde* as a volume ‘all opponents of globalization should carry in their luggage’, its English translation enabled by a bursary from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, copyright protected and with a bar code on the back: Vaneigem’s tract looks official indeed. In contrast, back in 1972 his *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (*Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations*, 1967) appeared in English wrapped in a pirated Brueghel, encrusted with quotes from Breton, Blake and the Ranter Joseph Salmon, hand printed at the Community Press in 1972 by its chief translator, Paul Sieveking. The translation was edited together from various sources – pamphlets and a chunk in *King Mob Echo* – and was unpaid. The edition was anti-copyright. Has Vaneigem now been reduced to a system-endorsing commodity? In situationist jargon, ‘recuperated by the spectacle’? In other words, has he ‘sold out’?

Despite the aesthetic immediacy of alternative products, the law of value remains unshaken by petty-bourgeois modes of production. My copy of the second impression of *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, bought in 1976, sports a Compendium Books price sticker of £2. Despite its underground provenance, to find out what Vaneigem was thinking in 1976 you still had to pay the equivalent of six pints of beer, just what the Pluto Press volume costs today. Politically, too, the Vaneigem of 1967 endures. He still adheres to the situationist doxa: Marx and Freud united in all-out materialist war on every moral justification for class society. Today’s established bodies have simply come round to Vaneigem’s way of thinking: he’s now so overground he can seize the mantle of Thomas Paine and declare a new *Rights of Man* for an epoch of anti-capitalism. ‘Every human being has the right to life ... to knowledge ... to happiness ... to healthy food ... to comfort and luxury’, and so on: fifty-eight rights in all.

For a short book, it’s not an easy read. The utopian afflatus of *The Revolution of Everyday Life* was intoxicating, leading the reader to accept each twist and turn

in Vaneigem’s expressionist polemic. Here, you suffer jolt after jolt, as intriguing commentaries on particular rights finish, and another right is bannered in capitals across the page (in this, it recalls the experience of Hegel’s *Logic*, where the expositions in smaller type – oral improvisations transcribed by his students – are more accessible than the propositions themselves). The language of rights – ‘Every human has the right to the freely available necessities of life’, and so on – carries the stale air of the United Nations, where pious wishes are so regularly and brutally betrayed their hollowness is palpable. Vaneigem’s subtitle – ‘On the Sovereignty of Life as Surpassing the Rights of Man’ – registers this problem, but it does not prevent him using the form.

Marx famously criticized the Rights of Man declared by both American and French Revolutions, pointing out that ‘not one of the so-called rights of man goes beyond egoistic man, man as a member of civil society, namely an individual withdrawn into himself, his private interest and his private desires separated from the community’ (*On the Jewish Question*, 1843). Declarations of the rights of individuals mask the real workings of capitalist society, which has socialized production to an extraordinary degree. Towards the end of his life, in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), Marx reiterated his critique: the Lassalleans’ assertion that ‘the proceeds of labour belong undiminished with equal right to all members of society’ was actually – because human beings have different capacities – a ‘right of inequality, in its content, like every right’. Against the language of rights, Marx counterposed the slogan ‘from each according to their ability, to each according to their need’.

Vaneigem proceeds from Marx’s vision of a humanity whose happy existence and reproduction is the main event, and for whom the accountancy of capital is a decimating, perhaps lethal, plague. He merrily rides the paradox of declaring ‘rights’ which supersede ‘rights’, flouting analytical logic, but giving heart to

those who find their values contradicted daily on television by military commanders and financial experts. 'We cannot be satisfied with abstract rights in a society where economic ascendancy abstracts human beings from themselves': like every situationist, Vaneigem is a master at the Marxist device whereby a conventional-sounding descriptor ('abstract rights') is sprung from its usual logical chain and transformed (*détourné*) into a direct appeal to the experience of the reader. These sudden turns against the grain of philosophy – stark immediacy where you expected mediation after mediation – bring situationist texts into the orbit of poetry, leading spirited readers to relish arguments which might otherwise be rejected as riddled with political error.

The situationist term 'spectacle' made possible criticisms of ideology that were aesthetic as much as political. Vaneigem adheres to this Parisian tradition, somewhat confusing for British socialists, where the poet is suddenly in the vanguard. You will search British left literature in vain – including bestselling works against branding and commodification – for sentences like these:

Comfort and luxury have been the decor of the will to power, of money and vain concerns about appearances. In this, 'having' tried to compensate for the deficiencies of 'being'. Thus consumerism filled the world with a tawdry display of cheap miracles which underlined even more poignantly our exile from the body, the dehumanisation of our everyday surroundings, the glacial nature of our landscapes.

The situationists began with a critique of representation, a closely argued analysis of art's history which vaunted vandalism for its destruction of kitsch and cliché. Paradoxically, this demolition of the pretensions of art gave them a freedom in the deployment of the big themes ('consumerism', 'the body', 'our landscape') lacking in either academic Marxism (hobbled by 'theory') or activist Marxism (hobbled

by the mass media's narrow concept of 'politics'). Artistic thinking focuses on singularities, and from the political viewpoint is open to the charge of anarchism and uselessness. Political thinking focuses on abstractions, and from the artistic viewpoint is open to the charge of reductionism and sterility. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, whose Artaudesque concept of a 'body without organs' proposed epileptic spasm as an alternative to intellectual comprehension, Vaneigem addresses the specific/general (body/mind) problem in ways which suggest avenues for science.

There are no organs which are either noble or ignoble, nor are there high or low functions. Each component of the organism, like the individual in the social body, possesses the capacity for enjoyment of the self through sharing with others. When it has become the human mode which conveys the expression of the body as living matter, the mental faculty possesses the means to perfect and refine it. As an emanation of the vital energy which animates every part of the body, it is the passive and active consciousness of each single particle of the body and of its totality.

Students of political theory who have wrestled with Hobbes are wary of bodily metaphors for the state, but it's possible to contend that an *unconscious* image of the body necessarily underlies all political systems.



Driven by their antidemocratic politics, Platonic and Pauline idealists overemphasize the brain and downgrade limbs, lungs, genitals and stomach. Vaneigem's dialectic, which refuses to suppress the physicality of desire and pleasure, imagines the body as an ensemble of organs. This chimes with recent research on the biochemistry of hormones, as well as proposing a progressive vision of society: differentiated, but replete with reciprocal influence. Blake and Marx provide appropriate figureheads for Vaneigem's doctrine.

The revolutionary sexual politics of Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown – eclipsed in the 1970s by feminism and the politics of social identity – resurface as Vaneigem recommends the unalloyed pursuit of pleasure as the sole remedy for social ills. Again, as in his critique of abstract rights, the pseudo-liberalism of 'equal citizens' in a society based on monetary exchange comes under Marxist fire. The pleasure principle brings benefits undreamed 'by moral entreaties, which form the spearhead of the citizen's ideology. When achieved by coercion, the best becomes the worst. Ethics resuscitates the kinds of barbarism that it has crushed with the noblest of intentions.' Having extinguished Marx and Freud as guiding lights of radical thought, post-structuralist philosophy created a vacuum into which relativism rushed: an 'ethical turn' (or rather intellectual implosion) was inevitable. As the moral panic over Kosovo and NATO's bombing of Serbia paved the way for Bush and Blair's invasion of Iraq, Vaneigem's vision of ethics turning into barbarism couldn't be better illustrated.

As few writers currently dare, Vaneigem goes beyond anticapitalism to a defence and celebration of the life humans actually want to live. His vision relies on the romantic ideal of lifelong personal unfolding that Marx inherited from Goethe, and that seems so hard for Marx's readers – especially those 'trained' in economics or politics – to understand. It speaks beneath the lofty pinnacles of 'theory' with a directness anyone involved in anticapitalism might grasp. It ought to be a popular book. However, two things stand in its way.

Vaneigem's strength is that he can talk grandly and poetically about what it is to be alive; his weakness is that his own life becomes a template for his ideas. Although the publishers stoke the traditional situationist mystique by reporting 'he is rumoured to live in Belgium', it's easy to read between the lines. Vaneigem's rose-tinted view of a new, green capitalism selling 'clean energies' to a resplendent new world

could only come from someone who is doing rather well in a privileged part of Europe, replete with wind farms and goat's cheese. Apparently, 'organic farming' and 'market humanism' mean that after ten millennia of an 'unnatural system' we can now regain 'what rightly belongs to the nature of human beings'. Vaneigem's view of history is so undifferentiated – the patriarchy of the Bronze Age paved the way to 'the infamy of concentration camps and the annihilation of natural resources' – and his solution so individual (artistic integrity; producing use values not exchange values), that his politics veer close to the religions he reviles. Like Norman O. Brown in *Life Against Death*, this poetic dualism (a product of a startling imaginative grasp of both the horrors and possibilities of capitalism) revives the moral binary of Good and Evil. Revolutionary seizure of the means of production is no longer a demand and progressive politics becomes a matter of 'us' living the good life.

A second problem, at least for the English reader, is a translation that sacrifices readability to faithfulness. English cannot support the florid *fin de siècle* sentences which were surrealism's gift to modernity. Rather than having one's soul scorched with words afire, you end up parsing sentences for subject and verb: 'Taking leave of the old world means doing away with a dialectic of heavenly order where decline, corruption and death have been the curse of humankind and of the earth ever since their inaugural sacrifice on the altars of the economy of the profit.' It was not for nothing that punk rewrote situationese into statements short, sharp and penetrating.

Nevertheless, despite its difficulties and illusions, Vaneigem's text deserves to be read, and widely. In creating a paranoid subject freed from subservience to capital, situationist writing fomented turbulence and independence of thought. It understands that without mentioning the rights of elephants, autarchic sexual gratification, alchemical transmutation and identity-busting, the rhetoric of social change waxes moralistic and pompous; that religion's appeal cannot be countered by reason, but only by play. At a time when lying governments are bringing all aesthetic semblance into disrepute, Vaneigem reminds us that 'in the most far-fetched fiction, the most ephemeral lie, there is a spark of life which can rekindle all the fires of possibility.' His links between the critique of the commodity – both mass and intellectual – and the defence of the active imagination are crucial.

**Ben Watson**

# Thinking fast and keeping faith

William E. Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2002. 216 pp., £42.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 8166 4021 1 hb., 0 8166 4022 X pb.

William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, 2nd, expanded edition, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2002. 272 pp., £15.99 pb., 0 8166 4086 6.

William Connolly's now prolific writings exhibit a continual and fascinating preoccupation with two connected themes: the inherent creativity of human thought processes and the 'existential faith' that may be cultivated as a result of this in late modernity. This intertwining is once again evident in his latest study, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*, the publication of which coincides with the appearance of a new, expanded edition of his best-known work, *Identity/Difference*. In the latter, a substantial new preface explains and further justifies some of the core ideas motivating his interventions in debates about identity. *Neuropolitics* does so too, but in a somewhat different way. It draws upon recent research in the neurosciences, innovatively connects this with insights from film theory, and uses the combination to explain the creative potential of thinking, a multilayered notion of culture, and the cultivation of a pluralistic ethical sensibility. The uniting factor, the book claims, is the critical role of 'technique' in each of these areas. Showing how a range of films from *Five Easy Pieces* to *Citizen Kane* unsettle orthodox conceptions of space and time in contemporary cultural theory, Connolly seeks to solidify the commitment to an ethic of generous responsiveness towards difference – an ideal he has pursued relentlessly from *Identity/Difference* through his subsequent works, *The Ethos of Pluralisation* (1996) and *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (2000).

Led to question his own initial prejudice that the neurosciences unjustifiably neglect phenomenological aspects of thought, Connolly focuses on recent research emphasizing how cultural life contributes to the composition of body/brain processes, and vice versa. This insight destabilizes cultural theory's reaction against the reductive biology of standard neurophysiological research and unsettles its equally reductive focus on cultural representations of the body. These conceptions should be revised, according to Connolly, since aspects of popular culture also inform processes of layered thinking: images and rhythms in films, for example, 'prompt a synthesis of experience', stimulating us to different kinds of micropolitical activity, by deploying techniques that organize our perceptual experiences.

These ultimately help to create dispositions to think and act in more creative and receptive ways.

These claims are ambitious and attractive – all the more so for Connolly's explicit declaration that the work is 'hitched' to an underlying agenda of defending the sort of democratic pluralism that would respond to the acceleration of speed and the multidimensional diversity of modern life. Against the teleological conceptions of nature and culture underlying much 'deliberative' democratic theory, he argues that culture is constituted by the perceptions, beliefs and concepts in it; and that, reciprocally, subjective desires, demands and anxieties coil back on 'culture'. Since thinking helps to compose culture, and, reciprocally, since the objective dimension of culture helps to compose thinking, the relays that connect bodies, brains and culture are exceedingly complex. Techniques of the self (choreographed mixtures of word, gesture, image, sound or rhythm) and micropolitics (tactics deployed individually or collectively by non-political associations) set the conditions for thinking, ethical sensibility and a particular 'existential faith'.

One of the most striking and engaging aspects of this book is its claim that film, which affects cultural values on a mass scale and on a variety of different levels, is a potentially powerful motor for micropolitical activity. Stanley Kubrick's much-discussed *Eyes Wide Shut*, for example, deploys colour and slow pace to depict dream-states, which, as Connolly says, 'place us in a position, after the fact ... to ponder how our eyes can become wide shut too', by mobilizing our thought processes subconsciously. This is *ethically* significant, since it can lead us to dissect the organization of our perceptions, particularly when we are confronted with the cruel effects that our habitual thought patterns have on those we marginalize and 'demonize' by them. This thought is later developed through Connolly's defence of a naturalistic conception of both thinking and culture that is set in neither a theo-theological nor a classical scientific frame. Relying instead on Nietzsche's conception of an 'underworld of becoming', which signals the false universalism of any law-like scientific model, he outlines a conception of



to forge between interventions in empirical scientific research and the ethical imperative it centrally defends. Connolly is optimistic that making this link might encourage devotees of different perspectives to acknowledge the ultimate contestability of the 'theoretical' ethical source each professes. This would, he thinks, encourage diverse people to work together to overcome resentments arising in the absence of any definitive answer to the most perplexing problems facing us, such as the search for a

consciousness capable of working on itself via modes of 'self-artistry', shifting and altering its subconscious assumptions about the world and the people in it. This conception is supported by cognitive psychological research into anxious and depressive conditions: to change your thinking on something central to your identity often involves work on subconscious layers of thought, but to assess the effects of those experiments involves reinvoking cognitive or conscious thought directly.

So, if Connolly is right that thinking is at once *immanent*, in subsisting below the reach of consciousness, *material* in the sense of embodied in neurological processes, and *cultural* in being shaped and perpetually reinscribed by experience, the Kantian model of command, Rawlsian public reason and Taylorite attunement to a higher purpose in being all turn out to be problematic, underestimating the role of technique in the formation of thought and belief. Support for this viewpoint is found in Varela's discovery that judgements about oneself and others emerge from complex relays between several systems connecting the self and the world at varying velocities, rather than from a central coordinator in the self acting upon the world. This critique of a central coordinator, and, by extension, of the transcendental self of modern epistemology, should not however be taken as an apology for personal or social irresponsibility. Rather, it suggests that, since one can always think, feel and act otherwise, one can and should consciously cultivate an affective response that is appropriate to the contours of contemporary political problems and realities.

The attractiveness, and at the same time the potential vulnerability, of this book lies in the links it attempts

justification for human suffering and mortality. And this echoes his long-standing claim that such existential anxieties lie at the emotional core of aspirations to universal identity: to assert identity is to assert oneself as normal, good and true, and, in the same move, to demarcate the other as abnormal, deviant or flawed. Now, by supplying hard data concerning the plasticity of our thought processes, he wants to emphasize further that resentment, and the cruelty to 'the other' it harbours, are not our only possible affective responses to the world.

The later chapters build upon this claim by showing how the 'flooding' of slower layers of conceptual thought and imagination can have creative outcomes for individuals or groups, if informed by a Nietzschean 'visceral gratitude for the abundance of being'. This helps us to be *critically* responsive to different interpretations of the world – that is, to decide which new infusions to support, which to tolerate and which to resist, at a time when the tempo of life moves faster than ever. The discussion here recalls Connolly's point, which he introduced first in his early, more analytical work, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, that the language of politics is not a neutral terrain of unmediated concepts generating sets of rationally assessable interpretations. Rather, it is a structure supported by institutions and disciplines, which channel meanings in particular, often explicitly political ways. This thought has turned him increasingly towards Foucauldian and Deleuzian analyses of power and affect. His claim now is that a collective ethos is necessary to foster our capacities to respond generously, but critically, to this interpretative pluralism; and that only by doing so can we learn to react less anxiously or aggressively

to those 'fugitive' interpretations which might thereby emerge.

Speed, or, more precisely, differences in tempo across the spheres of social life, is important here. Political time, as Sheldon Wolin has said, requires a certain slowness, at least in its democratic form. But nowadays politics is overwhelmed by economy and culture, which, because of changes in the infrastructure of media, communications and transport, move at breakneck pace. Against Wolin, Connolly is optimistic about fostering an ethos of pluralism appropriate to this asymmetry in zones of time, primarily because the asymmetry means that people are forced to become less dogmatic in their identities. For example, the pace of change in fashion, in school curricula and faith practices, have led to far-reaching revaluations of standards of sexual identity. Moreover, and importantly for Connolly, this point is confirmed in Nietzsche's recognition not only of the tragic character of life (in which 'identity' ultimately stifles and attempts to extinguish creativity) but also of the non-linear nature of time: Zarathustra ultimately learns to 'affirm the rift' engendered by the dissonance between systems and events which they cannot perfectly assimilate. Connolly is aware of the ethical ambiguity that the use of Nietzsche engenders for democracy and hence declares his position of 'antagonistic indebtedness' to him. Finally, Connolly thinks, a Nietzschean politics of becoming can encourage much more than a politics of recognition. The latter merely *recalls* things that have been forgotten or repressed, while many people, whose identities are constructed through multiple axes of difference, need to balance commonality and predictability with self-artistry and 'the surge of the new'.

As well as going well beyond the array of disciplines on which political theorists usually draw, *Neuropolitics* is impressive in its ethical range. For example, it is concerned as much with Deleuzian micropolitics as with global justice, an issue it addresses by examining Virilio's claim that when time accelerates, space is compressed. Here, Connolly tries to establish the positive role of speed in intrastate democracy, by examining recent attempts to overcome the presumed ethnocentricity of Kantian 'cosmopolitanism'. Many of these are found problematic, because they still share with Kant a concentric model of political culture. But, against this, there are numerous 'eccentric' connections exceeding any one circle: ties might be forged, for example, to environmentalists or feminists in South America, out of the need to challenge oppressive practices across states. These coalitions might, Connolly thinks, help us to cultivate self-modesty in our

personal and political identities, and thus to generate the collective ethos necessary to address macro-level issues, which cannot be solved by any one nation, religion or philosophy.

Ultimately, one might wholeheartedly endorse the ethical sensibility of *Neuropolitics*, without necessarily being so sanguine that the empirical data that it foregrounds will make it any easier in modernity. Nevertheless, Connolly is at least rigorous in applying his own methodological commitment to self-inquiry to his own ideas. This is evidenced by his engagement with his critics in the new edition of *Identity/Difference*. First published in 1991, this book advances a post-Nietzschean account of the relation between identity and democracy, contending that every identity, individual or social, presents a paradox, in the sense that it establishes itself with reference to a range of differences which it constitutively aims to stabilize or 'fix'. It is organized around a letter to St Augustine, in which Connolly entreats the saint to accept that his position as a 'post-pagan' is similar, in the sense of heralding a similar cultural break, to the post-theism marked by Nietzsche and Foucault. In a substantial new essay, 'Confessing Identity/Belonging to Difference', Connolly responds to the criticisms these ideas provoked from many directions; and while he does not retreat from his earlier claims, he takes the opportunity to explain their premisses in a manner that usefully unpacks some of the denser passages of *Neuropolitics*.

Connolly acknowledges that his critics have often focused on his denial that he is a postmodernist, by which he understands one who believes identity is fluid and that ethical life is unimportant. The standard criticism is that, although he is evidently concerned with ethics, his politics is so slippery and ambiguous that it cannot locate a source certain enough to sustain the ethical perspective that it embraces. He aims to refute this by arguing that 'nontheistic reverence' for the continual diversification of life is his most basic ethical source. Attractive though this claim might be, however, one question is how, to use Connolly's words, responsibilities will be affirmed and rights acknowledged. In fact, the question is really whether the Foucauldian premiss concerning the ubiquity of power can provide support for the claim that, due to relations of historical disadvantage, some identities are more vulnerable than others to the effects of particular forms of power. This is to say that from explicitly feminist or postcolonial perspectives the concern is that it is difficult to translate the Foucauldian insight into a sustained political philosophy. Given Connolly's

explicit preoccupation with marginalized identities and institutionalized forms of normalization, it would be useful to know how his theory can address the historic inequalities between liberal individualist discourse and the discourses of minority traditions. All in all, since Connolly characterizes his position as a 'post-Nietzschean liberalism', it is difficult to know how his contribution to a postcolonial perspective might proceed.

Another question arises about the demandingness of the psychological orientation Connolly defends. In a sense, his perspective assumes that we can all think very fast and laterally, putting our identities constantly in question. He argues that he finds it noble to treat his faith as contestable, but the difficulties associated with this self-distancing for those professing marginalized world-views is acute. He seems only too aware of this problem: as he explains, when existential resentment becomes intense, others who question your faith 'can become targets of your revenge in the name of morality'. He responds by saying that the process of asserting identity, along with all the cruelty it can

harbour, is at once necessary and necessarily unjust. It is necessary because it is lodged in the very structure of human desire; and it is unjust because it denies all life that exceeds its contours. So, although he advocates adopting a range of tactics of the self, from Deleuzian micro-political self-fashioning to irony and mimesis, to overcome resentment and replace it with responsiveness, it is sometimes difficult to see how subjects can achieve this.

Connolly addresses the general difficulty by pointing to the social and political responsibility that institutions should bear for cultivating a broad ethos of responsiveness to difference. However, this is to raise one more question: doesn't the existence of social criticism presume some *common source* for respect for persons, for democracy, or for ethics? Connolly replies that respect is not deep respect until one acknowledges the dignity of those who embrace different sources of respect. Most importantly, he shows why the ethic is so necessary, exactly because of our everyday distance from it.

**Monica Mookherjee**

## Penumbra

Christopher J. Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx's 'Capital'*, Brill, Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 2002. viii + 263 pp., £52.00 hb., 90 04 12798 4.

Chris Arthur is known for his philosophical investigations of the work of Marx and Hegel as well as, more widely, for his student editions of *The German Ideology* and *Capital* (Volume 1). His new book, *The New Dialectic and Marx's 'Capital'*, although intended for a specialist readership versed in Marx's theory of value and Hegelian dialectics, reveals the close relationship between the reflexive and editorial operations involved in both the scholarly and disseminatory aspects of his endeavours. I am referring not merely to clarity of argument and expression, but to how attention to the textual detail of his source materials – so important to the pedagogic work of an editor – grounds the philosophically 'new' in his approach to both Hegel and Marx. A good example of this is to be found in his second chapter, where from a critique of the 'myth' of simple commodity production there emerges, first, an argument for a 'systematic' rather than a historicist dialectic, and, second, the main object of theoretical concern – the value form – which will be developed in the rest of the book.

Taking its cue from the cultural criticism of Adorno, Marcuse and Jameson – all concerned with questions of 'form' – Arthur's work is a philosophical intervention in the Marxist tradition that is critical of its historicist inflections in both their positivist and idealist guises, as well as of more recent structuralisms, especially as they impact on the analysis of Marx's *Capital*. If for Engels, and subsequent writers in the tradition of the status of Ernest Mandel and Paul Sweezy, the first chapters of *Capital* tell a story of linear historical development from a precapitalist stage of 'simple commodity production' to capitalist production proper, Arthur, in contrast, following in the Hegelian footsteps of the young Lukács, argues that Marx's analysis involves a dialectical account of an established social totality – that is, an account of a self-reproducing capitalist whole that is *systematic* in character. The difference in perspective is crucial for Arthur, since it liberates value theory from a post-Engelsian orthodoxy for his own 'new' dialectic, which, although Marxist in ethic, is Hegelian in method. Inspired by the now

classical work of I.I. Rubin on value as a social form, Arthur shows how value, particularly as money, mediates and produces the social. Hegel's idealism is seen to register this in its categories: it is the peculiar spectral power of capital to make the abstract Ideal become paradoxically real.

This is where Arthur's textual knowledge – the kind of knowledge the pedagogy of good editions demands – comes decisively to the fore to support his philosophical argument. He shows in some detail how the historicist idea of simple commodity production evokes a mythical precapitalist beginning from which a series of models of society of increasing complexity may be derived, and how, as such, this idea convinced Engels that Marx's method was simultaneously logical and historical. Arthur notes:

a model of simple commodity production as a one class society allows [Engels's Marx] to give a complete account of the law of value, and ... the subsequent introduction of a model of capitalism as a two class society allows him to demonstrate the origin of surplus-value through the specific inflection capital gives to the law of value; subsequently more complicated models, including landed property and the like, introduce still further distortions of the operation of the law of value.

The effect of this positivist narrative is to separate value historically (and thus theoretically) from the logics of capital accumulation. For Arthur, in contrast, value can only be understood as a capitalist social form. Methodologically, this means that Marx's *Capital* begins abstractly rather than historically, and moves to the concrete systematically in reconstructive mode, presenting 'a progressive development of the forms of the *same* object', value (from, for example, the formula of commodity exchange C–M–C, to another mediated by money M–C–M'), such that at each level of concreteness the previous level of conceptualization is reworked and redefined by the next. Arthur's 'new' dialectic is a systematic one: 'logical progression is at the same time a "retrogression"' so that 'the sequence of categories has to be read in both directions, as a disclosure, or exposition, progressively, and as a grounding moment retrogressively'. Such transitions have little to do with historical *evolution*, he points out, but with *systematic* categorial leaps that attend to 'the insufficiency of the existing stage [of the argument] to comprehend its presuppositions'. Finally, rounding off his argument against Engels's, Sweezy's and Mandel's logical historicism, Arthur reveals that Marx never used the idea of simple commodity production at all; that it was in fact an invention of Engels's which has now

become institutionalized (particularly through the work of Mandel) as orthodox mythology.

Arthur's *The New Dialectic* is also an engagement with the idealist philosophy of Hegel. It does not, however, tackle its historicism, but seeks to show how we may understand Hegel's systematic panlogicism from the perspective of its fetishistic registration of the 'determinate absenting of the real' by value in capitalist society – in other words, the spectral Being of Nothing (capital). There is, Arthur insists, a homology between Hegel's 'systematic dialectic of categories' as outlined in his *Logic*, and Marx's presentation of the value form in *Capital*, in which

the movement from commodity exchange to value parallels [Hegel's] 'Doctrine of Being'; the doubling of money and commodities parallels the 'Doctrine of Essence'; and capital, positing its actualization in labour and industry, as 'absolute form' claims all the characteristics of Hegel's 'Concept'.

Here lies the key to Arthur's other, most important, critical intervention. If, as we have seen, he explodes the myth of simple commodity production through philosophical argument and textual erudition, in his account of value Arthur goes on, not to dismiss but to sideline the importance of the labour theory of value. Instead, he privileges commodity exchange and the money form (particularly the formula M–C–M', in which money appears to generate more money) over abstract labour. Arguing methodologically from the point of view of his systematic dialectic he 'corrects' Marx's hurried introduction of production and labour into his discussion of the determination of value and its power to abstract: 'Before the positing of labour as "abstract"', he writes, 'the *ontological* foundation of the capitalist system' is founded on the '*reality* of that abstraction in exchange predicated on the identification as "values" of heterogeneous commodities.' In contrast to recent neo-Spinozian celebrations of the 'positivity' of living labour (Negri), Arthur's arguments here are rigorously capital-centred and all the more powerful for it. Abstraction in exchange is thus not only a mental operation, but real, and produces, Arthur argues, a 'reality of pure forms which then embark on their own logic of development (as in Hegel)' culminating in self-valorizing capital (Hegel's 'Idea').

Negativity and labour, however, are never far away. As is evident, Arthur for the most part reads Hegel into Marx. But he also at times does the inverse, reading Marx's critique of political economy back into Hegel to find, for example, the 'shadow side' of Hegel's reconstructive method in the *Logic*, the side of Nothing rather than Being. This is the place where, as

in capitalism, 'everything is inverted'. It is the beginning, too, of a 'hellish dialectic' (commodity exchange in Marx) where it turns out that, in Adorno's words, 'the whole is false'. Hegel, however, did not take the path of Nothingness, but rather the path of Being to Truth. Nevertheless, Arthur insists, this all suggests that, despite himself, Hegel may have been writing about capitalism all along.

This is where the thematic of exploitation and the figure of labour come back into Arthur's argument, undermining the phantasm of capital's spectral but sovereign self-positing and self-valorization. Value theory may not rest, in the first instance, on abstract labour, but capital accumulation cannot occur without it. As is well known, the use value of labour for capital is the production of surplus value. If from this perspective labour is an effect of capital, capital also needs and depends on it. Labour thus returns to Arthur's argument in the form of an ambiguity: systematically, and from the point of view of value theory, labour as abstract labour (purchased labour power), would seem to be internal to capital's accumulative logic of sovereign self-positing. Politically, however, it seems *logically* to preexist capital, endowed with its own autonomy and the power of negation. At this point we would seem to have reached the limits of Hegelian systematic dialectics, but in a theoretical context in which an appeal to history seems to have been radically weakened. Thus even Arthur's appeal to the revolutionary class rings hollow, melodramatic even:

We take our stand with what escapes the totality, yet supports it, social labour, the exploited source of capital's accumulated power, no matter that this is denied. We saw, with Marx, that (form determined as wage labour) living labour realizes itself only by its de-realizing itself, producing 'the being of its non-being', capital. Only through the negation of this its negation can labour liberate itself, humanity and Nature, from the succubus of capital.

Although Arthur goes on to say that '[t]he reality of this standpoint is still historically open-ended', here his 'new' dialectics would seem to have reverted to the linear and teleological logic of 'realization' characteristic of Hegel's idealist historicism, of the kind criticized by Althusser, rather than, for example, the logic of overdetermination that thinking politics may require. What, in my view, becomes increasingly clear in *The New Dialectic and Marx's 'Capital'* is that it is not possible to derive a politics directly from a *systematic* account of the dialectics of the value form. Some kind of critical history is required here.

Its absence leaves the politics of the text theoretically bereft: every anticapitalist gesture appears as mere assertion because as yet radically undertheorized – symptomatic, perhaps, of the need now to retheorize the *historicity* of the value form and of labour both within and without it.

In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx says that Hegel's late work is characterized by a combination of 'uncritical positivism and equally uncritical idealism'. It is not clear that Marx himself ever quite overcame the positivist-idealist combination. The main object of Arthur's criticism is the Marxist historicist tradition, which has both its positivist and idealist versions. His critique of positivist historicism (the myth of 'simple commodity production') is outstanding, as is his systematic and dialectical account of the value form. The politics derived from the category of labour, however, remains uncritically historicist and idealist. This is what gives the book its, at times, defensive and self-satisfied tone, and perhaps what keeps it from engaging with contemporary forms of value outside of the 'pure capitalism' of the factory that Arthur, following Marx, constantly evokes as the real object of value form theory.

**John Kraniauskas**

## Quite contrary

Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003. xiii + 331 pp., £45.00 hb., £16.95 pb., 0 52166 144 7 hb., 0 52100 417 9 pb.

This book is an important addition to the now quite extensive literature on Mary Wollstonecraft. While many studies of Wollstonecraft focus on literary analyses of her texts, on historical and biographical discussions of her life, or on assessing the nature of her feminist views, especially as evident in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Taylor's work encompasses all three. It is emphatically not a biography. At the same time, its psychoanalytic approach to Wollstonecraft involves a constant shift backwards and forwards from the life to the texts, as it explores the ways in which Wollstonecraft's childhood, adolescence and adult experiences are reflected and reworked in her writings. This approach allows for a careful and nuanced account of the changing political and intellectual circumstances in which Wollstonecraft lived.

The discussion of the 1790s, of the rapid shifts in outlook in Britain that followed the French Revolution, and their impact on the ways in which Wollstonecraft was read and understood is particularly insightful.

As the title indicates, the book's central concern is the imagination. Taylor chose to focus on the imagination, she explains, in part because it was such an important concept in late-eighteenth-century thought – especially in discussions about women. But her psychoanalytic interests are important here too, for imagination refers both to reasoned creativity and to 'the implicit, often unconscious fantasies and wishes that underlie intellectual innovation'. Wollstonecraft's imagination is clearly the most important, but hers is not the only one that is explored. Rousseau's sexual fantasies and the role they play in the construction of his female characters and his broader notion of femininity are discussed in detail. Indeed, one of the most engaging sections of the book deals with Wollstonecraft's complex relationship with Rousseau, with her simultaneous love of and identification with him, her enjoyment of his paradoxes, and her anger at the way in which his fantasies lead to prescriptive invention in which the character of woman is contorted into the feminine position.

The relationship between Wollstonecraft and Rousseau is a paradoxical one, and it is just one of the many paradoxes that Taylor explores. The underlying paradox of feminism – its emphasis and even reification of the category of woman in its very attempt to transcend it – has been discussed extensively recently by Denise Riley and Joan Scott. Taylor is less concerned than they with categorial issues. Rather, she focuses her attention on the paradox evident within Wollstonecraft herself, with her 'shocking misogyny' and repeated insistence that many women are morally, intellectually and socially worthless, on the one hand, and her deep and abiding concern for the fate and future of womankind, on the other. It is not just in Wollstonecraft that paradoxes are to be found, however, but in many different facets of the social and intellectual world in which she lived. There were paradoxes in the relationship between reason and imagination, especially as outlined by Rousseau and Burke. The whole question of what it meant to be a Christian woman, something that had become extremely complicated by the 1790s, involved a paradox as women were supposed to be innately religious and even devout – but not to have any independent engagement with religious ideas or beliefs. The paradoxes presented here serve both as an insight into the tensions and contradictions evident in social attitudes generally and

as a way into the complex imagination that underlay Wollstonecraft's ideas.

The relationship between history and psychoanalysis is complex and controversial. Taylor defends her use of psychoanalysis strongly, arguing against the idea that one cannot analyse individuals and ideas that existed in a pre-Freudian age with the tools that Freud devised. At the same time, she acknowledges that there is a problem with the ways in which a psychoanalytical historical approach might deal with the historicity of beliefs and feelings and their changing meanings over time. As a result, she insists that she has made only limited use of psychoanalytic concepts in this work. While this disclaimer is important, and the use of psychoanalysis certainly yields valuable insights into Wollstonecraft, the difficulties of dealing adequately with the historicity of belief using a psychoanalytic approach is also evident in the book. It can be seen most clearly in the longest and pivotal chapter, that dealing with Wollstonecraft's religious ideas.

On the one hand, Taylor insists on the significance of religion to Wollstonecraft. She emphasizes its centrality in the world that she inhabited, and provides a thorough discussion of contemporary beliefs such as Rational Dissent and the kind of pantheism that was important to Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft's religious beliefs were highly personal and unorthodox, however, and were not entirely understood even by her closest companions. Taylor is right to insist on the centrality of religious beliefs to Wollstonecraft's feminism. And the accounts of the idea of immortality, of the erotic content of Wollstonecraft's religious beliefs, and of her sense of the importance of the Deity in enabling women to be sexual subjects free from masculine fantasy and constraints are cogent and convincing. On the other hand, there is a clear underlying argument that Wollstonecraft's religious beliefs met a psychic and emotional need that could be overcome.

The passions of religion, Taylor suggests, are at least partially responses to love's failures; and in Wollstonecraft, as a child of unloving parents, this involved a failure of self-love. As Wollstonecraft herself moved from the agony of rejected love to the final satisfying relationship with Godwin that helped heal some of her own psychic wounds, so too one can see in her texts a shift from the early heroine who is completely dependent on religion to a later more mature one who is able to do without it. Thus Mary, the eponymous heroine of Wollstonecraft's early novel – a deeply unhappy young woman, forced by unloving parents into a mercenary marriage, and finding consolation in a dying man whom she loves in an intense and spiritual way – is a

romantic martyr, unable to separate divine and earthly love. By contrast, Maria, the heroine of the last novel, is able to disentangle the erotic and the religious, to recognize the extent to which she has engaged in fantasies about the man she loved, to acknowledge her own erotic desire and to understand emotional realities in a more mature way. 'Rather than a new relationship with God', Taylor argues, Maria acquires at the end of her torments 'a new relationship with herself'. Taylor recognizes that this move is implicitly anti-theistic, but insists that at the same time as she wrote the novel Wollstonecraft was writing a critical essay reaffirming her belief in the close connection between the erotic imagination and the sacred and their link to creativity. Nonetheless, the use of William James and of Freud in framing the approach to religion here does serve to reinforce the idea that it fulfilled an emotional need rather than being integral to a world-view.

Taylor addresses, and often seeks to defend Wollstonecraft against, some of the criticism made of her in recent years. Just as she seeks to argue against the view that Wollstonecraft was excessively critical and puritanical on the question of women's sexuality by emphasizing the importance of her religious ideas and the changes in her ideas over time, so too she seeks to defend her against the charge of being a 'bourgeois thinker' and to insist on her social radicalism. In part, the argument here depends on an analysis of the precarious social and economic position of Wollstonecraft and her fellow journalists, who had little in common with the mainstream of the middle class. But it also involves a discussion of Wollstonecraft's increasingly critical attitude towards 'the adoration of property' and the growing affluence that she saw all around.

Wollstonecraft's hostility towards the wealthy and indolent is seen as important to her many vicious criticisms of women, most of which are directed against leisured and affluent women rather than against all women. At the same time, Taylor points to the difficulties that Wollstonecraft had in acknowledging how few women in eighteenth-century England were the pampered, sensual and indulgent creatures that she so despised – in contrast with the vast numbers of women whose lives were spent in paid and unpaid labour and in struggling for their own survival and that of their families. The imaginary and emblematic Woman that plays such an important part in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* took much of her colouring from Wollstonecraft's own unhappy early experience as an employee and from the masculine fantasies that she could not escape, although she did so much to puncture them. This version of

Woman had to give way to a different idea of the female citizen for Wollstonecraft's feminist vision to become whole.

It is in Wollstonecraft's last book, *Maria*, that this process begins, through her attempt to explore the importance of class differences in the trials that women face, and in her depiction of the mutual concern and partnership that develops between the middle-class Maria and the plebeian Jemima. It is the different but equally intense sufferings of the two women at the hands of cruel men, and of a male-dominated social and legal structure that bring them together. The relationship they forge is an unequal and fraught one, and their future uncertain. As Taylor shows, the vision presented here is thus in no way a utopian one. It reflects the difficulties faced by reformers in the reactionary years of the mid-1790s, the lack of concern with the situation of women among the radicals of that and the previous decade, and the obstacles feminists would face in the century to come. In its concerns with the lack of rights of mothers, the need for women to be financially independent in order to support themselves and their families, and its recognition of the need for women to provide support for each other, however, it points also to the most important directions that feminist thought would take.

**Barbara Caine**

## Philosophy in the world

George Yancy, ed., *The Philosophical I: Personal Reflections on Life in Philosophy*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD, 2002. 295 pp., \$75.00 hb., \$27.95 pb. 0 7425 1341 6 hb., 0 7245 1342 4 pb.

At first sight, an edited collection of autobiographical essays by sixteen prominent American and Canadian philosophers is not the most attractive of prospects. Intellectual autobiography is a genre in which legitimate pride and satisfaction in achievement can all too easily turn into self-aggrandisement or smug accounts of 'my brilliant career'. The contributors do, however, succeed in resisting that temptation, though it has to be said that some (notably Douglass Kellner and, to a lesser degree, Sandra Harding) do not entirely escape the trap of supplying annotated personal bibliographies. The sixteen authors demonstrate in various ways both that the personal is philosophical and that

the philosophical is deeply embedded in the personal. Philosophy is always-already in the world. The reminder that this is the case came with the wake-up call of 9/11, which, as Yancy puts it in his introduction, ‘woke us from our hyperreal slumber’. This sounds very much like a last goodbye to Baudrillard and all that. This time it’s for real, so what are the responsibilities of philosophy and philosophers? When, in 1755, an earthquake devastated Lisbon, Voltaire famously concluded in *Candide* that philosophers and others should ‘cultivate our gardens’. What do we do after 9/11?



Yancy and his contributors all conclude that philosophy must assume and work with its worldiness, with its being-in-the-world. This implies that philosophers must come to terms with their own worldliness. Autobiography is one way of doing so. This concentration on the self and its emergence implies neither sterile narcissism nor a simplistic notion of selfhood. No one here is arguing that the self is a transcendental source of meaning or even an absolute starting point. As John J. Stuhr has it, a person *is* a history. The underlying consistency of a self is that of a narrative, of what MacIntyre calls the narrative unity of a life. This does not mean that the self is a starting point, or a cogito that exists outside time; still less does it mean that particular selves are destined to become philosophers – that choice of vocation is often the contingent effect of an encounter with a book, a teacher or an institution. A life or a self is never a finished project. It is a contingent ‘adventure’ (Sandra Harding) that is narratively temporal and historically dynamic. Few psychotherapists would disagree. In a few of these essays, the authors come close to or even flirt with the later Foucault’s notion of an aesthetics of existence, though none endorses his advocacy of a combination of S&M, heavy drugs and ‘extreme experiences’. In this perspective, the old ‘life and/or works’ dichotomy collapses as the two merge into a single project that never ends.

The various authors supply vivid and often very moving accounts of the vexed question of affirmative action in universities, of struggles over sexism and racism, of the horrors of the APA’s annual conference-cum-slave-market. Yancy offers a major contribution on doing ‘philosophy in a black skin’, whilst Charles W. Mills nicely pinpoints the inherent instability of all ‘racial’ categories. In the Jamaica where he grew

up, he is a ‘red’ man; when he teaches in the USA, he becomes a ‘black’ man. Harding, who graduated in 1956, tells of the trials of living in the dismal age of the feminine mystique. Lorraine Code speaks of the difficulty of being at once an apprentice and a ‘faculty wife’ (and what a ghastly phrase that was/is). For her, studying and then teaching philosophy was a way of escaping the life of a stay-at-home mother as much as an expression of any intellectual desire.

Some of the details of these lives in philosophy are at once amusing, terribly moving and human, all too human. George Yancy’s childhood prayer is quite irresistible, and could raise some interesting theological debates: ‘And God bless the devil. Help him to be a better person.’ A young Sandra Harding tried to read the library in alphabetical order... and got, she thinks, to ‘M’. Similarly, Linda Martín Alcoff spent a lot of her youth reading ‘classic novels’, mechanically and rather like the Autodidact in Sartre’s *Nausea*. They weren’t the only ones.

The variety of positions held by the contributors is remarkable, ranging as they do from feminist epistemology and ‘standpoint epistemology’ (Nancey Murphy, Lorraine Code, Nancy Tuana) to philosophies of race and ethnicity (Yancy, Mills), ethics (Lachs, Stuhr), philosophy of religion (Murphy, Nicholas Rescher) and pragmatism (Joseph Margolis). The range of standpoints is testimony to the pluralist vitality of transatlantic thought, even though most if not all contributors express a certain unease about its state of health. Many also express a certain weariness with contemporary orthodoxies. The linguistic turn is described by Lachs as ‘the folly of academics’. For Margolis, the hyperactivity of some forms of postmodernism (Foucault, Derrida) ‘obscures the philosophical doldrums of our end-of-century. We are marking time, waiting for a

new infusion.' For Kellner, 'reaction and retrenchment' set in with analytic philosophy; worse still, continental philosophy has segregated itself into circles in which specific philosophers are revered as the Voice of Truth, Derrida being its most voluble spokesman. The underlying cause of the malaise is not purely philosophical. Despite the emphasis on the need for a philosophy that is 'steeped in the real world' (Yancy), which definitely suggests a certain optimism, there is sometimes a quiet note of something bordering on despair. Looking back at her formative years, when government grants were easily available and when tuition at Florida State was cheap, Alcoff – a 'Latina' from a poor background – remarks: 'These days, I doubt if I would have made it.' And would Yancy – born one generation away from institutionalized segregation – now make it from the despised housing projects of North Philadelphia to the

philosophy department at Duquesne? Would he now make it from the street to the faculty? Like Alcoff, I somehow doubt it.

9/11 was no simulacrum. For many of the contributors it was a traumatic reminder that philosophy is embedded in the world, and cannot go on living in denial or bad faith. The echoes of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are deafening, and it is perhaps significant that so many contributors first encountered philosophy in one of its phenomenological–existentialist guises. Yancy strikes a similar note in his introduction, where he contends that philosophers have a responsibility to help create new habits of thought 'in the service of a more pluralistic, democratic and just world culture'. He adds: 'perhaps philosophy has a responsibility toward creating authentically rich values.' Surely the only contentious word here is that hesitant 'perhaps'.

David Macey

## Another dogma of empiricism?

Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2002. ix + 190 pp., £23.50 hb., 0 674 00905 3.

The fact/value dichotomy – the theory that statements of fact are objective and verifiable, whereas evaluative claims are mere matters of opinion and subjective – has been a fundamental tenet of a great deal of modern philosophy. It is questionable whether Putnam is right to suggest that it originates with Hume; like many analytical philosophers Putnam is somewhat casual when it comes to history. Nevertheless, Putnam is undoubtedly correct that the fact/value dichotomy has been a fundamental article of faith of Hume's empiricist and positivist successors in the twentieth century. Perhaps, Putnam muses at one point, it should even be regarded as another 'dogma of empiricism'.

The issue of fact and value is usually discussed in ethics, where the main concern is with the nature of values. Putnam reverses this. Most of his work over the years has been in philosophy of language, metaphysics and philosophy of mind. His main focus in this book is on the concept of a 'fact'. This proves to be a suggestive and fruitful approach.

Putnam starts by recounting the history of attempts to distinguish logical truths from matters of fact in positivist and empiricist philosophy, culminating in Quine's celebrated abandonment of the analytic/synthetic distinction as an untenable 'dogma of empiricism'. On this basis, Putnam goes on to question the very notion of 'fact' as it has been developed

in empiricist philosophy. No clear-cut separation of facts from values is possible; the two are inextricably connected in most contexts. This is true even for what are normally regarded as the ethically neutral facts of science, mathematics and logic. For even in these areas, evaluative considerations of what is 'coherent' or 'rational' play an ineliminable role in determining what is to be accepted as 'objective' and as 'fact'. Indeed, following Dewey and other pragmatists, Putnam argues that 'value and normativity permeate all experience'. But empiricist philosophers and their analytic successors have been 'determined to shut their eyes to the fact that judgements of coherence, simplicity, beauty, naturalness, and so on, are presupposed by physical science.... Yet *coherence* and *simplicity* and the like are *values*.' As Putnam puts it, 'epistemic values are values too'.

The entanglement of facts and value is even more evident in the realm of ethics. Putnam focuses on what have come to be called 'thick ethical concepts', such as 'rude' or 'courageous'. Concepts like these cut right across the fact/value divide. They combine both an evaluative and a descriptive aspect (in contrast to 'thin' concepts, such as 'good', 'right' or 'ought' and their opposites, where the descriptive content is minimal). With thick concepts, sometimes the descriptive aspect, sometimes the evaluative one may

be to the fore, but this sort of concept presumes a particular moral perspective and can be used only from within it. In characterizing a person's behaviour as 'rude', for example, I am not simply giving a neutral and factual description of it, I presuppose a moral framework without which the concept would be incomprehensible.

These arguments raise important issues. Putnam mainly stresses their critical and negative impact, particularly on what he sees (rather narrowly) as 'positivism' and its legacy. Indeed, it is a symptom of the restricted range of his philosophical horizons that pretty well all his targets of criticism are rolled up under this heading. At one point even poor old Habermas gets treated as a 'positivist'.

What Putnam is proposing as an alternative to the fact/value dichotomy is less clear. His positive account of the nature of facts and values and of the relation between them is sketchy. Dewey and other pragmatists are invoked from time to time, but what pragmatism actually means in this area is never spelled out in any detail. For his main example of an alternative and more satisfactory approach Putnam turns to the field of economics and to the ideas of Amartya Sen. Economics is a field in which the fact/value dichotomy has long ruled as orthodoxy. With the rise of neoclassical economics in the 1870s, mainstream economics abandoned any attempt to ground economic value in objective and naturalistic measures of the sort for which classical economists like Adam Smith and Marx were searching with the labour theory of value. Economic value is now regarded as a function of mere preference alone. It thus becomes subjective and arbitrary. The effect of this is to exclude any concern with ethical questions from the realm of economics. Economics is no longer supposed to have anything to do with questions of welfare or human good.

Putnam shows how the rejection of the fact/value dichotomy is fundamental to the quite different approach of welfare economics, of which Sen is a leading exponent. Sen's area is development economics, where the conventional wisdom has been that the sole priority is to raise monetary income and economic output. Sen argues that we have wider economic goals. Sen is no revolutionary. He is arguing for what will seem common sense to most liberal-minded people: namely, that questions of welfare and equality should figure on the agenda of economic planners. Existing economic rationality, however, excludes such ethical concerns, and this is standardly justified on the basis of the fact/value dichotomy. In opposition to this, Sen maintains that ethical and economic questions are

inextricably bound up together. As Putnam explains, he insists that we should

think about what functionings form part of our and other cultures' notions of a good life and to investigate just how much freedom to achieve various of those functionings various groups of people in various situations actually have. Such an approach will require us to stop compartmentalizing 'ethics' and 'economics' ...

Putnam gives little more than a brief overview of Sen's work, but this is clear and thought-provoking and it whets one's appetite for more. For that, however, one must go to Sen's own, highly readable, writing (for example, *On Ethics and Economics*, 1987). Putnam's book is a collection of popular lectures and academic papers which vary considerably in quality and style. Issues tend to get dealt with in a somewhat accidental and haphazard manner; arguments are often not adequately developed and followed through. Nevertheless, the book does a good job of presenting the issues in clear and accessible terms. It contains a strong and stimulating line of argument, put forward with all the verve and flair one has come to expect from this author.

**Sean Sayers**

## Riddling

Kyriaki Goudeli, *Challenges to German Idealism: Schelling, Fichte and Kant*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2002. 232 pp. £45.00 hb., 1 4039 0122 8.

Literature on German idealism in English mainly comprises either austere scholarly monographs on main representatives of the movement (especially Kant and Hegel) or historical and descriptive accounts of it. On rare occasions one encounters inspiring and controversial studies on Kant and Hegel, but one can hardly find similarly fruitful and challenging readings of Fichte and Schelling.

Goudeli's book is an attempt at filling this gap, due to the original narrative it offers on Schelling, and especially on the so-called 'middle period' of his oeuvre. On the one hand, the work seeks to deliver itself from the spectre of Hegel and his impact on subsequent interpretations of German idealism. On the other hand, though, the attentive reader won't fail to recognize the – often indirect – presence of Hegel, on the level of a subtle critique of Hegel's interpretations of the thinkers considered. Goudeli attributes para-

mount importance to the possibilities opened up by the reinterpretation of Schelling with which the book culminates. Despite a recent revival of Schellingian studies, Schelling remains in the margin of current theoretical debates. It is a merit of this book – and a challenge to contemporary academic practice – that it adopts a critical distance from both Deleuzian and psychoanalytic interpretations of Schelling.

The book is divided into two parts, 'The Logic of Experience' and 'The Logogriph of Experience'. The first is dedicated to Kant and Fichte, while the second – more than half of the book – comprises four chapters on Schelling's early and middle-period philosophy.

According to Goudeli, Kant should be considered the first modern thinker who systematically conceptualized the notion of experience, setting the scene and the conditions for subsequent discussions of the concept. In Goudeli's view this occurs by Kant 'sharply distinguishing between Reason's legitimate and illegitimate provinces' and the task she accordingly ascribes to her book is to put a challenge to the alleged 'illegitimacy' of certain provinces. By inquiring, 'how are a priori synthetic judgments possible?', Kant objectifies the very notion of experience. Although spontaneity plays a crucial role in the formation of the concepts of the understanding, as their presupposition, it is nevertheless restricted to the realm of cognitive experience. Spontaneity thus loses its dynamic force and becomes a transcendental concept, a mere 'logical presupposition for the possibility of experience'.

Goudeli then moves into Kant's *Critique of Judgment* as a possible source of a different account of spontaneity and therefore of experience. Preoccupied with the 'contingent' particular, reflective judgement leaves a space open for an interplay between the 'subject and its contingent representations'. However, reflective judgement does not escape the limits of transcendental logic. For although the laws of the understanding do not explain the contingent, the latter should conform to them nonetheless.

The third chapter focuses on Fichte. Despite Fichte's attempt to escape Kant's representational mode of thinking by exploring the conditions of the transcendental unity of apperception, Goudeli shows, he did not manage to escape its trap, remaining thus within the limits of transcendental logic. In the context of Fichte's philosophy, the latter becomes the 'logic of the will' replacing the Kantian 'logic of the concepts'. Although Fichte's notion of productivity – like Kant's concepts of spontaneity and free play – can be seen as anticipatory of a possible transgression of the transcen-

dental notion of experience, both thinkers restrained their insights, remaining within the boundaries of 'the logic of experience'.

The second section of the book begins with an exploration of Schelling's early writings where he develops his system of identity. However, according to Goudeli, it is Schelling's middle period that is of special interest since it is the period in which he breaks with his system of identity, abandoning as well his transcendental point of view. This transition can be traced to 'Schelling's trilogy', *Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809), *Ages of the World* (1811, 1813, 1815) and *Deities of Samothrace* (1815). Goudeli argues that both Hegel's and Heidegger's accounts of Schelling are 'monochromatic interpretations' of his thought, in the sense that even when they deal with Schelling's middle writings, they neglect this very transition.

Schelling's self-criticism sets the ground for what Goudeli sees as the transition from the 'logic of experience' to the 'logogriph of experience'. What distinguishes Schelling from Hegel's alleged overcoming of 'transcendental logic' is the fact that he escapes the trap of speculative thought by expanding the horizon of experience to include – and also to be conditioned by – the nexus of living forces that constitute the universe, the nature and the human being. This is not tantamount to a repudiation or abandonment of logic. Quite the contrary, Goudeli's reading of Schelling reveals a hidden aspect of logic, namely logic's theurgic interaction and interplay with the 'forces of chaos'. Indeed, logic not only *experiences* but also actively participates in the cosmic enigma, and in this sense it becomes a 'logogriph'.

Schelling uses the term 'logogriph' – literally the 'logic of the riddle' – just once, in a footnote of his book on freedom. Goudeli's contribution consists in making this originally marginal metaphor central to a reinterpretation of Schelling's oeuvre, which serves as the foundation for a critique of the philosophical foundations of modernity. Traditional philosophical concepts of identity, unity, reason, intellectual intuition and the absolute lose their fixed and rigid meaning, acquiring instead both a plasticity and an elasticity, or, in Goudeli's words 'an allegorical and transitive unity'. Longing nurtures the will-to-love, initiates movement and *is* simultaneously chaos. Experience ceases to be a static object for observation and expands its limits to the realm of the unconscious and to abysmal and creative powers.

**Vasiliki Tsakiri**

# CONFERENCE REPORT

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## Quoi?

'Questioning Religion', British Society for Phenomenology,  
University of Greenwich, 11–13 July 2003

On some of the hottest days of the summer, amidst the designs of Wren and Hawksmoor at the University of Greenwich's Maritime Campus, around forty speakers and many more participants attended the BSP's 'Questioning Religion' conference. Perhaps the surroundings gave a languid air to proceedings. What might have been an occasion for fierce arguments proved more congenial, with only the occasional abortive attempt at scripture ping-pong: 'Matt. 5:24', 'Romans 7:13', 'No, I'm sorry I don't know that one, you'll have to quote it to me.' Alternatively, this may have been the result of the absence of any scheduled theological disputes: meaty questions of soteriology and atonement generally exceed phenomenological coordinates and well-mannered restraint.

That said, the presence of such theology, as distinct from religious experience and ecclesiastical doctrine (the former being the systematization and rationalization of the latter), might have clarified certain methodological issues arising from the putative 'theological turn' in phenomenology. Since the phenomenology of religious experience is not per se theological, it requires a speculative moment to render it so. Disappointingly, few returned to Levinas's claim in *Totality and Infinity* that metaphysics is first philosophy. Too many papers offered theological supplements to resolve philosophical problems without attending to the critical problems of presentation thus generated.

In contrast, Paul Davies carefully undermined the accepted distinction between philosophical, theological and religious writing by examining the presence of the Tenth Commandment, 'Thou shalt not covet...', within Kant, Levinas and the Pauline epistles. And Howard Caygill's paper early on Sunday morning laid further foundation for such questioning. By examining Henri Corbin's confrontation of phenomenology with Iranian philosophy of the post-medieval period, Caygill developed the concepts of theophany (the manifestation of the *hiddenness* of the divine, over the rationalization of religious experience) and prophecy in order to provide a counterpoint to Levinas. Reading Levinas as a legal thinker, creating applications of law to novel cases, Caygill used the perspective gained by these theological concepts to resituate the tensions between justice and the state. On the latter reading, the face of the Other is understood as a moment of singular theophany: one which cannot be historicized into a sacred or universal history.

The interconnections between neo-Kantianism and theological concerns in Hermann Cohen and Frantz Rosenzweig, and the continuation of these concerns into Walter Benjamin's writing, were the topic of Nickolas Lambrianou's paper. It put into question the changed conditions which determine the current reception of these thinkers. Similarly, Joanna Hodge's paper on Heidegger's early lecture series on phenomenology and religious life had the potential to ignite current understanding of *Being and Time*. Combining discussions on the philosophy of history with lectures on Augustine, Galatians and Thessalonians, Heidegger aimed to release the latter texts so that they could be read 'phenomenologically'. But this early, explicit connection between phenomenology and 'religious life', which produces a different access to thinking time, supports the possibility of a new reading of 'authenticity' and conversion experience – an *Umkehrung*, which, in the same panel, Laurence Hemming suggested could still be prepared, even though it may be centuries away from the present.

In his paper on Bataille and Klossowski, Jones Irwin illustrated the critical charge that the sacred possesses in its opposition to bourgeois, secular rationalism. This claim found

a weak echo in Jeremy Carrette's suggestion that, given changed historical conditions, the basis of all criticism today is the critique of the interrelated disciplines of psychology and economics with the aim of providing an alternative model of 'being human in a neoliberal world'. Unfortunately, the only attempt to develop this idea at the conference rested with those seeking to develop a new religion of 'critical piety'. It is tempting to read this idea through a Sorelian optic, but academic philosophy seems an ill-starred vehicle for the message: 'Repent, attend to what matters, for the end of capitalism is nigh.' Even if certain experiences may help to liberate our thinking from instrumentality, there was little thought given to the demands of philosophical presentation. For example, if mysticism appeals to modern intuition, it needs to be asked how it ties in today with an orthodoxy of individualism. In the conclusion to her paper on Hadewijch of Antwerp's positive concept of the fecund abyss of creation, Grace Jantzen suggested that such reinvigoration of the 'abyss' as philosophical trope could provide the resources to articulate modern problems of gender, race and colonialism, whilst avoiding the nihilism of postmodern relativism. But this assertion was left hanging, unsubstantiated on this occasion.

That such a promise could be treated seriously marks a strengthening, yet ambivalent, tendency in contemporary philosophy for which this conference created an illuminating platform. The danger is that it might only offer a new twist on *bricolage*, so long as it trusts in intuition rather than critique. The latter's productive charge is too easily dissipated when asked to shore up pre-given positions.

Andrew McGettigan

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