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Geographies of violence and democracy

Politics in Spain

Alejandro Colás

On the morning of 11 March 2004, after ten bombs were detonated on four commuter trains in southern Madrid, the communist-led United Left coalition released a press statement, part of which translates as follows:

Today is a day of democratic unity. With this fascist-like massacre, carried out with despicable cowardice against hundreds of workers and students, with this act of nazi barbarism, ETA seeks to destroy Spanish democracy and undermine the rule of law. It is a direct challenge to the whole of society, a challenge to democracy, an attempt to drench our voting booths with blood.

Like other political forces, United Left initially got the perpetrators wrong; but it was right about the fascism. And they should know, because the trail of the 11 March bombings leads back to parts of Madrid's geography that are charged with political significance for the Spanish Left. They are places that evoke all the violence, hope, antagonism, terror, solidarity and disenchantment associated with the democratic struggles against fascism in that part of the world. With the 11 March bombings these sites have once more acquired a global significance, raising questions of democracy, violence and political economy on a transnational plane which pose especially challenging dilemmas for the internationalist Left.

Atocha, El Pozo, Lavapiés

Atocha is not only the train station originally destined for the terrorist 'spectacular' of 11 March 2004. It also names the street where five communist lawyers were assassinated by fascist gunmen on 24 January 1977. On that occasion, close to 200,000 mourners attended the victims' funeral at the Plaza de las Salesas, in what was to pass as Madrid's largest free political demonstration since the proclamation of the Second Republic in the spring of 1931. For historians, the funeral of the Atocha five signalled a turning point in the road towards the 'democratic transition' inaugurated six months later with the first free multi-party elections after Franco's forty-year military dictatorship. The 1977 elections opened up a fraught and protracted process of political democratization marked by intensive class struggles, Spain's own *anni di piombo*, the approval of the 1978 Constitution granting unprecedented autonomy to the country's various nationalities and regions, the aborted military coup of February 1981, and the first electoral victory of the Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) in 1982.

The fourteen-year PSOE hegemony that ensued both challenged and consolidated Spain's budding liberal democracy. Under Felipe González's successive premier-ships, Spain joined the European Community, and experienced economic growth and significant improvements in public infrastructure, administration and services. By 1992 this brave new Spain officially entered the hallowed world of 'modernity' with not one, but three ostentatious displays of its advanced capitalist status: the Seville Expo, the Barcelona Olympics and Madrid's turn as European city of culture. These were also the *pelotazo* years (that reckless swigging back of bonuses and backhanders somewhat akin to the English 'loadsamoney'). They were years of state-sponsored terrorism against suspected ETA sympathizers, privatizations stacked in favour of PSOE cronies, and systematic corruption at senior levels of the administration. It was a period that witnessed the ruthless, often violent deindustrialization of entire regions, unemployment reaching 25 per cent of the working population, and a continued class antagonism that provoked no fewer than three general strikes in the space of a decade.

Few places in Madrid better represent that bittersweet experience of 'democratic transition' than El Pozo del Tío Raimundo, a working-class neighbourhood where successive generations of migrants from Spain's south forged some of the most powerful – and emblematic – opposition forces to Franco's dictatorship. Many of those gathered at the Plaza de las Salesas in January 1977 would have arrived from El Pozo. With the legalization of the communist party and the advent of civil liberties many more will have later participated in the movement against Nato membership which was narrowly defeated in the 1986 referendum after the PSOE reneged on its electoral promise to campaign for Spain's withdrawal from the Atlantic Alliance. A quarter of century on, despite – or perhaps because of – momentous domestic and international changes, the people of El Pozo and its neighbouring districts are likely, together with 90 per cent of Spanish public opinion, to have opposed the government's support of Anglo-American military adventurism in Iraq. Yet it was in these defiantly leftist and historically anti-militarist neighbourhoods of southern Madrid that four of the ten bombs blew up on 11 March 2004.

Police investigations soon established that the explosives had been activated with the aid of mobile phones purchased at a shop in the neighbourhood of Lavapiés, a stone's throw away from Atocha. The Plaza de Lavapiés stands on the border between the sixteenth-century Habsburg Madrid of the 'Austrias' and the nineteenth-century Madrid of imperial decline. Like most old quarters on either side of the Mediterranean, the area has historically been populated by lower orders – artisans, shopkeepers, traders, domestic servants, some proletarians and the odd bag-snatcher, pimp or dealer. For the past decade or so, it has attracted immigrants from all corners of the world, principally from Spain's former colonies, many of whom have joined locals in these professions.

After Ecuador, Morocco is the largest exporter of labour to Spain, and there are currently close to half a million Moroccan citizens living and working across the country. Many are recent arrivals who tend to gravitate towards neighbourhoods like Lavapiés with affordable accommodation and an already existing expatriate community; most work in the agribusiness sector, and some – like a number of the twenty-four suspects associated with the 11 March explosions – have been residents for many years and developed business interests in the peninsula.

Moroccans and other immigrants have been victims of Spanish xenophobia from the beginning. If they survive the treacherous waters of the Gibraltar strait (or the stretch of the Atlantic leading to the Canary Islands), African immigrants can expect racist assaults, police intimidation, institutional discrimination, super-exploitation and outright pogroms like those that took place in the Andalusian village of El Ejido in February 2000. Responses to such experiences are diverse, but they typically involve the politicization of racism and xenophobia through trade unions, immigrant associations,

political organizations and solidarity groups. It has generally involved campaigns for the extension of democratic rights to immigrants; very rarely has religion played a major part in such mobilizations. The Association of Moroccan Immigrant Workers in Spain (ATIME) is one of the oldest and – with close to 15,000 members – the largest of such organizations. After the bombings, which killed fifty-four of his fellow immigrant workers, ATIME's secretary-general, Mustapha El Mirabet, told the Spanish daily *El País* (7 April 2004):

The moment we're living through requires radicalism in certain areas, and we're going to be radical on this issue: the democratic state of law requires the defence of civil liberties. And there are some extremists who abuse these liberties to attack our coexistence. Well, we're going to confront them. We're going to be uncompromising in our defence of the democratic state of law.

Their values and ours

That such a statement could just as easily have been issued from the White House or Downing Street raises the first challenge for the internationalist Left: to reappropriate the language of democracy, freedom and solidarity from its monopolization and instrumentalization by the authoritarian Right. For one of the most serious failures of the Western Left in recent decades has surely been to let such language be bandied about by governments like those of Bush, Blair, Aznar and Berlusconi, which have systematically undermined substantive democracy, clamped down on genuinely plural public spheres and fostered opaque, unaccountable and unrepresentative forms of rule both at home and abroad. The current occupation of Iraq, where 'freedom' and 'democracy' are being imposed externally through the barrel of a gun in much the same way that British imperialism tried to do some eighty years ago, is perhaps the most notable example of how such concepts are being abused domestically and internationally. More worryingly, it is a textbook example of how to ratchet up the global 'strategy of tension' pursued by al-Qaeda and its supporters.

A central component of such a reappropriation must be its internationalist dimension, because it is not only in the West that the authoritarian Right is revising the meanings of democracy, freedom and solidarity. The Madrid bombings and their precursors have made it clear that the political issues at stake are transnational in nature. The sources of this violence cut across national borders, and so clearly must the political responses. Here the Left should be at an advantage, since its politics have, at least in principle, always been suspicious of the inherent legitimacy of state borders and disdainful of primordialist notions of nationality, religion or ethnicity. Yet for many on the Left this requirement of anti-essentialist internationalism seems only to apply to 'the West'. The millenarian demagoguery of Bin Laden and other, more 'moderate', Islamists are, in a perverse leftist version of the 'clash of civilizations', all too often legitimated as sole expressions of the 'Muslim world' or the 'Arab resistance'. However, political Islamism is only one of various responses to societies in the midst of a general crisis. It is at root a reactionary ideology, and as such is no friend of democracy or democrats but rather antagonistic, often violently so, towards leftists in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The clash is over ideologies and within civilizations.

This is especially clear when seen from the southern side of the Straits of Gibraltar. The five men accused of executing the Madrid bombings originated in the northern Moroccan cities of Tangiers and Tetouan – the first an international zone and the second the capital of 'Spanish Morocco' until 1956. Like other major Moroccan cities, Tangiers and Tetouan display all of the contradictory symptoms of a postcolonial malaise: an intense and constant traffic with the outside world, which is nonetheless rendered impossibly distant by the Mediterranean ramparts of fortress Europe and a structurally unequal international exchange; a regional socio-economic dynamism,

atheists and Jews, but now generic 'Crusaders'. Unlike European interwar fascism, however, the *ihadists* do not dispose of the state's machinery of war and oppression. But this could change. The general crisis in states and societies across the Arab and Muslims worlds, coupled with the occupations of Palestine and Iraq, makes it very difficult for progressive forces the world over to deploy terms like 'democracy', 'secularism' and 'freedom' against radical Islamism.

What difference does four days make?

This conviction goes a fair way to explain the swing in favour of the Socialists at the general elections on 14 March 2004. Spaniards understood that, while our country's military presence in occupied Iraq was not the single cause of the attacks, it was nonetheless part of the international context that fuels Islamist terrorism. In other words, attacking Iraq was the worst way of combating terrorism. There is no question that the bombings were successful in placing the links between war and terrorism at the forefront of voters' minds. But equally important was the crassly partisan mismanagement by the incumbent Popular Party (PP) government of the circumstances surrounding the attacks. In their insistence, right up to the day before the election, that Basque separatists were in the frame for the atrocity, the PP displayed all too openly their manipulation of suffering and their disdain for public opinion. This arrogant miscalculation was to cost them the election.

Two facts gleaned from the electoral data bear out this interpretation. The first is the 8.5 per cent increase in voter turnout with respect to the previous legislative election in 2000, much of it made up of nearly 2 million first-time voters. The second is that while the PSOE gained close to 3 million new votes, the PP lost only 600,000 votes. Putting all these figures together, and factoring in the rise in the nationalist vote at the expense of the PP in Catalonia and the Basque country, it seems reasonable to speculate that the aggregate swing was not so much away from the PP, but in favour of the PSOE and the regional nationalists. Put differently, the first-time voters and those who abstained in 2000 went to the polling booths with the intention of punishing the ruling party. Whether this was the result of its support for the war on Iraq, its political manipulation of the 11 March bombings, or a combination, is an open question. In any event, a generation after the Atocha assassinations of 1977, Spaniards responded to the second Atocha attacks in a similar fashion: with a turn to the power of the electoral ballot.

For the Spanish Left, the departure from office (with a ticket to Georgetown University) of José María Aznar – a grey, pious, provincial politician to whom only the proverbially astringent *catellanos* could ever ascribe charisma – brings to an end eight long years of cultural and social regression marked by the unholy combination of devout colonization and wanton commodification of the public sphere. Many Spaniards breathed a sigh of relief after the elections in the expectation that the new Premier, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero – a quiet, unassuming northern Castilian who has nonetheless shown character by openly supporting the 'peripheral' football club FC Barcelona – will redress these years of right-wing Catholic, centralist socio-political and cultural hegemony. The promise of a democratic overhaul of the Senate, a more engaging attitude towards nationalists of Spain's various autonomies, a root-and-branch reform of the state's unspeakably philistine broadcasting media, and, most importantly, a political willingness to tackle comprehensively such pressing social questions as the epidemic of violence against women or the astronomical rise in the cost of housing, all point to the unequivocal leftward turn resulting from the Socialist victory.

Those expecting radical departures in socio-economic policy should be less sanguine. Zapatero's cabinet is made up of men and women (equally represented, for the first time) with mainstream left-of-centre views on the economy. The Economy and

Treasury Minister, Pedro Solbes, is one of a number cabinet members recycled from the later González administrations and was until recently EU Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs. His macroeconomic objectives are unsurprisingly in line with both the previous administration and the rest of Europe: fiscal austerity, productivity gains through technological innovation and investment, and continued flexibility of the labour market are among the familiar mantras coming from this new minister. Should there be any doubt, the new president himself reassured the Spanish ruling class: 'I am confident the economic policy adopted by my government will give investors great confidence and peace of mind.'

The one arena where the new Socialist administration has already cashed in its promise to break with the PP is in foreign policy. The immediate honouring of the electoral commitment to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq unless there was a clear UN political and military control of Iraq, after 30 June, caught many observers by surprise. Although it is largely a symbolic gesture with more domestic than international repercussions, it has served to realign Spanish foreign policy with its more natural allies at the heart of Europe. Zapatero's swift rapprochement with Morocco after years of unnecessary tension between the PP government and its southern neighbour (the low point of which was the farcical military dispute over the island of Perejil, inhabited by one man and his goats) indicates a genuine willingness to engage with the kingdom as an equal partner – particularly on the issue of intelligence gathering which, *ex post facto*, might have proved especially significant in preventing or disrupting the 11 March attacks. The appointment of Miguel Angel Moratinos, former EU representative to the Middle East peace process, as Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs further signals an attempt once again to place the Arab world – together with Europe and the Iberoamerican community, the main poles of Spanish external relations – at the centre of the new administration's foreign policy.

This latter ambition to make multilateralism – be it through the EU or the UN – the strategic alternative to the Bush–Blair axis in international affairs is a major challenge to the internationalist Left. For, as Kate Soper has argued in the pages of this journal (*Radical Philosophy* 120, July/August 2003), the internationalist Left has to make up its mind on whether institutions like the UN Security Council are legitimate bearers of a 'democratic multilateralism'. Intelligence cooperation and international solidarity will only go so far towards tackling the sources of Islamist terrorism in the short term: there are likely to be further atrocities in future and a credible political response to such violence must be developed. A fundamentally undemocratic institution like the UN Security Council is an unsatisfactory forum for addressing this violence, much less so are the national security institutions of implicated states. It is necessary, therefore, to begin imagining and realizing alternative sources of international authority against indiscriminate violence – be it state-sponsored or transnational.

Finally, the internationalist Left should be uncompromising in its defence of secularism within an increasingly religiously framed conflict. Secularism is a progressive value that is not anti-religious but simply requests that religious beliefs – whatever their provenance or expression – remain subordinated to politics. The Madrid bombings were the product of religious fanaticism, and the sources of that violence have been further inflamed by the redemptive and militarized liberalism of Bush and Blair. Standing in between, the internationalist Left must continue confronting our own governments' imperial adventurism, but also analyse the often very local dynamics of Islamist terrorism, so as to offer viable political alternatives to such violence. The impressive worldwide mobilizations against war and occupation are in this respect a small part of the even more challenging task of developing democratic and socialist alternatives to the current world order.

The sublime from Lyotard to Schiller

Two readings of Kant and their political significance

Jacques Rancière

I will here offer a few reflections on a paradoxical object that Jean-François Lyotard puts at the centre of aesthetic theory: the aesthetic of the sublime. Two closely interconnected questions will be raised: What makes this theoretical construction possible? What is at stake in it?

I will focus on Lyotard's short essay 'After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics'. At the beginning of this text, Lyotard makes the following proposition: 'for the last century, the arts have not had the beautiful as their main concern, but something which has to do with the sublime'.¹ This concern is presented as proper to the avant-gardes in painting and music. And for Lyotard it is jeopardized by some new artistic currents – such as trans-avant-gardism or neo-expressionism – which either come back to old artistic formulas or blend them with the modernist tradition.

In the first instance, let us note that the identification of modern art with an 'art of the sublime' poses a very simple problem: for Kant, the very idea of a sublime artwork is a contradiction in terms. The sublime does not designate the product of an artistic practice as such. Even when experienced before the Pyramids or St Peter's in Rome, the sublime is entirely contained in a subjective experience determined by a certain relation between the powers of reason and imagination. In this experience we emerge from aesthetics proper and enter the realm of morality; we are led from the feeling of imagination's impotence to the feeling of humankind's destination in the supersensuous Kingdom – the province of Reason and Freedom – that would impose its rule over the power of Nature.

Lyotard is of course aware of the problem. But he states it in a way that amounts to dismissing it. In his own words, 'the sublime is none other than the

sacrificial announcement of the ethical in the aesthetic field.' It is on the basis of this understanding of the sublime that he asks, 'what is an art, painting or music, an art and not a moral practice, in the context of such a disaster?'²

I return to the terms Lyotard uses here – sacrifice and disaster. Of primary interest is the very formulation of his question. Lyotard asks: *What is an art* in this context. That is, what art is possible under the category of the sublime? But obviously this question skips over the logically prior question: *is there an art* thinkable under this category? How is it possible that *any* art be subsumed under it? Lyotard's question is actually an answer. And this answer substantializes in advance the idea of a sublime art.

In this way, Lyotard seems at first glance to be in keeping with the Hegelian innovation. Hegel changed the Kantian feeling of the sublime into the characteristic of an art, the symbolic art. He makes the sublime discrepancy into a property of artworks themselves.³ Nevertheless, in Hegel the cause of the discrepancy remains close to the Kantian view: it is first of all a discrepancy inherent in the idea that the artist tries to express through words or stones.

But Lyotard apparently takes a step further: he holds that the properties of the sublime belong to the matter of art itself – that is, to the *aistheton* as such – so that the task specific to the art of the sublime is to 'approach' matter, to approach 'presence' without having recourse to representation. In a word, the point is to approach matter in its alterity. The art of the sublime is art responding to the alterity of its matter, to the *aistheton*.

What are the characteristics of this alterity? The first characteristic of matter is that it is *pure* difference, meaning the difference that is not determined by any

set of conceptual determinations, like the difference of nuance or tone as it distinguishes itself from the sets of differences and oppositions that determine the harmonies of colours or the combinations of notes. Now Lyotard gives to this pure difference that defines matter an unexpected name: he calls it 'immateriality.' That which properly defines matter is its immateriality.

You could say that the idea of 'immaterial matter' merely binds together two well-known traditions: first, an artistic tradition, dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, that identifies pure sensuous presence with the invisibility of thought, and the light of the Idea with the immateriality of energy and electricity; second, a phenomenological tradition that emphasizes the *there is*, the invisible event of a coming-to-presence. But Lyotard's analysis has a more specific goal. It aims at giving matter the properties that Kant gives only to aesthetic form.

At the heart of Kant's *Analytic of the Beautiful* there is a new idea of form. Form is no longer what it had been with Aristotle: the active power that shapes matter. On the contrary, there is aesthetic form in so far as the active power no longer imposes its law on passive matter. The chief property of aesthetic form is its unavailability. Aesthetic judgement is referred to a form that is precisely not a conceptual form imposing its law to the manifold of sensation. The beautiful is beautiful as such to the extent that it is neither an object of cognition, subjecting sensation to the law of the understanding, nor an object of desire, subjecting reason to the anarchy of sensations. This unavailability of the object with respect to any power of cognition or desire allows the subject to feel an experience of autonomy, a 'free play' of the faculties.

This *neither... nor...* is the presupposition of aesthetic experience as such. This is why Kant's argumentation is so confused when it comes to the status of the pleasure induced by *tone* and *colour*. It is unclear whether such pleasure belongs to the mere agreement of the sensation, which is an effect of the regularity of vibrations on our senses, or whether it depends on the perception of the regularity as a form. This ambiguity helps to restore the traditional opposition of form and matter and to reset the stage of an *either... or...*, as is obvious in the fourteenth paragraph of the *Critique of Judgement*. Lyotard's analysis thus appears as a specific response to Kant's analysis and to its difficulty. It is no coincidence that Lyotard brings the status of tone and colour to the heart of his argumentation; or that he wants precisely to claim that colour and tone have the autonomy, the unavailability of the aesthetic form. With Lyotard, Kant's autonomy of the subject

before the free form is relocated in matter, in the event of sensation itself.

There is significantly more at stake in this shift than the 'modernist' privileging of 'presence' over 'representation.' The issue is the autonomy of aesthetics as such, the *neither... nor...* that expresses its logical form. By giving the 'charming sensation' the properties of the aesthetic form, Lyotard goes so far as to cancel the very existence of a specific sphere of experience. He consciously mixes the Kantian aesthetic form with its opposite – the Aristotelian form – because he wants to dismiss the Kantian *neither... nor...*, to replace it with a sheer *either... or...* Either the aesthetics of the beautiful, meaning the conceptual legislation of form unifying the manifold of sensation, or the aesthetics of the sublime, meaning the conflicting complicity binding the material 'immateriality' of sensation to the transcendence of Reason. Ultimately this means: no aesthetics at all. There is either the autonomy of the mind in knowledge or its heteronomy in Ethics.

This reconfiguration is more obvious still when we look at the second property Lyotard gives to matter. Matter, he tells us, is 'the event of a passion.' At the end of the ninth paragraph, after having emphasized the singular, incomparable quality of the grain of skin, the fragrance of an aroma, of the tone or the nuance, Lyotard goes on to specify:

All these terms are interchangeable. They all designate the event of a passion, a possibility for which the mind will not have been prepared, which will have unsettled it and of which it conserves only the feeling – anguish and jubilation – of an obscure debt.⁴

This is the second characteristic of matter in Lyotard's construction. Matter designates 'the event of a passion', a disarray that brings to mind the consciousness of 'an obscure debt'. The first characteristic of matter, its 'immateriality', is borrowed from the Kantian *Analytic of the Beautiful* and transferred from form to matter. Clearly the second characteristic is borrowed from the *Analytic of the Sublime* with the result of yet another displacement. Lyotard first bestows upon the 'agreement' of tone or colour the autonomy of form. But in a second move he wants to confer to the *aistheton* the 'disagreement', the 'discrepancy' that in Kant is specific to the experience of the sublime.

This means that the *aistheton* is two things at once: it is pure materiality and it is a sign. It is the sign of an unrepresentable. Put simply, in Lyotard the tone or the nuance seems to play the same role as the pyramid or the stormy ocean in Kant. They induce a disagreement, a break in the mind's capacity to take

hold of its object. But the ways and ends of these two forms of disagreement are diametrically opposed. In Kant's analysis, the 'incapacity' to seize the object is referred to the imagination. It cannot offer Reason an apprehension of the magnitude as a whole. Through the sublime it betrays its own inadequacy, and this inadequacy is none other than the inadequacy of 'the greatest faculty of sense'.⁵ The imagination is revealed, or rather it reveals itself, in its incapacity to present the Ideas of Reason.

In so doing it proves two things: Reason's power of conception that goes beyond sensory experience, and Reason's power of command, which makes the imagination recognize in reason a power to complete what imagination itself can never complete. At bottom, 'the subject's very incapacity betrays the consciousness of an unlimited faculty of the same subject.'⁶ The disarray of imagination before the sublime is the pathway that leads the subject to the field of the supersensuous. It also leads from the autonomy of aesthetic free play to a superior autonomy, the autonomy of Reason as a supersensuous legislator.

Lyotard turns all this on its head. The core of the 'sublime' is the experience of a double heteronomy. The *aistheton* acts as a shock that induces in the mind the sensation of its radical dependence. As he puts it in 'Anima Minima': 'The soul comes into its existence dependent on the sensuous, thus violated, humiliated. The aesthetic condition is enslavement to the *aistheton* without which it is anesthesia.'⁷ The condition of the soul is the dependence on an *either... or...*: either

the *aistheton* which means servitude, or its absence which means death. 'Servitude or Death' is obviously a reversal of the revolutionary motto 'freedom or death'. It invalidates any intellectual pretension to autonomy.

Now this is not all. As in Kant's third *Critique*, the relation to the sensuous in Lyotard reveals a relation between the subject and the law. But here too Lyotard turns the conclusion of the deduction into its opposite. Enslavement to the *aistheton* means enslavement to the law of alterity. The experience of the sublime in Lyotard reveals the exact contrary of what is revealed in the Kantian sublime. The law of ethics is here identified rigorously with a 'debt' to an Other. It is the law of heteronomy, the enslavement to the mere, mute alterity of 'the Thing' – the power inside the mind and prior to the mind that the mind ever tries to overcome, and never succeeds.

It is pointless to argue that Lyotard has misread Kant. It would be more relevant to ask why he reads Kant the way he does. But the primary question is: why did he bring Kant into the picture at all, why go looking in Kant's theory of the sublime for a cluster of ideas that are hardly to be found there: an idea of artistic avant-gardism; a definition of the task of that avant-garde as bearing witness to the misery of the subject; an idea of an ethical Law in terms of radical heteronomy?

Such is the paradox presented by Lyotard's aesthetics of the sublime: it ties the idea of bearing witness to the Freudian immemorialness of 'the Thing', to the



idea of the artistic avant-garde's task. This paradox cannot be resolved by reference to a postmodern turn. The standard view of Lyotard as a postmodern theorist is misleading. Postmodernity is for Lyotard a descriptive category that accounts for a state of things; it is not a new paradigm of art and of rationality. Lyotard's appropriation of the sublime aims openly at defending the essence of modern art and of the avant-garde's duty, in opposition to the so-called postmodern forms of artistic eclecticism, such as trans-avant-gardism or neo-expressionism. Against this eclecticism, Lyotard calls for the resumption of the tradition of modernity as a straightforward movement, for barring any kind of 'return' to figuration or mixing of figurative features with abstract features. And he takes on the task of this resumption in a way that could hardly fail to recall Greenberg's own polemics.

The question thus arises, how does Lyotard reconcile two apparently opposite ideas: the idea of the enslavement of thought to the immemorial law of 'the Thing', and the idea of a one-way history of artistic 'revolution', still more or less attuned to an idea of political emancipation? How can he conceive a historical task of modernity that would be witness to the originary and inescapable servitude of the subject? Apparently the paradoxical recourse to Kant, which results in the opposite of what Kant intended, is linked to this conflation of temporalities and politics.

Perhaps matters may be clarified if we refer to another essay, 'Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable', which also takes on the issue of trans-avant-gardism:

Mixing on the same surface neo- or hyperrealist motifs and abstract, lyrical or conceptual motifs means that everything is equivalent because everything is good for consumption. This is an attempt to establish and have approved a new taste. This taste is no taste.... To the extent that this postmodernism, via critics, museum and gallery directors and collectors, puts strong pressure on the artist, it consists in aligning research in painting with a *de facto* state of 'culture' and in deresponsibilizing the artists with respect to the question of the unpresentable. Now in my view this question is the only one worthy of what is at stake in life and thought in the coming century.⁸

How can it be determined not only that a taste is bad, but that it is not a taste? Lyotard's answer is that if this aesthetic equivalence in consumption is a taste, the historical duty, the very meaning of our life and thought, is lost. It is not a taste because it must not be a taste. We easily recognize the form of this argument. It runs through all Adorno's polemics against eclecticism

in music. We may recall, for instance, the point made in *Philosophy of Modern Music* concerning some chords of nineteenth-century salon music that *are* no longer audible unless, as Adorno says, 'all is deception'.⁹ If those chords are audible, if they can still be heard today with pleasure, the promise of art reveals itself as a lie, which also means that the historical path to emancipation is lost.

The comparison throws some light on Lyotard's argumentation. Undoubtedly the 'impossibility' of mixing figurative and abstract motifs on a canvas is indebted to a certain tradition of Marxist argumentation linking the radical purity of art and its one-way movement with the promise of political and social emancipation, a tradition championed by Adorno and Greenberg. This argumentation remains relevant because it clearly invalidates the idea of an opposition between 'art for art's sake' and 'engaged art'. It substitutes for it a quite different idea: art is political to the extent that it is only art, to the extent that its products are different from objects of consumption and are endowed with a character of unavailability. Obviously this does not mean that they are not sold; what is suggested, rather, is something in their very sensory texture, in the way we experience them, that stands in sharp contrast to the status of consumable things.

This is also the point behind Kant's comeback: I mean the comeback of Kant's tripartition of the good, the beautiful and the agreeable. The only thing that can ensure the border between artworks and consumable objects is the specificity of the feeling that they induce. The beautiful, Kant maintains, is neither the agreeable nor the good. Artworks, Adorno or Lyotard maintain, must not be agreeable, they must not be available to the desire that holds objects as consumable. And in so far as they are unavailable in this way, they produce a specific 'good' themselves. Art has to do with disagreement. And it is this power of disagreement that makes it good and ties it to another good.

In Adorno the argument is clear. The disagreement of art is called contradiction. Contradiction is the property that characterizes art, in opposition to the eclecticism that acts as the market's principle. Contradiction endows the artwork with the double property of a power and a lack of power: a power of a self-containment which challenges the law of the market; and a lack of power, an 'insufficiency' that prevents it from indulging in its self-containment and has it bear witness to alienation.

Lyotard's position should be considered as both the last offspring of that political interpretation of art and its reversal: art still carries the historical task of

preserving a sensory difference among the objects of the world; it is still set in opposition to the market. But the ways and the ends of the artistic disagreement no longer fall under the concept of contradiction. And the disagreement no longer bears witness to an alienation that should be suppressed. The disagreement is now called a 'disaster'. It is the sheer inscription of alienation, an enslavement of the soul that cannot be suppressed.

What makes this reversal possible? Here again, the reference to a postmodern break does not help account for the problem. To the extent that the notion of postmodernism makes sense – which is not much in my view – it dismisses the idea of a historical duty of the avant-garde. To understand Lyotard's conceptual operation adequately we have to take our distance from the standards of modernism and postmodernism and reset the originary stage of the politics of aesthetics. Lyotard's paradoxical reading of Kant becomes comprehensible once it is read as a kind of palimpsest, as both returning to a primary political reading of Kant and erasing it at the same time. The analysis of the *aistheton* as bearing witness to a condition of enslavement should be read as an exact response to a first analysis of the 'aesthetic state' which stages the promise of freedom. I have in mind, as announced in my title, Schiller's reading of Kant in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*.

Agreement as disagreement

What is at stake in this reading of Kant by Schiller? I would say that the point is, first, to emphasize the aesthetic *neither... nor...* as the principle of a specific sphere of human experience, and second, to spell out the political implications of this autonomy of aesthetic experience.

Schiller's reading rests on a basic thesis: aesthetics is a field where the relations of power that frame the experience of the subject as knowledge, desire and action are suspended. The free play of understanding and imagination in the experience of the beautiful puts an entirely new kind of freedom in play. It puts in play an autonomy that has nothing to do with the autonomy that the mind imposes, as its own law, to the manifold of sensation. Rather, aesthetic autonomy is the withdrawal of that kind of autonomy; its autonomy is in fact strictly related to the withdrawal of power. The free appearance stands before the subject and is unavailable to the domination of knowledge or will. The aesthetic experience is the experience of a specific sensorium cancelling the oppositions of understanding and sensibility, form and matter, activity and passivity. This

suppression of opposites is resumed in the concept of the 'play drive', which contrasts at once with the power of the 'formal drive' imposing the law of the mind on the sensations, and with the 'sensuous drive' imposing the anarchy of sensations over the mind.

So it turns out that the agreement without concept of understanding and imagination is a disagreement as well. There is no need to look in the sublime experience of magnitude, power or fear for the mark of disagreement that would found the radicality of art. The experience of beauty, the experience of the *neither... nor...*, is already a double-bind, an experience of attraction and repulsion. It underscores the identity of Kantian opposites, charm and respect, that Schiller translates as grace and dignity. We may recall the well-known passage concerning the statue of Juno Ludovisi, which both attracts by its charm, and remains inaccessible by its self-sufficiency. We are, Schiller writes, 'drawn by this contradictory movement in a state of utter repose and supreme agitation'.¹⁰ The sublime disquiet is entailed in the aesthetic rest. The disagreement is operative at the heart of the 'aesthetic agreement'.

It is this meeting of agreement and disagreement which allows the aesthetic experience to be politically significant – that is, to be more than a Kantian 'common sense' promising to bridge the gap between the refinement of the elite and the simplicity of the lower class. Why does the statue simultaneously draw us over and keep us at bay? Because the goddess the statue represents has the characteristic of divinity that is nothing less than the characteristic of the human being's full humanity: she does not work, she plays. She neither yields, nor resists. She is free from the links of will and obedience.

This state of harmony clearly disagrees with the kind of 'agreement' that governs human societies, that pins people down to their proper places, separating those who rule from those who are ruled, those who work from those whose leisure is won on the back of workers, and so on. This aesthetic disagreement can thus be posited as a single response to both the kind of 'agreement' imposed by the old despotism and the 'agreement' imposed by the revolutionary and terrorist form of political disagreement.

In Schiller's view the French Revolution had failed. It turned to terror because the revolutionary power had played the traditional part of the Understanding – meaning the state – imposing the law of universality onto the matter of the sensations – meaning the masses. The Revolution was still in line with the old partition of the sensuous according to which the 'culture' of the elite must rule over the 'savageness'

of the people. The Revolution remained true to the traditional opposition between a class of the mind and a class caught in sensation. By contrast, true revolution would be revolution that overthrows the power of 'active' understanding over 'passive' sensuousness, that undermines the power relation that establishes the class of 'activity', of 'law' and 'intelligence' as dominating over the class of 'sensuousness' and 'savageness.' It would be a new partition of sensuousness. This new partition represents precisely what is at stake in the aesthetic experience, which, far from simply reversing the power of understanding over sensuousness, as the Revolutionary power had done, instead neutralizes it. Active thought and passive sensation now cohere in a unique mode of the sensuous and a specific sphere of being. There is a new meaning to universality, a new sensuous equality, involved in the experience of free play and pleasure in appearance. For Schiller, this new sense carries the promise of equality, the promise of a new way of sharing a common world. The 'aesthetic education of man', the development of a new kind of 'humanity', is the pathway that leads to this truly free state.

Adorno's aesthetics and Lyotard's aesthetic of the sublime are made intelligible once brought over to this 'originary stage' of aesthetics, where the autonomy of art and the promise of an emancipated humanity are grounded in the specificity of a sensory experience. This sensory experience is the experience of a heterogeneous sensuousness, cancelling the oppositions of activity and passivity, or form and matter, which frame ordinary experience. And this experience presents this cancellation in the specific form of a double-bind.

It is this double-bind, this becoming dynamic of the *neither... nor...*, that Schiller introduces into Kant's *Analytic of the Beautiful*. This means that the sublime disagreement is already involved in the beautiful agreement. The experience of the beautiful is both agreement and disagreement. The aesthetic free play is not simply a state of mediation, as it is with Kant. Schillerian free play is neither a common sense, reconciling high culture and popular simplicity, nor a step towards the moral subject's self-discovery. It is not only a suspensive state but a power of its own, a specific freedom that can as such act in society and supersede the deadlock of political freedom. Free play is the seed of a new humanity, opposed to the present state of social and political domination. And this new humanity can come to fruition through a historical process of self-education.

The idea of aesthetic self-education makes the idea of a new revolution possible: a revolution in the

sensuous conditions of common life. It clears a path that leads to the idea of an aesthetic revolution, the revolution first spelled out in the so-called 'Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism', fostering the Marxian idea of the 'human revolution' by contrast to the merely political revolution, and culminating in the Futurist and Constructivist programmes in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Put otherwise, the Schillerian idea of aesthetic self-education opened the door to the metapolitics of aesthetics.

The whole issue for this metapolitics lies in the relation between the *selfness* of aesthetic *self-education* and the kind of 'otherness' that shapes the *neither... nor...*, the neutralization proper to aesthetic experience. I said that this otherness highlights a lack of power. The subject is promised the possession of a new sensuous common world by the 'self-contained' divinity expressed in a work of marble that cannot be possessed in any way.

But in order to make this artwork a principle of self-education, it has to be considered in a completely different way. The self-containment of the Greek statue immediately turns out to be the expression of another self-sufficiency: the self-sufficiency of the very collective life that gave rise to the statue. The statue's self-containment thus expresses the life of that ideal Greek community that did not even know the 'otherness' of aesthetic experience because its experience did not rend itself into separate activities, because art and life, art and politics, life and politics were not severed from one another. And this self-contained statue therefore promises to modern humanity, torn to pieces by the division of labour, ranks and occupations, the restoration of a state of integrity, where the forms of art would again be identical with the forms of collective life. The Other turns out to be nothing but the Self severed from itself.

From this point on, the 'otherness' or 'heteronomy' that had first fostered the autonomy of the aesthetic experience is erased for the benefit of a new *either... or...* Either the everlasting splitting of the human subject or its integrity; either the passivity of the spectator contemplating the representation of a lost integrity in the dead marble, or the activity aiming at the reappropriation of that integrity in the life of human beings, the construction of a new world where, as Malevich says, the collective projects of life will take the place of the old Greek ladies, and the forms of art will be the forms of a collective life.¹¹

As is well known, the deadlock of 'aesthetic education' turned into 'human revolution' would provoke yet again a reformulation of the aesthetic double-bind

– a reformulation that some Marxist philosophers would contrast to the state powers of Marxism. The principle of that reformulation is simple. It consists in two main aspects.

It aims, first, at restoring the ‘separation’, restoring the otherness of aesthetic experience that alone carries the promise of a new sensuous world. It is no coincidence that so many Marxists in the last century became – and some of them still are – the most uncompromising champions of the ‘autonomy of art’. The question is not to oppose an ‘open-minded Marxism’ to a sectarian one. At issue is the link between the promise of emancipation and the assessment of a difference in sensory experience, the experience of a heterogeneous sensuousness, cancelling of the power of active form over passive matter, the power that epitomizes the law of domination. The aesthetic alternative does not oppose, as is often assumed, autonomy to heteronomy. It opposes one linkage of autonomy and heteronomy to another linkage of them.

Restoring this separation means displacing the point where the double-bind produces its effect, going from the aesthetic experience to the work of art itself. This is the second point of the reformulation: the equality of the opposites, the mutual cancellation of activity and passivity becomes the law of attraction and repulsion, the gravitation of the artwork itself. Such a position is expressed succinctly in Adorno’s reformulation of matters. Obviously Adorno has the same basic concern as Schiller: the division of labour, the separation of labour and enjoyment. But Adorno’s response is that the path to the suppression of the opposition consists in hardening the opposition, in pushing it to the extreme. The promise of emancipation can be kept only by sweeping aside any kind of reconciliation, by resisting any ‘agreement’.

Moses or McDonald’s?

The ‘aesthetic’ stage therefore turns out to be the stage of the irreconcilable. The autonomy of Schoenberg’s music, as Adorno conceptualizes it, is a double heteronomy: in order to denounce the capitalist division of labour and the agreements of commodification, it has to take that division yet further, to be more technical still, more ‘inhuman’ than the products of capitalist mass production. And this inhumanity in turn makes the blotch of what had been repressed – the blotch of the unconscious – rise to the surface and disrupt the perfect technical arrangement of the work.

So the aesthetic double-bind becomes the contradiction of the work, the contradiction sealed in its sensory

texture. In so far as it is a contradiction *in actu*, the work alone keeps the promise of emancipation. This also means that the ‘aesthetic’ stage could take the place of both politics and morality.

Lyotard’s construction appears as the last scene of this metapolitical plot, the last turn in the play between aesthetics, ethics and politics. Lyotard takes the Adornian conception of the irreconcilable to the point where it is reversed. The meaning of the postmodern moment in Lyotard’s thinking thus becomes clear: it was just the moment of disconnection between artistic modernism and political emancipation. The dismissal of the latter allows for artistic avant-gardism to get into a new connection and endorse a new ‘historical task’. The avant-garde indeed must indefinitely draw the dividing line and sever modern art from commodity culture. But the inscription of the double-bind is no longer the contradiction revealing the mark of alienation and bearing the promise of emancipation. The tracing of the line has become a mere stroke, the sheer inscription of the Other’s strike.

With the contradiction, it is the ‘aesthetic’ that has vanished. ‘Anima Minima’ states it unambiguously: Kant’s *Analytic of the Beautiful* is a collection of ‘logical monsters’: universality without concept, pleasure devoid of interest, and so on.¹² Contradiction thus only means inconsistency. The field is cleared in this way for the sublime double-bind that becomes the law of art. This means that the practice of art is a practice of mere witnessing to Otherness. The sublime seemed at first to reside in the work. But in actuality the work is nothing but a stroke. The important thing is the self-inscription of the stroke, the otherness of the *aistheton* inside the mind, the immemorial law of dependence.

Schiller opposes the emancipating power of the aesthetic double-bind to the cruelty of the revolutionary motto ‘freedom or death’. Lyotard, by contrast, puts in the place of the revolutionary motto a sheer ‘enslavement or death’. Schiller elaborates from Kant an idea of the aesthetic experience as a third way between the eternity of domination and the savagery of rebellion. As it were, the sensuous realm signals that something else is possible. But this is the stake of the Lyotardian reformulation, for the *aistheton* offers the opposite sign – it signals that there is no third way, that there is nothing to do other than obey the immemorial law of alienation. For Lyotard, the avant-garde has to draw the line precisely with this in view: it must denounce the whole trickery of emancipation. The reformulation of what is at stake in the aesthetic opposition now reads: *either one disaster or another*.

Either the disaster of the sublime, the recognition of the immemorial dependence of the human mind on the immemorial law of the Other inside it, or the greater disaster of the promise of self-emancipation and its completion in either the overt barbarity of Nazi or Soviet totalitarianism or in the soft totalitarianism, the anaesthesia, of commodity culture.

Art is still taken in the metapolitical plot. But the meaning of the plot has been entirely overturned. Art is no longer the carrier of the Schillerian promise. It is still 'resistance' as with Adorno. But resistance has taken on a new meaning. It is nothing else than the anamnesis of 'the Thing', the anamnesis of the inescapable enslavement to the Other. Either the enslavement to the Other that 'violates' us, or the enslavement to the Self that leads us to the anaesthesia of commodity culture. Either the Law of Moses or the law of McDonald's. Such is the last word that the self-cancelling aesthetic of the Sublime gives to the metapolitics of aesthetics. This last word swallows both aesthetics and politics in the mere ethical double-bind. How much this new Law of Moses actually contrasts to the law of McDonald's remains, of course, a debatable point.

Translated by Max Blechman

Notes

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1991, p. 135.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
3. Of course Lyotard makes no reference to Hegel. He rather refers to Burke, because this thinker offers him the overtones of night, power and terror that he associates with the sublime. But the sublime in Burke is a feeling. It is not the concept of a specific sort of art.
4. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 141.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1952, §27, p. 106.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
7. Jean-François Lyotard, 'Anima Minima', in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 243.
8. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 127.
9. T.W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster, Seabury Press, New York, 1973, p. 34.
10. F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982, p. 109.
11. See 'On the Museum', in K.S. Malevich, *Essays on Art 1915-1928*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glovacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, Borgen, Copenhagen, 1968, pp. 68-72.
12. See 'Anima Minima', p. 240.



C R O S S I N G S
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What is feminist phenomenology?

Thinking birth philosophically

Johanna Oksala

In one curious and exceptional fragment from 1933 Husserl discusses sexuality phenomenologically. Even if his taciturnity and his heterosexual prejudices concerning sexuality hardly make him a very original thinker on the topic, this fragment is interesting in relation to the question of the phenomenological importance of women's experiences. Starting from himself as a man, Husserl has serious problems accounting for procreation and ultimately for the birth of a child:

I start from myself as a man and from my human monad which contains implicitly my immediate surrounding human world. The question arises concerning the intentionality of copulation. In the fulfillment of the drive, immediately viewed, there is nothing concerning the child which is created, nothing concerning what will have the well known consequences in the other subject: the fact that the mother will give birth to the child.¹

Husserl ends the fragment, however, confident that a phenomenological investigation into the structure of his own experience would nevertheless clarify the phenomenon of pregnancy reflected in it:

in the explication from the side of my being in the world as a man, I experience what in the world reveals itself through further inductions, I experience what concerns the physiology of pregnancy. Teleology encompasses all of the monads. What occurs in the motherly domain is not limited to it, but is reflected throughout. But I arrive at this only as an ego that recognizes itself as a scientific man in mundane life and questions my and our monadic being and from there goes systematically further.²

Husserl's problematic comments on pregnancy and birth form a background against which it is possible to recognize the ground-breaking importance of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Sara Heinämaa has recently argued that in presenting a philosophical

description of women's experiences and the world as experienced by women Beauvoir's book was a response to Husserl and his followers (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Heidegger) and their shared implicit assumption that sexual difference is irrelevant to our descriptions of experience.³ In contrast, Beauvoir shows that the neglect of women's descriptions of their own bodies has serious consequences for philosophical reflection. The problem is not only that explanations of women's behaviour and sexual relations are thereby biased. What is worse, from a philosophical point of view, is that the neglect limits our understanding of human experience, its scope and its structures. It has led us to present and accept as universal and essential features that belong only to a subclass of all experience – the experiences of men.⁴

However, if Husserl has problems accounting for pregnancy and birth, Beauvoir is notorious for her negative descriptions of them. She describes the fetus, for example, as a 'parasite' that feeds on a women's body and as 'a growth arising from her flesh but foreign to it'.⁵

She and the child with which she is swollen make up together an equivocal pair overwhelmed by life. Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a storehouse of colloids, an incubator, an egg; she scares children who are proud of their young, straight bodies and makes young people titter contemptuously because she is a human being, a conscious and free individual, who has become life's passive instrument.⁶

More recent phenomenological descriptions of pregnancy and birth have compensated for these descriptions by emphasizing the positive aspects of motherhood. The aim of these descriptions is still, for the most part, the same as Beauvoir's: to include women's experiences in the phenomenological inquiry. Carol Bigwood, for example, argues that descriptions

of pregnancy and birth are important in challenging the various ways in which male modes of embodiment are privileged in our thought and practices.⁷ Feminist phenomenology has an important role in reminding us that there is a whole region of experience that philosophers have failed to think.

But, despite the importance of these phenomenological descriptions of women's experiences, this development is in danger of making feminist phenomenology a study concerned with regional sub-themes in phenomenology more generally, understanding it as only complementing and deepening phenomenological accounts of lived embodiment with accounts of female embodiment.⁸ From this perspective, feminist accounts of pregnancy and birth, for example, can add some missing descriptions of embodiment to the phenomenological project, but they do not change the core of it in any essential way.

The aim of this article is to question this perspective and to suggest that the challenges facing feminist phenomenology are more fundamental. Does the study of experiences, such as being pregnant or giving birth, which are traditionally understood as feminist issues and relegated to the margins of phenomenology, not change the phenomenological project in any fundamental way? Do they simply deepen or complement it while leaving intact that which has previously been discovered? This article attempts to show that an analysis of these experiences does not simply point to the need to complement phenomenology with vivid descriptions of labour pains, for example, but suggests a need to rethink radically such fundamental phenomenological questions as the possibility of a purely eidetic phenomenology and the limits of egological sense-constitution. I argue that a careful study of these questions reveals a different understanding of feminist phenomenology, no longer a faithful assistant to the phenomenological project concerned with marginal or regional sub-themes in it, nor a complementary practice adding gender-specific analyses of experience to it. Rather, feminist phenomenology should be understood as a critical current running through the whole body of phenomenological thinking and reaching all the way down to its most fundamental tenets.

In the first two parts of this article I will discuss two critical developments in, or modifications of, the phenomenological project: the phenomenology of the event and generative phenomenology, arguing that these can be viewed as responses to a critical focus on previously neglected experiences such as pregnancy and birth. The third part discusses the consequences of these developments for feminist phenomenology.

The event of birth

If Husserl has problems accounting for the experiences of pregnancy and the birth of a child, his account of the sexual encounter does not fare much better. F.A. Elliston summarizes Husserl's topology of human sexuality into three theses: sex is a social act; sex seeks copulation; sex is heterosexual. He notes ironically that to disengage oneself from cultural presuppositions in order to examine them critically is indeed an infinite task.⁹ Even if Husserl's views on sexuality could prove to be more nuanced than Elliston claims, it is safe to say that his phenomenological analysis of it does not in any way challenge the findings of his previous phenomenological studies. Yet, as I suggested earlier, his fragment on sexuality is interesting because of the tensions and underlying problems that it reveals concerning intersubjectivity and intentionality, and also the phenomenological understanding of subjectivity as reflecting consciousness.

Husserl depicts consciousness in this fragment as a system of drives seeking fulfilment, one of the most fundamental drives being sexuality. Dan Zahavi argues that in Husserl's philosophy the intentional activity of the subject is founded upon and conditioned by an obscure and blind passivity, by drives and associations. He notes that Husserl famously declares, in *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis*, that his investigation of the problem of passivity could well carry the title 'a phenomenology of the unconscious'. For Husserl, the reflecting consciousness can thus never be totally transparent to itself. There are constitutive processes of an anonymous and involuntary nature taking place in the underground or depth dimension of subjectivity which can only be uncovered through an elaborate archaeological effort.¹⁰ However, viewed intersubjectively sexuality becomes a universal teleology. Elliston claims that in Husserl's thought sexuality functions as the social bond uniting otherwise isolated monads into a community. Sexuality is essential not just to the meaning of social life but to its very existence: the other is the telos of the sexual drive, and the means by which future generations are born.¹¹ Sexuality is thus not essentially characterized by obscure and blind passivity, but by a universal teleology always in the process of fulfilling itself.¹² Rather than introducing a fundamental break or contradiction into the horizon of expectations, sexuality correlates with a universal intentionality. Furthermore, the archaeological effort of uncovering this universal intentionality still means for Husserl a reflective investigation of the essential structures of consciousness. Despite its elusive and anonymous nature, sexual experience is characterized



by a first-person givenness that makes it *my* experience. This means that it is possible to thematize it, at least to a certain extent, through self-reflection. Sexuality and procreation are thus not understood to decentre subjectivity in any significant way.

According to Iris Marion Young, however, the experience of pregnancy questions the unity of the phenomenological subject. Her description of this experience relies on phenomenological accounts of embodiment, but she also partially criticizes them for their implicit assumption of the subject as a unity. She argues that pregnant embodiment challenges the idea of a unified subject as a condition of possibility of experience because pregnancy is often experienced as an ordeal of the splitting of the subject, a separation and a coexistence of the self and an other. It reveals a bodily subjectivity that is decentred: myself in the mode of not being myself.

The first movements of the fetus produce this sense of the splitting of the subject; the fetus's movements are wholly mine, completely within me, conditioning my experience and my space. Only I have access to these movements from their origin, as it were.... I have a privileged relation to this other life, not unlike that which I have to my dreams and thoughts, which I can tell someone but which cannot be an object for both of us in the same way.... Pregnancy challenges the integration of my body experience by rendering fluid the boundary

between what is within, myself, and what is outside, separate. I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body.¹³

In pregnancy there is thus, according to Marion Young, a discordance in the constitutive unity of bodily subjectivity, although not a discordance due to illness or some other abnormal disturbance. Phenomenological literature is rich in descriptions of the distorted body images of individuals with multiple personality disorders, or individuals with severe neurological disturbances or schizophrenia. But the experience of a split subject in pregnancy cannot similarly be accounted for as a pathological phenomenon. Pregnancy is not only normal, but is essential for human existence. It is a nonpsychotic experience which nevertheless contains alterity and heterogeneity. The integrity of the subject is fractured, but not completely lost.

The decentring of the subject in pregnancy can be viewed as a gradual and fluctuating process culminating in the event of birth. Phenomenologically birth would seem to be, simultaneously, an experience for the mother giving birth and an experience for the child being born. Neither one of these is, however, an 'experience' in the strict phenomenological sense. It is my contention that birth is better understood in terms of the phenomenological category of an 'event' than of an experience. Françoise Dastur defines an event phenomenologically as that which was not expected,

what comes to us by surprise. The event is always 'upsetting', in a certain sense because it does not integrate itself as a specific moment in the flow of time, but drastically alters the whole style of existence. It does not happen *in* a world; on the contrary, it is as if a new world opens up through its happening. The event constitutes a critical moment of temporality, but a critical moment which nevertheless allows for the continuity of time. It appears as something that dislocates time, giving it a new form; something that puts the flow of time out of joint. The event, in its internal contradiction, is thus the impossible which happens, in spite of everything, in a terrifying or marvelous manner. We can speak about the event only in the third voice and in a past time, in the mode of 'it happened to me'. We never 'experience' the great events of our life contemporaneously.¹⁴

First-person descriptions of giving birth often depict birth as an event in this sense, as an upheaval akin to being caught in a violent storm. In both there is a cessation of time, of intention and activity, or there is an alien intention, an intention of life. The boundaries of the body as well as the self are in flux with an extreme suspension of the bodily distinction between inner and outer. The subject is wrenched from itself. Instead of a constituting subject, in birth there is an upsurge of life beyond control or comprehension, flesh turned inside out.¹⁵

If giving birth can be understood as an event that happens to us, being born is certainly an event in this sense, indeed the first great event of our lives:

We did not ask for our birth, and this is testimony to the fact that we are not the origin of our own existence. To be born means that we are conditioned by a past that was never present to us. It can only be appropriated by us later, by assuming these determinations of our existence that we have not chosen. There is therefore a surprise in us in relation to our birth. It is the permanent surprise of being born which is constitutive of our being. It is testimony to the uncontrollable character of this proto-event. In each new event there is a repetition of the proto-event of birth. It is as if we re-experience, in a new event, this radical novelty of what happens for the 'first time', as well as the impossibility of coinciding with the event itself, which in its sudden apparition disconnects the past from the future.¹⁶

For Dastur, the difficult task for phenomenology is to think this excess to expectation that is the event. The thinking of the event requires that phenomenology cannot be content to remain an 'eidetic' phenomenology – the thinking of what remains invariable in experience. It must also be a thinking of what may be

and of contingency. The capacity to undergo events implies an active opening to a field of receptivity. To lack this capacity to open oneself to what happens, to welcome no longer the unexpected, would be a mark of psychosis, not of normal experience.¹⁷

Arguing that phenomenology and the thinking of the event should not be opposed, Dastur tries to connect them: openness to phenomena must be phenomenologically identified with openness to unpredictability. Phenomenology can think the event because one is not completely passive in relation to it, even if its meaning must remain obscure. Dastur notes that both Husserl and Heidegger saw a passivity within our intentional activity which can only be assumed and not chosen. Like Zahavi, she argues that Husserl's theory of passive synthesis is an important recognition of this. She also notes that there is a foundation for a phenomenology of expectation in Husserl's analysis of intentionality because there is always an addition to what is experienced which can never be completely correlated with the intention. Indeed, this addition could even be considered to be at the origin of the intentional movement itself, in the sense that a total fulfilment of intentionality would destroy the structure of experience.¹⁸ While relying on the analyses of Husserl and Heidegger, Dastur nevertheless emphasizes through her analysis of birth a different aspect or dimension of the phenomenological subject. The subject is not primarily a self-aware, constituting consciousness, but radically defined by its capacity to undergo events the meaning of which it is not the constitutive source, but which must remain forever obscure.

The generativity of birth

Dastur's analysis of birth points to a phenomenology of the event in which there is unpredictability to experience capable of shattering the unity of the subject's horizon of expectations. But a careful analysis of birth also questions the privileged status of the phenomenological subject in another sense, highlighting the limits of egological accounts of sense constitution. In Husserl's fragment on sexuality, he acknowledges that generative matters such as the birth of a new human being make visible the limits of self-temporalization. The intersubjective act of reproduction motivates new processes in the life of the other that are different from self-temporalization.¹⁹ The problems faced by phenomenology in accounting for birth from an egological perspective can be understood to lead to the modifications, in part implicit and in part developed in Husserl's late writings, that are sometimes referred to as generative phenomenology.

Anthony Steinbock argues that generative phenomenology should be understood as a style of phenomenology, instigated by Husserl in the 1930s, that is concerned with the geo-historical, social, normatively significant becoming or generation of meaning.²⁰ This development in or modification of static and genetic phenomenology stemmed precisely from the acknowledgement of the problems with egological accounts of sense constitution and the importance of generative matters such as the constitutive role of birth, death and historicity. Generative phenomenology questions the traditional phenomenological assumption that sense-constitution begins with an individual subject rather than extending beyond him or her and stemming from tradition, culture, language and history. Generative phenomena are never given to the individual subject in experience, nor can they ever concern only one person, yet they are constitutive features in world constitution. Steinbock's account of generative phenomenology is thus not so much an explication as a radical modification of phenomenology. He does not see generative developments as only deepening the phenomenological method, leaving what had previously been discovered intact. Generative matters and methods surpass and even ruin the findings of previous static and genetic analyses. By extrapolating a generative phenomenology, Steinbock is in fact developing a non-foundational, transcendental account of the social world. He argues against the view that phenomenology reduces social structures of meaning to individual consciousness, defining his non-foundational phenomenology of the social world as 'a phenomenology that describes and participates in geologically and historically developing structures of existence and coexistence, as well as their respective modes of constitution, without reducing those modes of constitution or structures to consciousness or to an egological subjectivity'.²¹

Steinbock also discusses the constitutive mutations that the questions of birth and death must undergo in generative phenomenology. During the period in which Husserl had only distinguished between a static and genetic phenomenology, he was committed to the idea that the transcendental ego has never been born and will never die. Genetic phenomenology examines the continual process of becoming in time, but the constitution of sense and self-temporalization are studied only within the life of an individual consciousness. This means that life and death form the necessary limits of this analysis but cannot become questions for it because genetic analysis remains within the structures of internal time-consciousness, internal to the becoming of the individual. According to Husserl sleep

is a constitutional discordance that can be integrated into individual sense constitution, but birth and death present a profound hiatus in genetic phenomenology that egological constitution cannot overcome. They are precisely the limits of subjective sense constitution.²²

From the perspective of genetic phenomenology, it is thus impossible to clarify how birth and death belong essentially to world constitution. Birth and death as constitutive problems necessarily escape the parameters of a genetic transcendental phenomenology. Steinbock argues, however, that in considering the possibility of a generative framework for phenomenology, Husserl was obliged to adopt a transcendental perspective in relation to birth and death. From a generative perspective birth and death must be understood as transcendental and not merely mundane events that are involved in the constitution of sense understood as stemming from an intergenerational homeworld. Generative world constitution extends before and after the individual subject in a community of generations. The processes of being born and dying are involved in the generative transmission of sense through traditions and rituals, for example. Birth and death must thus be understood as essential occurrences for the *constitution* of the world, not merely empirical events within the world.²³

Christine Schües has also argued that the analysis of natality serves to ground a generative phenomenology with the potential to transform phenomenology into an investigative and critical enterprise, claiming that 'all of the phenomena in generative phenomenology concern borders, thresholds, and transitions that are most fundamental for the understanding not only of birth, death, and beginning, but also language, personal relations, gender relations, and history'.²⁴ She distinguishes her account of generative phenomenology from Steinbock's by arguing that the perspective of natality is fundamental even in comparison with other important generative problems. According to Schües, birth is the fundamental condition of possibility of intentionality. It is only by way of being born into the world – that is, through an original differentiating from prenatal existence – that humans can act and constitute sense. She is concerned with human birth not in the sense of a biological event, but in the sense of a fundamental leap from one mode of being to another, the essential trait of the latter being intentionality. Birth is this leap from the undifferentiated into a confrontation with the differentiated world of objects towards which the senses are directed. According to Schües, birth is thus not the beginning of life, but rather the fundamental leap of coming into the world in a new

mode of existence, through which the already living organism is given a new being.²⁵

Feminist futures for phenomenology

If the analysis of birth poses some fundamental problems for some of the central tenets of traditional phenomenology, it also points to the possibilities of a generative phenomenology: to the need to study the intersubjective conditions of possibility of the subject's experience in birth, death, community, history and language. Dastur's analysis suggests that it also points to a phenomenology of the event, questioning the traditional conception of the transcendental subject as a unified, constitutive source of meaning. But whether these modifications of phenomenology – generative phenomenology and phenomenology of the event – should be understood as adequate responses to the concerns of its feminist phenomenology must remain an open question. It is clear, at least, that feminist phenomenology cannot be understood only as a merely complementary project. Further, if it is a critical current questioning even the central methodological tenets of phenomenology, this does not mean that its only task is to point out the failures and limitations of phenomenology in relation to women's experiences. If phenomenology is understood as an ongoing, creative and co-participatory project, sensitive to other critiques and responses, feminist phenomenology must play an important part in contributing to its development. As Linda Martín Alcoff has said, if the phenomenological tradition is to continue in any useful way, and avoid becoming a mere artefact in the museum of philosophical history, it *needs* feminist theory to acknowledge and explore the ways in which it has been affected by masculine assumptions.²⁶ This also entails that 'traditional' feminist phenomenologists acknowledge the consequences of generative phenomenology and the phenomenology of the event for their own accounts. Are the methods and starting points of feminist phenomenology themselves adequate? What do 'feminine experience' and 'female embodiment' mean? Can the meaning of sexual difference be phenomenologically understood through egological accounts? It is my contention that generative phenomenology, in particular, opens up promising possibilities for and poses particular challenges to feminist phenomenology. Generative phenomenology suggests the need to theorize sexual difference as an intersubjective structure of meaning, answering the post-structuralist criticism of feminist phenomenology, according to which the positing of 'women's experi-

ences' as a starting point means focusing on mere effects, precluding an analysis of the historical and cultural structures that constitute them.²⁷

Generative phenomenology studies the ways in which intersubjective structures such as language form the condition of possibility for singular subjectivity and how experience is structured in accordance with intersubjectively handed down forms of apperception.²⁸ A generative analysis of birth also makes evident, however, that sexual difference cannot be reduced to a mere linguistic effect. It forms a necessary condition of possibility for procreation and therefore also for the intergenerational constitution of meanings. Feminist phenomenology must seek to understand how sexual difference as an intersubjective structure is constituted and how it is further interlocked with embodiment and singular experiences.

Trying to account philosophically for the recurring miracle of birth means having to come to terms with the groping and unfinished nature of all our theories and philosophical frameworks. I maintain that the greatest challenge feminist phenomenology faces lies not in consolidating but in destabilizing phenomenological thinking, even if it means losing the firm ground on which we stand.

Notes

1. Edmund Husserl, 'Universal Teleology' (1933), in *Husserl, Shorter Works*, trans. M. Biemel, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1981, p. 337.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD, 2003, xvi.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
5. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley, Picador, London, 1988, pp. 512, 515.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 512–13.
7. Carol Bigwood, 'Renaturalizing the Body', *Hypatia*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1991, p. 56.
8. Linda Fisher, for example, argues that feminist critiques of omissions or lacunae in phenomenological accounts and corresponding elaborations and analyses of gendered experience serve to expand, deepen and correct phenomenological accounts. See Linda Fisher, 'Phenomenology and Feminism: Perspectives on their Relation', in Linda Fisher and Lester Embree, eds, *Feminist Phenomenology*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 2000, p. 33.
9. F.A. Elliston, 'Introduction to Universal Teleology', in *Husserl, Shorter Works*, p. 333.
10. Dan Zahavi, 'Anonymity and First-Personal Givenness: An Attempt at Reconciliation', in David Carr and Christian Lotz, eds, *Subjektivität – Verantwortung – Wahrheit. Neue Aspekte der Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls*, Peter Lang, Sonderdruck, 2002, pp. 76–7.
11. Elliston, 'Introduction to Universal Teleology', p. 333.

12. Husserl, 'Universal Teleology', p. 336.
13. Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1990, p. 163.
14. Françoise Dastur, 'Phenomenology of the Event: Waiting and Surprise', *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 182–3, 186.
15. See, for example, Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, p. 163; Bigwood, 'Renaturalizing the Body', pp. 68–9.
16. Dastur, 'Phenomenology of the Event', p. 186.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 183, 187.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 184–5, 186.
19. Husserl, 'Universal Teleology', p. 337.
20. Anthony J. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1995. Husserl seems to have been aware of the necessity for generative investigation even when he does not explicitly develop it. His *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), for example, puts forward an egological account of sense constitution, but he also claims there that the investigation implies the need for further study to deal with the problems of birth and death which have not yet been touched upon. See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1988, p. 142. Steinbock argues that we do not find fixed, clear-cut stages in Husserl's work, but that there are strains of thought or methodological motivations running throughout, often becoming interwoven with other strains or motivations. When developed systematically and consistently, however, these strains have distinct and irreducible implications. See Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, p. 4.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 4. See also pp. 264–5.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 190–91.
24. Christina Schües, 'Empirical and Transcendental Subjectivity: An Enigmatic Relation?', in Bina Gupta, ed., *The Empirical and the Transcendental: A Fusion of Horizons*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD, 2000, p. 111.
25. Christina Schües, 'The Birth of Difference', *Human Studies* 20, 1997, pp. 243, 245–7.
26. Linda Martín Alcoff, 'Phenomenology, Post-structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience', in Fisher and Embree, eds, *Feminist Phenomenology*, p. 39.
27. See, for example, Judith Butler, 'Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception', in Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young, eds, *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989, pp. 85–100; Joan Scott, 'Experience', in Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds, *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Routledge, New York, 1992, pp. 22–40.
28. Dan Zahavi, 'Husserl's Intersubjective Transformation of Transcendental Philosophy', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1996, p. 239.

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Surplus consciousness

Houellebecq's novels of ideas

Martin Ryle

Michel Houellebecq's fiction is said to be selling better outside France than that of any French novelist since Camus. *Atomised* (1999) and *Platform* (2001), his two more recent novels, appeared in English within a year of their publication.¹ The comparison some reviews have drawn with Camus is of limited help in reading Houellebecq, but it opens questions about 1960s 'alienation', critical consciousness and complicity, which I discuss below. While divided about his literary importance, reviewers agree that Houellebecq, like Camus, is a novelist of ideas; and that his work is a polemical critique of contemporary French and European society. Some have placed him in a line of French reaction traceable back to Céline; others see him as denouncing global capitalism. These are not necessarily incompatible judgements.

Houellebecq's novels, though provocative rather than didactic, indeed foreground ideas. One need not make too much of the references to Comte in *Platform*, or the dismissive remarks on postwar French theory in *Atomised*.² More to the point, his fiction tests the implications of Foucauldian celebration of bodies and pleasures, and seems to dispense with the 'deep' subject along with its ethical and affective corollaries. 'Reflexive transcendence' has gone, Baudrillard declared long ago: 'today the scene and the mirror no longer exist; instead, there is a screen and network ... a non-reflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold.... [The] psychological dimension has in a sense vanished.'³ Houellebecq's characterization mimics this depthlessness. The narrator of his first novel, *Whatever*, declares he will not 'charm [the reader] with subtle psychological observations', which are obsolescent in a world of media, gadgets, homogeneity (p. 14). 'It is wrong to pretend that human beings are unique, that they carry with them an irreducible individuality.... As often as not it is futile to wear yourself out trying to distinguish individual destinies and personalities', the narrator of *Platform* insists (p.

181). However, in reading the novels we may come to construe depthlessness not just as symptomatic condition, but as lack.

This ambiguous engagement with contemporary *idées reçues* is central to Houellebecq's project. 'Ideas' in the general sense of opinionated statements – about death, the body, feminism, 'race', culture, the sex industry, economics, sociobiology, designer goods – crowd his work. The narrative's background is generally given in a polemical or ironical tone:

It is interesting to note that the 'sexual revolution' is usually portrayed as a communist utopia, whereas in fact it was simply another stage in the rise of the individual. As the lovely phrase 'hearth and home' suggests, the couple and the family were to be the last bastion of primitive communism in a liberal society. The sexual revolution was to destroy the last unit separating the individual from the market. The destruction continues to this day. (*Atomised*, pp. 135f.)

A brochure in my hotel room gave me some information about the history of the resort, which was the product of a wonderful human adventure: that of Bertrand Le Moal, backpacker *avant la lettre* who, having fallen in love with this place, had 'laid down his pack' here at the end of the 60s. With furious energy, and the help of his Karen friends, little by little he had built this 'ecological paradise', which an international clientele could now enjoy. (*Platform*, p. 66)

The protagonists voice opinions constantly, in first-person narration, monologues and dialogues. Elsewhere, their taciturnity may issue an implied challenge: 'Usually, when I left the office, I'd take in a peepshow. It set me back fifty francs, maybe seventy if I was slow to ejaculate. Watching pussy in motion cleared my head' (*Platform*, p. 17). The perspectival, diachronic engagement specific to fiction-reading, based on a developing interpretation of character and of plot, is interrupted by demands for the kind of response proper

to journalism, polemic, critique: immediate, decontextualized political-ideological response. No doubt this strongly ideological colouring is what has led English reviewers to lament that Brits don't know how to produce that kind of novel. Houellebecq makes no show of cordoning the literary-aesthetic off from other discourses: rather than seeking the conscious aesthetic difference of the modernist artwork, he presses fiction up against neighbouring kinds of writing, much as nineteenth-century realists did.

In particular, in Houellebecq writer and reader are involved in unpleasant sexual and 'racial' discourses. Quasi-pornographic representation, normalized as the everyday consciousness of the protagonists, invades the text in *Atomised* and especially in *Platform*. Houellebecq was unsuccessfully charged with *provocation à la haine* (incitement to hatred) for derogatory comments on Islam made in an interview (he called it 'the dumbest religion'), and his novels press heavily on questions of religious ethnicity and represent scenes of actual and imagined interracial violence.⁴

In staging these themes, Houellebecq risks the charge of complicity. No implied author can be located, aloof from the narration, guiding our responses. Therefore we cannot exonerate Houellebecq from the charge of writing racist and misogynistic discourses from which he never clearly dissociates himself. He has made flippant, offensive comments on some issues his work raises, though these are probably best regarded as provocations.⁵ His protagonists can be seen as representative types, 'figures ... à la fois banales et monstrueuses' invented to typify contemporary attitudes and behaviours (to quote a review in *L'Humanité*). They may for all that be close to the biographical Houellebecq.⁶ Nothing in this exempts the reader from making judgements: on the contrary, it is by goading us to judge for ourselves that the novels sustain moral-political tension and produce an unsettled experience of reading. The view that Houellebecq's work is 'a mirror to the "Who cares?" attitudes of late post-modernism'⁷ simplistically mistakes the anomic and cynical attitudes sometimes struck by his protagonists (and by their author) for the final effect of his books on an attentive reader.

Fredric Jameson has lamented that writers, critics and readers are now all 'deeply immersed in post-modernist space', so that 'distance in general (including "critical distance" in particular)' has been abolished. Jameson has invoked, as antidote to this loss, some 'as yet unimaginable new mode of representing' that would allow us to map our political co-ordinates again.⁸ Houellebecq's fiction makes no show of any-

thing 'unimaginable', if by that term we understand some immediately striking aesthetic-formal innovation; it reads easily, draws on everyday journalistic and anecdotal styles, depends on straightforward narrative development. It is quite distinct from that line of postwar French neo-avant-garde theory and writing that has sustained a link with modernism. But Houellebecq has produced something 'new', along Jameson's map-making lines. They are not 'postmodern fictions' in the terms developed by literary theorists, but his novels, in their ambiguous engagement with contemporary subjectivity and culture, challenge us to decide whether they – and we – are merely 'immersed' in this lifeworld or 'distanced' from it.

Platform, especially, insists on its subjects' historical and geographical location as members of a relatively privileged class in the European metropolis. This class imagines itself as 'universal', in the sense that its 'values' are sure to conquer and absorb – 'culturally', of course – whatever resistance they encounter travelling the world. Meanwhile, however, its self-reproduction depends on globalized material inequality. Tourism exactly represents this contradiction: beach tourism, adventure tourism, eco-tourism, sex tourism. Babette and Léa, fellow-tourists in Thailand with the narrator of *Platform*, work for a PR agency in the Île-de-France. He finds out their salary, and comments to the reader that though it might be better, it is still 'pretty good. About twenty-five times the salary of a metalworker in Surat Thani [in Thailand]. Economics is a mystery' (p. 83). *Platform* centres on tourism managed and marketed from Paris: Paris, with its particularities, but Paris as exemplary metropolis – with its own peripheral zone, of course: the salaried employees of the Aurore group are advised to travel home by taxi if they have to work late. The area where the head office is located is dangerous, the grounds are patrolled by private security guards (p. 198). Surat Thani, meanwhile, with its 42,000 inhabitants, 'is distinguished, according to the guidebooks, by the fact that it is of no interest whatever' (p. 82).

Beyond its specifically French dimensions, Houellebecq's work speaks to these more generally European and 'Western' contexts, social and literary-theoretical. In what follows, I take up the comparison with Camus and the relation between protagonists, society and ideas. I then consider the uses of quasi-pornography and what this means for the subject; and assess what 'critical distance' Houellebecq establishes vis-à-vis the representations of interracial violence that recur in his writing. I conclude by situating *Platform* in relation to some general discussions of fiction, modernism and critique.

Outsider?

'Father died last year'; 'Mother died yesterday' – the opening of *Platform* echoes that of *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider*), the novel of Camus which Houellebecq's work might seem most to resemble.⁹ Both protagonists, Camus's Meursault and Houellebecq's Michel Renault, are also the narrators, so the relation we form with them will modify our interpretation of the texts.¹⁰ At the outset, we may note that neither shows what is thought of as a proper response to death: is this a personal failing, or a challenge to hypocritical bourgeois mores?

Camus's book seeks to sustain the latter reading. Meursault's relation to the society he lives in becomes explicitly antagonistic. His failure to display signs of grief at the funeral is read, he later discovers, as evidence of 'great callousness'. We are to read it otherwise, as the sign of authenticity. Believing he has been condemned to death, not for killing an unnamed Arab in a beach fight, but because he has refused to observe conventional etiquette, Meursault hopes to be greeted, going to the scaffold, with 'howls of execration' from the crowd.¹¹ We may well reject the romantic-egotistical presuppositions of that attitude, as René Girard does in a stringent analysis.¹² However, this is to refuse the principle on which the novel offers itself to be read. Meursault's 'outsiderly' demeanour must be taken to imply some radical if never-formulated critique. This was certainly the basis of the reputation *The Outsider* gained in Britain during the 1960s, where Colin Wilson's much-discussed 1956 book of the same title accorded an important place to it and helped pave the way for its many Penguin printings in the subsequent decade. 'The Outsider' is the man (Wilson's outsiders are always men) who 'cannot accept life as it is', who 'sees "too deep and too much"', and who is 'cut off from other people by an intelligence which ruthlessly destroys their values'.¹³

Michel Renault, like Meursault, declines to view the body; he too turns aside from death. *Platform* tells us less about the funeral than about what Renault watches afterwards on his dead father's '32-inch Sony widescreen with surround sound and an integrated DVD player': *Xena, Warrior Princess*; a quiz show; a made-for-TV film, with period-pastoral sex; and, as he dozes off, a programme about 'silurids – huge fish with no scales which had become common in French rivers as a result of global warming' (pp. 3–10). Nothing suggests our hero's comportment is found eccentric. He makes 'an excellent impression' at the ceremony, with his habitual sober dress and 'sullen expression', his head 'bowed a little to listen to a Christian funeral-

hymn medley' (p. 5). All this offers no reason to think performance and authenticity are opposed. A state of indifference is mirrored in performances nobody invests with much meaning. It is nevertheless still open to readers to feel there is something lacking, some moment of awe or of reflection, which death ought to evoke but which finds no register, subjective or ceremonial or discursive, in the chapter.

Here, then, if there is a critique of 'society' it must also call in question the behaviour and attitudes of the protagonist, who is by no means the Camusian outsider-as-dissident. And if there is such a critique, the reader has to produce it, and take responsibility for it, without overt prompting or support in the text. We will be in the same position when we confront later behaviours and opinions: Renault's visits to Thai prostitutes; his affair in Paris with Valérie and the account given of their sexual pleasures and preferences; and, in the novel's major narrative development, the couple's participation in the development of 'friendly tourism'. This is the euphemism for a new project in which dealings between European visitors and local people willing to sell sex will be facilitated rather than merely condoned by the tour operators. Valérie and her colleague Jean-Yves, newly headhunted for the Aurore group, set up and lead the project. Renault returns to Thailand with them to sample the first resort in the new chain, which is murderously attacked by turbaned bombers and gunmen in the book's climax.

How are we to read Renault, through whom we must read all this? The '1960s' figuration, Renault as an outsider who sees through bourgeois hypocrisy, is certainly untenable. To invert this, to read him as a moral-political reprobate and a complicit apologist for whatever he recounts (as we may read Michel in *Whatever* and Bruno Clément in *Atomised*), is over-simple: he wittily criticizes many aspects of the world he describes. On the questions of sexuality, selfhood and the marketable body, it is a certain blankness in his narration, rather than any explicit commentary, that we have to interpret.

In any case, the autonomy of 'opinions' tends to be undermined by the emphasis placed on character as produced in a matrix of determinations: 'The three of us' – Jean-Yves, Valérie and Renault – 'were caught up in a social system like insects in a block of amber' (p. 165). Whether we hold people accountable for opinions presented as circumstantially determined is something the reader must decide (and this, of course, involves a choice between humanist and anti-humanist understandings of the subject). In all the novels, life-situations are summed up with less emphasis on

individualizing traits than on socio-economic constraints and opportunities. Even exceptional moments of social mobility are historically contingent. 'Martin Ceccaldi's singular destiny was entirely symptomatic of the role played by secularism, throughout the Third Republic, in integrating citizens into French society and promoting technological progress. His teacher quickly realised that he was an exceptional pupil' (*Atomised*, p. 25).

The effect is of a positivistic determinism. (This may be one reason for the novel's references to Comte.) Once the subject acquiesces in the truth of this 'determination', and concedes, too willingly, that personal dispositions and sentiments are beyond the self's control, the result is self-reflexive irony. One example. Renault, recently moved to Chinatown, has been wondering whether to buy a gun:

Curiously, I was not afraid for my own sake. It's true I had very little contact with the barbarian hordes, except perhaps occasionally at lunchtime when I went for a walk around the Forum des Halles, where the subtle infiltration of the security forces... eliminated all danger, in theory. So I wandered casually through the reassuring topography of uniforms; I felt as though I was in Thoiry safari park. In the absence of the forces of law and order, I knew, I would be easy prey, though of little interest; very conventional, my middle-management uniform had little to tempt them. For my part, I felt no attraction for ... the *dangerous classes*; I didn't understand them, and made no attempt to do so. I didn't sympathise with their passions nor with their values. For myself, I wouldn't have lifted a finger to own a Rolex, a pair of Nikes or a BMW Z3; in fact, I had never succeeded in identifying the slightest difference between designer goods and non-designer goods. In the eyes of the world, I was clearly wrong.... Through my blindness, however involuntary, I set myself apart from a living human reality powerful enough to incite both devotion and crime. (pp. 270f.)

The passage turns back, implicitly, on itself. Its self-awareness is impeccably sophisticated; its 'self-criticism' ('very little contact with the barbarian hordes', 'I set myself apart from a living human reality') is ironic complacency. The knowledge of the 'outsider' was celebrated in the 1960s as 'alienation' – the term being used, in a sentimental lay understanding, to denote not subjection to material and ideological determination but a state of emancipated critical enlightenment. Believing oneself outside, one occupied an imaginary Archimedean point.¹⁴ Since then we have seen the destruction in theory of such humanistic positions. But once critical consciousness apprehends

the subject as fully embedded in the social, can it apprehend itself as anything but surplus consciousness, ineluctably produced, unable to effect anything? The question has particular implications for those who work, as Renault does, in the 'cultural sector'. The themes of determination and complicity arise in relation to the contested autonomy of the artwork, which depends on the idea that consciousness can transcend the determinations that it knows. Renault for his part states early in the novel, after sketching his day in the office where he organizes the financing of art shows: 'My conclusion, henceforth, is that art cannot change lives' (p. 16).

I shall return to this. Meanwhile, we should note that a novel confers dialogic power even on the most banal statement. Because they are acts of communication with a reader, the most blankly positivistic discourses tend to become self-subverting. Told that Michel Djerzinski 'ate a Monoprix ready-meal – monkfish in parsley sauce, from their Gourmet range' (*Atomised*, p. 14), we enter into an unspoken conversation (with the author, the narrator, the character, ourselves): on solitude and sociability, on how when a putatively complex need is met in this pre-packaged way part of its potential content is left unsatisfied, until perhaps the need shrinks. As Sartre noted in *Nausea*, telling a story imparts to every event, even the most unremarkable, the significance of its connection with an ending: nothing is 'superfluous', everything is 'a piece of information whose value we will understand later on'.¹⁵ Houellebecq, constantly interpolating ideas and opinions, provokes us to respond to these as valuable events and to produce our own commentary even on actions left without comment. The closed circuit of ironic complicity may be broken – as it may be merely extended – when readers reflect on whether their own forms of consciousness match those figured in the text.

Pornography and 'Islam'

It is part of the 'vanishing' of the 'psychological dimension' in *Platform* that the affair between Renault and Valérie, although Renault thinks of it as a love affair offering tenderness and intimacy, is represented largely through its bodily-sexual aspect, rendered more or less in the language of mainstream pornography: the language which in English is found in the 'confessions' pages of top-shelf mags – 'heterosexual', male-authored, relentlessly orgasmic, focused on physical impulses, movements and reactions.¹⁶ As time passes, Renault and Valérie, thanks partly to her obliging sense of 'the different things that keep male desire alive' (p.



207), go in for the kinds of scene canonical to porn. In Cuba, they pay a hotel chambermaid \$40 to join them in bed (pp. 212f.). Then comes partner-sharing in Paris *partouze* clubs, sex in public places (they visit an SM club, too, but this repels them). Perhaps a tenth of the novel consists of sex scenes; the formulaic repetition-with-variation is again integral to the porn genre. The English paperback cover features a semi-artistic semi-nude. Renault (p. 89) reminds readers that a man can jerk off to a book (he makes do with a scene in John Grisham's *The Firm*). Its putative sexiness is part of the marketing, and readability, of *Platform*.

However, this does not make the novel pornographic. The text incorporates the language of porn directly, whenever sexual activity is represented, as the way the narrator-protagonist sees things: it is not bracketed off as a sub-discourse, as commonly happens when literary novelists allude to it (for example, in Martin Amis's *London Fields*). Houellebecq ignores the supposed boundary between literature and pornography which has helped sustain the notion that porn is marginal, even transgressive, despite its cultural and economic centrality in societies like ours. In this novelistic context, the quasi-pornographic itself, rather than what it represents, eventually becomes the object of representation. Juxtaposed directly with other kinds of writing, spoken by a literary-fictional rather than pornographic subject, the language of porn in *Platform* speaks out its own terms: its intolerance of bodily ageing and imperfection, its censorship of whatever thoughts and feelings might trouble bodily pleasure, the hostility which is the obverse of its adoring fetishization. 'She had beautiful breasts, the slut, clearly visible under her see-through top ... I

stared attentively at the two sluts so I could forget them forever' (pp. 39f.). It speaks of its own linguistic poverty, its ignorance of the erotic.

Platform makes us respond to porn not just as language of representation, but as a discourse forming sexualities and selves. It presents us with a happy couple ('We could fuck with love': p. 164) who live according to its formulae. Its claim to historical representativeness depends on us seeing Renault and Valérie as 'typical', in Lukács's sense: 'a character is typical ... when his innermost being is determined by objective forces at work in society'.¹⁷ Their sexual life, while unusual, is that of a certain fashionable elite; there is a sufficient basis of realism for the relationship to stand metonymically as an image of contemporary metropolitan life. Beyond that, their deliciously anonymous pleasures are a figure, invoking metaphorically all those widely diffused pleasure-practices which involve acceptance of or preference for the solipsistic, the anonymous, the momentary. This is a dance of bodies and pleasures for a subject conceived as two-dimensional 'screen' or 'network', without the 'psychological dimension'. Sex tourism is emblematic of how such forms of metropolitan pleasure are becoming or may become hegemonic everywhere.

The reader is ultimately prompted, in my judgement, to see the union of Valérie and Renault as 'banal and monstrous'. She attracts him because of her self-abnegating complaisance: nothing that happens later need modify his initial dismissive assessment that she has 'a sort of canine docility ... she was just submissive *in general*, and maybe just ready to look for a new master' (pp. 42f.). The couple's relation, even if we grant its happiness, amounts to a ruthless

(though, again, ‘typical’) *égoïsme à deux*: sex and food and tourism fill what time is left over from well-paid, intensive bureaucratic–entrepreneurial work. Almost the last thought Renault has about Valérie is that she is ‘a good predator ... and she had chosen me to share her lair’ (p. 329).

We may ask whether the subject enjoying just these pleasures should be understood in terms of lack or default, as well as happiness and privilege. We may ask if other kinds of relationship are preferable, and on what grounds. But here we are caught between incompatible discourses, both useless: the barely visible ghost of a ‘moral’ tradition originating in Catholic familism (this ghost stalks more visibly through certain pages of *Atomised*) and the language that dwells exclusively on bodily surfaces and performances. On questions of virtue, the good life, self-realization, the first says what no one believes any more. The second offers



only ‘the humanist proposition: striving to maximise individual pleasure without causing suffering to another’ (*Atomised*, p. 262) – which can tell us nothing about what ‘pleasure’ is. If readers want to excogitate some third way, they are going to have to do it for themselves, starting from premisses that Houellebecq barely registers.

We may well resent the pressure to form judgements in the field of sexual practice, since reluctance to do so has been a defining trait of the intelligentsia formed by the 1960s. However, this reluctance has been in constant tension with another defining trait, namely a new political consciousness about gender relations. The moment which freed sexualities from old judgemental discourses also helped form the ‘second wave’ of feminism with its new forms of judgement. A humanist and existentialist feminism, reshaping gendered subjects in accordance with their own projects of reciprocity,

was one legacy of that moment, and provides one historical starting point for tracing a ‘third way’ between moralistic paternalism and solipsistic relativism. But Houellebecq’s characters register feminism (if they register it at all) as a moment in the past (‘1968’), a spent moment. We live among its ‘last dismaying dregs’. Valérie, a successful professional, hardly refers to feminism.¹⁸

Platform, like *Atomised*, provokes judgements just because its sexual narration – blankly pornographic, or blankly positivistic: ‘I took in a peepshow’ – ends up foregrounding its own absence of ethical and affective terms. In the books’ narrative development and their framework of ideas ‘1968’ is linked to the contemporary moment of peepshows, sex clubs, Internet contacts, globalized sex tourism. The middle term is not the new ethical–political body which feminism failed to produce, but the body newly available to

pleasure, the body as a ‘surface’ or ‘screen’. To this, no inner being corresponds or should be made to correspond. To make one’s sexual body a commodity is then merely a rational choice – as Valérie points out, the \$40 she gives the hotel chambermaid in Cuba is for the maid equivalent to a month’s pay (p. 213); and such a choice involves nothing different in principle from other market exchanges.

‘Therefore,’ I went on, ‘you have several hundred million Westerners who have everything

they want but no longer manage to obtain sexual satisfaction. ... On the other hand, you have several billion people who have nothing, who are starving, who die young ... and who have nothing to sell except their bodies and their unspoiled sexuality. It’s simple, really simple to understand: it’s an ideal trading opportunity.’ (p. 242)

In ending *Platform* with the attack by Islamic terrorists, Houellebecq anticipated 11 September 2001 and the Bali nightclub bombing, which happened after it appeared. The suggestion that violent political Islam is now global capitalism’s main antagonist has become a commonplace. Houellebecq’s representation of Islam traces this depressing global battle line into the metropolitan territory of France (which has the highest Muslim population in Europe, both absolutely and proportionally).¹⁹ His books reveal, partly through their own complicity in it, the outline of a new ‘orientalism’,

based no longer on colonial power–knowledge but on postcolonial metropolitan ignorance and fantasy. The complicity needs to be emphasized and criticized. In France, Houellebecq has been made to leave the leftist ‘Perpendiculaire’ writers’ group that he helped found. On the other hand, the review in *L’Humanité* that praised *Platform* for its critical force, ‘rare in recent French fiction’, made no suggestion whatever that its representations of Islam might be thought troubling. Few Anglophone reviewers have made as much as they should have of this, either.²⁰

There are incidents, real and fantasized, of racial violence and abuse in the first two novels. The protagonist of *Whatever* tries to persuade a colleague to stab a black youth who has gone to the beach with a white girl. He listens to but does not comment on a conversation about the bombing of a Parisian café by Arab terrorists (*Whatever*, pp. 16–20, 19ff.). Bruno, in *Atomised*, masturbates in front of a ‘pretty little Arab girl’ who is one of his pupils, and writes what he knows is racist propaganda (pp. 235–7). Both protagonists are presented as unbalanced, destructive individuals, compensating for their anxieties through displays of racialized resentment. Michel Renault, who in several places expresses crude anti-Islamic views, is, however, a more passive and less unequivocally negative figure than his predecessors.

More significantly, some of the authorial choices in *Platform* incorporate a hostile representation of Islam into the structure of the book. In all three novels, fantasies of racial violence are attributed to white Europeans, whereas acts of racial violence are committed by Arabs and Muslims; but this is of much greater significance in *Platform*, where terroristic killing does not remain on the periphery but engulfs the central characters. In *Platform*, ethnic hostility is no longer expressed only by the narrator–protagonist. Islamic culture is twice attacked in speeches by minor characters. An Egyptian geneticist makes a brief, otherwise unmotivated appearance to denounce Islam and monotheism, in terms close to those used by Houellebecq in the *Lire* interview (pp. 250f.). Near the start of the book, Aïcha, sister of the Arab youth arrested for killing Renault’s father, accuses her male relatives of being ‘stupid’: visiting Mecca has made her father intolerable, her brothers get drunk on pastis while posing as ‘guardians of the one true faith’ (p. 22). She is going to leave the family home and continue her nursing studies in Paris.

Aïcha, a young Muslim woman trying to escape patriarchal bondage, is the very same figure who is to be liberated by being banned from wearing the hijab

and assimilated to French secular society. The family configuration Houellebecq has chosen is calculated to enforce the claims of the French Republic as the standard-bearer of liberty, secular reason and women’s emancipation. If the issue is posed in these abstract terms – secular liberalism versus theocracy – plenty of us will, of course, side with the former. However, the abstraction represses, and is designed to repress, any reference to colonial history, specifically the Algerian war, where assimilation and metropolitan power were all too visibly linked in the formula: ‘Algerians’ must be French, and which disproved once again the idea that Europeans only ever dream of killing Arabs – or that they kill them like Meursault, ‘innocently’.²¹ Colonial history, which brought so many Arabs and Muslims to live in France, overdetermines the meaning of every sign of Islamic identity there today, and means that the abstract truth that religion is distinct from ‘race’ is concretely a half-truth at best. But none of this is even distantly alluded to in *Platform*. Instead, the author has produced a historically decontextualized trope, flattering to the self-image of *la patrie*.

Other aspects of *Platform* are less comforting to the good conscience of the metropolitan elite. The portrait of a privileged class immersed in but cut off from a world of violence and dispossession (‘no contact with the barbarian hordes’) is strengthened, rather than weakened, by the refusal to stage any humanistic and redemptive encounter with the ‘other’. We can trace this refusal or failure in the narrative line which seems to begin when Renault meets Aïcha. She has had ‘intimate relations’ with his father, which is why her brother killed him – probably inadvertently, going further than he had meant to. But Renault takes no interest in the trial, whose outcome we never learn (Camusian indifferentism is still in the background here). When she comes to collect her things from the house, Renault talks to her, but only about the quiz show he has been watching: ‘I’ve always admired [the host] Julien Lepers’, he tells her. ‘The contestants are human beings to him’ (pp. 6f.). Later they meet briefly again. Renault feels ‘a certain attraction to Muslim vaginas’, and congratulates himself, on no discernible grounds, for having made ‘a connection’ in their brief talk (pp. 21f.). Later still, her name is mentioned a last time when he dreams he is fucking on the Métro with ‘an Arab girl... She didn’t look anything like Aïcha, at least I don’t think so’ (p. 83). This scene is darkly echoed in a later incident when a colleague of Valérie is viciously raped by a gang, probably West Indian, on the Métro (p. 197). The implication at the personal level is plain enough: that Renault is incapable of

making any real 'connection'. Thematically, the rape connects with numerous fleeting references to the inequality, dispossession and danger at the heart of the metropolis, and then connects at another level to the novel's major theme: that 'consensual' prostitution in the tourist periphery, where Europeans live out sex fantasies and enjoy the exotic 'other', is part of that same system of inequality, against which brutal violence is a predictable protest.

Complicity, critical distance, 'culture'

Jameson asked a dozen years ago whether postmodern culture necessarily lacked critical distance. Referring back to a modernism still able to resist incorporation, still endowed with potential critical alterity, he wondered what space remained for resistance, in the subject or the cultural sphere. This led him to speculate about an 'unimaginable' new political and pedagogical art, 'which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system'.²²

Critical definitions and discussions of the postmodern novel have stressed its ludic, metafictional and para-historiographical character.²³ The histories (re)written by canonical postmodern fictions are often imaginary, speaking in the 'heteroglot' voices suppressed or marginalized in dominant literary and historiographical forms. This, evidently, is one way to attempt the kind of 'placing' and mapping that Jameson advocates. In these terms, Houellebecq's work is not an example of 'postmodern fiction' any more than of modernist distance through difficulty. It uses realist means, resorting neither to metafictional play nor to pastiche, and represents dominant, metropolitan subjects. However, there is every reason for continuing to engage with the dominant: as Bryan Palmer has insisted, contra Robert Young, 'the "West," as the site of capitalism's late twentieth-century power, is not, in any meaningful sense, in the throes of dissolution.'²⁴ Houellebecq in his critique of the European 'West' says very little directly about the sufferings or aspirations of the marginalized (and certainly does not produce the optimistic–progressive image of 'inclusiveness' favoured by British arts and cultural policy). His focus is on the pleasurable lives of well-off contemporary Europeans (who include most of his likely readers), our opportunities and capacities for pleasure being foregrounded as what is most historically 'typical' about us. Yet despite and because of this focus, his work produces a highly problematic image of the contemporary. Its 'map' of negativity, decadence and violence can be made to emerge, by way of the reader's

labour of critique, from a discourse which in itself seems to lack any 'distance'.

I have argued that in Houellebecq critique always depends on the reader, a reader 'produced' by the text's provocations and silences, but who brings to bear political and ethical sensibilities which are never explicitly registered there. 'Culture' without its readers, as a delimited sphere, as an object of policy on a par, say, with sport, as a fetishized space for the 'creative', cannot have alterity or distance. The bureaucratic development of the 'cultural sector' is an important sub-theme in *Platform*. Renault describes various artworks he has had to deal with in his job: photos of police brutality in the suburbs ('the artist had favoured a "fun" approach rather than the social critique you'd expect'), a rubber belt embossed with three-dimensional casts of the artist's clitoris (pp. 16f., 302f.). He is unconvinced, and so are we, that putting reality-images in brackets like this can in itself create any critical distance. In his interview with Captain Chaumont of the Cherbourg police, Renault finds himself 'completely desperate, overcome with shame' when asked to describe his work. However, Chaumont responds with 'compassion tinged with seriousness'. 'He had an awareness of the existence of the cultural sector, a vague but definite awareness. He must have had to meet people from all walks of life in his profession; no area of society could be completely alien to him' (pp. 12f.). Again, this highlights the discrete location of 'culture' – its institutionalization, after modernism, as an administrative 'sphere' – to suggest how just this separation makes it ineffectual.

These witty passages demonstrate that the novel, in its dialectical complexity, can get above the closed circuit of 'culture' by reflecting on it. However, they can then only show how those in the 'cultural sector' (the readers of literary novels, as well as their writers) are able to see their own backs in the mirror with the help of another mirror. Metacultural reflections can say nothing but this expected last word on 'culture'. On the largest themes of *Platform*, the final reference is not to culture but to politics: to the social and political interventions which might make a difference to the inequality and violence that are the context of our pleasures. Just before the attack on the resort hotel, Renault reflects as follows:

I tasted a spoonful of curried chicken with green peppers; as it happened, I could imagine doing something similar with mangoes. Jean-Yves nodded thoughtfully. I looked at Valérie: she was a good predator ... and she had invited me to share her lair... According to Immanuel Kant, human dignity consists in not accepting to be subject to laws

except inasmuch as one can simultaneously consider oneself a legislator; never had such a bizarre fantasy crossed my mind. Not only did I not vote, but I had never considered elections as anything more than excellent television shows.... I was quite happy to delegate whatever powers I had. In my youth, I had encountered militants, who considered it necessary to force society to evolve in this or that direction. ... What did I, for my part, have to reproach the West for? Not much... (*Platform*, pp. 329f.)²⁵

Such a subject claims he refuses to consider involving himself, even minimally, in the political practice to which ideas of critical alterity, of the autonomy of the aesthetic, ultimately refer. Can anyone as sophisticated as Renault, anyone whose sensibilities are informed by Kant, also be the subject who opts out, who is seduced by pleasure into going along with things as they are, who is glad therefore to be able to figure the self as a fly in amber? The 'heightened sense of our place in the global system' which we can elicit from Houellebecq's novels presses us to recognize that questions of distance, autonomy and alterity have in the end to be posed not of 'culture' but of its readers.

Notes

1. I cite English translations of Houellebecq's novels, in paperback editions, giving page numbers in the text. *Atomised* (Vintage, London, 2003; Heinemann, London, 2000), trans. Frank Wynne, was originally published as *Les particules élémentaires* (Paris, 1999). *Platform* (Vintage, London, 2003; Heinemann, London, 2002), trans. Frank Wynne, first appeared as *Plateforme* (Paris, 2001). *Whatever* was published by Serpent's Tail, London, in 1998, trans. Paul Hammond; the French original, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, was published in Paris in 1994. An earlier version of some material later incorporated into *Platform* has been published under the title *Lanzarote*. Many websites are devoted to Houellebecq, whose personal site is www.houellebecq.info. Via these, I have accessed (on various dates in January and February 2004) the book reviews and other information cited here. Where applicable I give references to original printed sources. For a listing of reviews of *Atomised* and *Platform*, with links to many of the texts, see respectively www.complete-review.com/reviews/houelbqm/parthelem.htm and www.complete-review.com/reviews/houelbqm/platform.htm.
2. 'The global ridicule inspired by the works of Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze, after decades of reverence, far from leaving the field clear for new ideas, simply heaped contempt on all those who were active in "human sciences"', *Atomised*, p. 376. For references to Comte in *Platform*, see pp. 178, 182f., 318. Houellebecq has edited and discussed Comte's work (and that of Schopenhauer).
3. Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Communication', in Hal Foster, ed., *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto, London, 1985, pp. 126f.
4. Houellebecq's remarks were made in an interview in *Lire*, September 2001 (consulted 4 February 2004 at www.lire.fr/imprimer.asp?idc=37437). They were accom-

panied by rude remarks about monotheism generally. The case was brought by four French Muslim groups, including the mosques of Paris and Lyon, and was heard at the Palais de Justice on 17 September 2002. Acquittal, on 22 October, was on the grounds that criticism of a belief does not amount to incitement against its adherents; it was noted that Houellebecq was in no way associated with campaigns or polemics against Muslims as a group. The fullest narrative I have found is the polemically anti-clerical account at www.atheisme.org/houellebecq.html (consulted 4 February 2004). Salman Rushdie summarized the case against Houellebecq and wrote in his defence. See the *Guardian*, 28 September 2002.

5. The *Lire* interview includes a claim that prostitution, for instance in Thailand, is not a problem, and should be properly regulated by the state in France as it is in Germany and Holland.
6. Jean-Claude Lebrun, *L'Humanité*, 30 August 2001 (on *Plateforme*). Renault, says Lebrun, is 'one of those remarkable figures, at once banal and monstrous, that novelists invent in order to sum up in human form the distinctive traits of an epoch'. Comparing Houellebecq with Balzac, from whose *Père Goriot* the epigraph to *Platform* is drawn, he dismisses the idea that Renault is the author's double or representative. Lebrun concludes that the novel is an unusually radical attack on the globalized market. Biographical information from various of the sources I cite above indicates significant parallels between the author's life and that of his protagonists (not that this licenses reductive readings of the fiction).
7. In Christopher Hitchens's review, 'Holy Writ', *Atlantic Monthly*, April 2003.
8. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London and New York, 1991, pp. 48, 54.
9. Albert Camus, *L'Étranger* (1942), trans. Stuart Gilbert as *The Outsider*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969, p. 13; *Platform*, p. 3. Some reviews note this echo, but none that I have seen remarks on the parallel centrality of racial violence in the two texts – on which I comment later.
10. The main protagonists of *Whatever*, *Atomised* and *Platform* are all called 'Michel', like the author.
11. Camus, *The Outsider*, pp. 68, 120. When Camus commented, extra-textually, that Meursault was a man executed because he refused to weep for his mother and 'refused to lie', he confirmed that we should read refusal as the sign of authenticity.
12. René Girard, 'Camus's Stranger Retried', in Harold Bloom, ed., *Albert Camus*, Chelsea House, New York and Philadelphia, 1989, pp. 79–105; pp. 79f. John Fletcher argues we should read the text as Meursault's rhetorically proficient construction: see 'L'Étranger and the New Novel', in Adele King, ed., *Camus's 'L'Étranger': Fifty Years On*, Macmillan, London, 1992, pp. 209–20.
13. Colin Wilson, *The Outsider*, Gollancz, London, 1956, p. 82. My 1969 Penguin edition of Camus's *The Outsider* lists eight earlier Penguin printings since 1961. The English hardback edition appeared in 1946. Adele King, fifty years after the novel's publication, still makes Meursault a representative of despair at the end of 'transcendence' and of surviving 'human emotions concerning the fundamental issues of life'. 'Introduction: After Fifty Years, Still a Stranger', in *Camus's 'L'Étranger'*, p. 1.
14. Aspects of *Atomised* can be read as suggesting that '1968' was a moment of critical alterity, subsequently incorporated. The 'Lieu du changement', founded by 'a

- group of '68 veterans' as a humanist and democratic self-governing community, subsequently becomes a new-age summer camp, offering residential courses in humanistic therapy to businesses and organizations (pp. 113f., 119f., 125f.). Other aspects, however, suggest simple hostility to most of what '1968' connotes.
15. Peter Brooks discusses the passage in his *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984), Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2002, pp. 92ff. It is Brooks's translation that I quote.
 16. I can't speak for the French equivalences. At all events, Houellebecq's claim in the *Lire* interview cited above that he wrote the sex scenes with especial care can hardly be taken seriously, even if he meant it seriously.
 17. György Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Merlin, London, 1963, p. 122.
 18. In *Atomised*, see especially the passages on the Cap d'Agde nudist colony (pp. 256–66). Christiane in *Atomised* – as submissive as Valérie – dismisses feminism in a paragraph: see pp. 173f. See *Whatever*, p. 4, for 'last dismaying dregs'.
 19. According to the *Guardian* (4 February 2004, p. 15), 10 per cent of French citizens are Muslim.
 20. A partial exception, discussing Houellebecq among other recent critics of Islam, is Hitchens's 'Holy Writ'. I am not implying that the work should have been censored or banned, or that for his remarks in an interview Houellebecq should have been found guilty of 'provocation'. But to uphold an author's right to speak and publish is not the same as to support his political opinions against criticism.
 21. Judging by the collection edited by King, *Camus's 'L'Étranger'*, few French critics fifty years after the publication of *L'Étranger* can recognize that in killing an Arab quasi-inadvertently, Meursault did what he (and Camus) in some sense wanted to do, while being able to disavow murderous desire. None of the contributors who seriously discuss the novel's colonial and 'racial' aspect (Christiane Achour, Alec G. Hargreaves, Michel Grimaud and Jan Rigaud) is based in France.
 22. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 54. Andreas Huyssens questions this paradigm opposing modernist and post-modernist aesthetics, and indicates new possibilities for a contemporary critical-artistic practice, in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*, Macmillan, London, 1988, esp. ch. 1.
 23. Critics disagree about the generic character of 'post-modern fiction' and about what works the category would comprise. In generalizing for present purposes, I summarize works whose emphases differ considerably. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London and New York, 1988; Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Routledge, London and New York, 1987; Robert Holton, *Jarring Witnesses: Modern Fiction and the Representation of History*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1994. For some recent criticisms of Hutcheon and McHale, see Stephen Baker, *The Fiction of Postmodernity*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000.
 24. Bryan Palmer, 'Critical Theory, Historical Materialism, and the Ostensible End of Marxism: The Poverty of Theory Revisited', reprinted in Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998: see p. 111. Palmer's particular target is Young's *White Mythologies*, Routledge, London, 1990.
 25. In an earlier passage (p. 268), Renault mocks an article by Jacques Attali in the *Nouvel Observateur* arguing that the violence of young people on housing estates is a response to the flaunting display of wealth in the Champs-Élysées.

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Demanding Deleuze

Keith Ansell Pearson

The Shortest Shadow and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* are the first two books in a new series edited by Slavoj Žižek entitled 'Short Circuits'.* In his series' foreword Žižek proposes that the shock of short-circuiting provides one of the best metaphors for a critical reading. His proposal is that we can take a major classic text, an author or a notion and read it in a short-circuiting way through the lens of a 'minor' author, text or conceptual apparatus. He intends the 'minor' to be heard in Deleuze's sense as that which is not of lesser quality but marginalized or disavowed by the dominant ideology. The minor approach will provide shocks to thought by shattering and undermining our common perceptions, as Deleuze and Guattari did with their text on Kafka, or, as Žižek notes, Marx did with his short-circuiting of philosophical speculation through the lens of political economy, and as Nietzsche and Freud did with morality (short-circuiting our highest values through the lens of an unconscious libidinal economy).

Žižek maintains that the result of this procedure is not a simple desublimation (reducing the higher to the lower), but rather a 'decentring' of the text subject to interpretation, bringing to light presuppositions and consequences it disavows. This is not a hermeneutics of suspicion in any straightforwardly phenomenological sense, but rather something much more severe and cruel, on the one hand, and something much more doctrinal and dogmatic on the other. Žižek states, somewhat in the manner of a categorical imperative of thought, that the underlying premiss of his new series is that Lacanian psychoanalysis is a 'privileged instrument' with regard to this approach and task. One might object that a key issue has been extracted from the equation and placed outside the forces of critique, that of the status of Lacanian psychoanalysis. However, this would be to prejudge the most important issue, namely whether its conceptual apparatus is capable of producing a set of new minor readings that make acute demands on us and pose new challenges to us.

Zupančič's text on Nietzsche provides us with a test case. It sets itself the task of opening up afresh the horizons of Nietzsche's thinking in an effort to breathe some new life into an alleged modern master of suspicion. The model for reading Nietzsche in minor terms already exists in Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy* of 1962, which is the only truly revolutionary reading of Nietzsche to date, and whose title indicates that Deleuze's Nietzschean battle cry is not simply contra philosophy but at the heart of it. In a number of respects Zupančič offers a genuinely thought-provoking book on Nietzsche. It does, indeed, short-circuit, presenting a Nietzsche that in key aspects is unrecognizable, and in a manner that is instructive and novel. It does this largely by taking core Nietzschean ideas and problems – such as the death of God and nihilism – and demonstrating how we have yet to think adequately through them and assimilate them.

Zupančič detects in the academy a widespread suppression of the shocking Nietzsche – that is, the Nietzsche who jolts thought. His jolts are either swept under the carpet or treated as exotic objects. One is not simply referring to his unpalatable remarks on race and women; the issue extends much further and deeper than this. In the case of Nietzsche – but of course not only in his case – it is as if philosophy has become a corpse; it no longer lives or seeks to show signs of life, it lacks what Nietzsche himself would call the passion of a great faith and the capacity for spiritual perception. (Philosophy as it was practised in the 1880s, as the 'theory of knowledge', evoked only pity in him, from which we can infer that he smelled the end was nigh.) Zupančič, whose previous book was a thought-provoking and demanding text on Kant and ethics, is able to marshal all the dark and disturbing conceptual weaponry of Lacanian psychoanalysis to revitalize Nietzsche and give his concerns an urgency and a demand that they have lost.

The problem with the text is twofold: it does not sufficiently allow Nietzsche's voice to speak with the

* Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003. 193 pp., £10.95 pb., 0 262 74026 5.

Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003. 188 pp., £10.95 pb., 0 262 74025 7.

Lacanian one, but allows one to override the other in almost every instance; and it fails to sustain its reading of Nietzsche, letting it dissipate at key moments. The result of the latter is that one does not get a total revelation of Nietzsche's revolution but only glimpses of it. The problem with the former is that Nietzsche's own philosophical legislation is never allowed to challenge the Lacanian 'truths' the author wishes us to live with and think by.

Where is Deleuze?

The target of Zupančič's attack is our lamentable and miserable postmodern condition in which 'nothing can shock us any longer'. She proposes we resist the tendency to reduce Nietzsche's jolts to thought to the level of opinions. She does not deny that Nietzsche is an ironic writer, or that he often deploys irony; but she detects another style in his writing, one that is much more disarming than the postmodern ironic Nietzsche and that is a crucial part of what makes him an 'event' in modernity, namely his deployment of the *naive* style. The reference is, of course, to Schiller's distinction between the naive and the sentimental, one which Nietzsche himself made use of in his first published text, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Zupančič argues that the naive style informs Nietzsche's philosophical project as a whole, giving it its manifesto-like character, its futurist tonality, its critical power, and its eventful character. It is a Nietzsche that the overly sophisticated 'postmodern' appropriation of him has allowed to disappear, with the result that a crucial part of the 'basic text' of Nietzsche has got buried under the weight of secondary meanings and interpretations. The decision to construct Nietzsche in this way informs Zupančič's admirable attempt to read the moment of his philosophy through the category of the event. Her proposal, in short, is that we should read Nietzsche's projections of his world-historic destiny not in terms of postmodern irony but in terms of naive seriousness.

To advance this construction of Nietzsche she begins by contesting Badiou's reading of Nietzsche as an anti-philosopher, which she does in a highly instructive and fertile way. She utilizes Badiou's conception of the event and reads Nietzsche as seeking to constitute himself as an event in this specific sense: 'the capacity of a given practice to produce its own object'. (When Badiou defines Nietzsche as anti-philosopher we need to appreciate that he is engaged, in part, in a repetition: this was exactly Merleau-Ponty's appraisal of Nietzsche.) One might suppose that there is nothing new in this claim. Does not Nietzsche himself tell us that he is an event that will divide humanity into two,

into those who come before him and those who will come after him? Have not several great thinkers read him, critically and clinically, as an event? Heidegger and Klossowski to mention but two. Zupančič's approach is distinctive on account of the attention it gives to the significance of the 'midday' in Nietzsche, the great noontide, which is also the stillest hour. She contends that this is Nietzsche's 'time of the event', the moment when one becomes two – that is, the moment of a fundamental break or split. She is very good on the meaning of the 'stillness' at play in Nietzsche's event and she impressively subverts Badiou's claim that a declaration of the new that lacks the Real (its object) is one that becomes caught up in the impossibility of making the distinction between its actual presence and its projected announcement. She asks in response, could we not say that this impossibility is the very presence of the Real and a true indication of it at work?

The relation is not *to* the Real but 'of' the Real. Moreover, do we not encounter the end of all things, as Zupančič suggests, when the reality principle gets conceived as the only and ultimate Real? Is this not our problem now? Of course, one could reply to this defence of Nietzsche, that this leaves an important issue untouched, namely, to use a Deleuzian term, how one is to *authenticate* an event. For Deleuze it is the test of the eternal return – a revolutionary doctrine in Deleuze's hands – that allows this authentication to take place. Zupančič is also very good in trying to do demanding things with many core aspects of Nietzsche, including the death of God and nihilism, perspectivism, the ascetic ideal, and the attempt to think 'beyond good and evil'. As she rightly points out, we should reflect in a demanding and precise manner on the nature of this 'beyond'. She proposes we conceive this not as denoting a realm, but rather as having the structure of an edge, and she contends the event that is Nietzsche is precisely this edge. Later in the book the 'beyond' is said to be neither a synthesis of a pair (good and evil) nor a third term that transcends them, but rather an 'in the middle', which we can understand, she says in Deleuzian terms as the neutrality of life or being in its divergent logic. Life is a creative neutrality and it in this sense that Nietzsche's 'beyond' places itself in the 'middle'.

This is ingenious and deeply thought-provoking; one only wishes it was coupled with what Nietzsche actually posits himself of beyond good and evil. The conjoining of the two would make for a better instruction than the one we get where we largely have to take Zupančič's inventive reading on trust. In Nietzsche

the 'beyond' is the essential place to position oneself 'outside' morality (outside the ex-position of the morality of metaphysics and the metaphysics of morality). This explains his attempt to change the sense of the 'beyond', away from metaphysics and humanism and in the direction of a new way of thinking and feeling (sometimes he speaks of it as a 'beneath'). On other topics central to an encounter with Nietzsche, the author is less original and thought-provoking, and indeed at times, admittedly rare, banal: for example, the material on forgetting, which is done much more profoundly in Deleuze and in the context of a treatment of the becoming-active of forces, which is Deleuze's earliest encounter with Freud and psychoanalysis and a signal of what is to come in much more aggressive and extreme terms in *Anti-Oedipus*.

For Zupančič the exact formula of Nietzsche's constitution or declaration is not 'I am the event', nor 'I will break the world in two', nor 'I am dynamite'; rather, it is 'I am two'. When, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche becomes the 'one' that he is, this is not a moment of



unification but of a pure split. We can see this, she says, in the way Nietzsche forges the division between decadence or negation and the principle of the new beginning or absolute affirmation. It is not simply that Nietzsche offers himself as 'Dionysus versus the Crucified', but rather that Dionysus is this very split between the two. But she wants to claim more than this. Dionysus does not come after the Crucified as something completely different, which would make of him the beginning of a new era. Rather, Dionysus is the beginning *as midday* – that is, as the moment when the one is doubled into the two. It is this moment of splitting, of the one becoming two, that constitutes what is new, and this is the moment of the 'shortest shadow'.

The argument is an intricate one, but one worth chewing over. One might conceive it in terms of a pure or absolute becoming. The becoming is absolute not because completion takes place, whether dialectically or speculatively; rather, there is the repetition of the

new beginning again (and again) and this repetition is the repetition of an absolute difference, of a new event (for example, the collision and catastrophe of 'Dionysus versus the Crucified'). It is, as Deleuze understood well, the repetition of difference and the new without the need for negation or the labour of the negative. It is not that there is no role for negation, but rather that the negative and reactive get subjected to a superior force or power (affirmation) that would expel them and ensure they do not return. It is for this reason that there is no *labour* of the negative. One might say that it is the event – revolution, for example – which is the 'truth' of itself, in which being gets becoming *stamped* or impressed on it. This was how Nietzsche himself put it, and it was a decisive move for Deleuze, and, it may be noted, for Deleuze positioning himself contra Heidegger on the question of Nietzsche. It is clear when Zupančič discusses Nietzsche on truth that her conception of truth, like her conception of the event in Nietzsche, has been heavily inspired by Deleuze. The full extent of this inspiration is, however, as Žižek would say, 'disavowed'. Indeed, in her text Zupančič draws repeatedly on the insights Deleuze developed in his book on Nietzsche. However, she never stages an encounter or a confrontation (or whatever it is that one might desire) with Deleuze's book. A 'minor' moment in philosophy, which is also to speak of an event in philosophy, has been disavowed. This is important because ultimately we do not have in this book a new Nietzsche; we have a revolutionary Nietzsche borrowed from and inspired by Deleuze that will not speak the name of Deleuze *as an event*. In an act of Lacanian appropriation, the text disavows the very book that makes its own reading possible. Was it not Deleuze who sought to teach us that in Nietzsche propositions, such as the death of God, are not speculative but dramatic ones – that is, revolutionary ones that give rise to the forces that then become capable of effectuating a rupture or break (the event)?

Zupančič concludes her book with a long addendum on the comedy of love, which leaves Nietzsche completely out of the picture. This is distinctively odd given that he is a fecund writer on love – especially on the *demands* of the love of knowledge and the love of life. There is also the important usage of courtly love in his conception of a gay science and so on. The author attempts at the start of it to justify what she is doing, and confesses that it is based on a paper that was given on an occasion that had nothing to do with Nietzsche. What is missing from this book, which could, and should, have constituted its ending, is an encounter with a demand that it does not care to

respond to: the event of Deleuze's book on Nietzsche. Instead of staging this encounter, which would also serve to put itself to the test, it chooses to do something parochial: staying with Lacan on the comedy of love, which, for all the instruction it provides, is quite irrelevant to the needs of this book. This is unfortunate since the ending gives the reader the impression that Zupančič does not know what she is doing with Nietzsche. The truth of the matter, of course, is that she knows *exactly* what she is doing. The question, however, is whether she is doing *enough*. Deleuze was absolutely clear – naively so, one might suggest – about what the Nietzschean revolution consisted in and the fact that it sought to inaugurate a new earth and new people. Zupančič tells us virtually nothing with regard to this vital issue and this is a direct result of her employing the formal resources and static machinery of Lacanian psychoanalysis. We get a revolution and an event without any content. This also has the effect, ultimately, of leaving untouched Badiou's critical concerns over a revolutionary figure like Nietzsche, namely that the act or event of auto-constitution and auto-legislation is one of fantasy.



Here is Deleuze?

In the opening pages of *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*,* Žižek openly tells us that his is a Lacanian book on Deleuze. It is one that will not assume the form of a dialogue between two theories – he duly notes Deleuze's aversion to debate and to the conversations of philosophy – but instead will trace the contours of an *encounter* between two incompatible fields. Moreover, he is keen to tell us that an encounter like this cannot be reduced to the level of a symbolic exchange, since what resonates in it is the 'echo of a traumatic impact'. This, then, is heady and heavy stuff. The problem with Žižek's conception of Deleuze is that it is overly fantastical, and fantasy may be the structural defect of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The word 'encounter' plays an important role in Deleuze's conception of the activity of thinking, but this is never engaged in Žižek's book. Indeed, he shows a serious disregard for Deleuze's own words and formulations, preferring instead to rely, and on numerous occasions, on secondary commentaries on Deleuze. In the opening pages we are told that, 'In the past decade, Deleuze emerged as the central reference of contemporary philosophy.' In a hyperbolic and wild statement like this we have effectively lost any chance of a rational perspective on contemporary philosophy (as well as making ourselves blind to the many academic contexts and institutions where Deleuze is effectively suppressed and silenced).

The aim in staging this encounter with Deleuze, says Žižek, is to go 'against the current'. Its 'starting premise' is that beneath the 'popular Deleuze' – which for him means the Deleuze of 'Deleuze and Guattari' – there is another Deleuze that is 'much closer to psychoanalysis and Hegel' and whose consequences are said to be much more 'shattering'. This is all welcome and provocative, but as the book unfolds it soon becomes clear that we are never going to learn enough about it. The 'ultimate' aim of the book, as stated much later in it, is said to be one of engaging 'in the practice of the Hegelian buggery of Deleuze' (readers may not be mistaken if they draw the inference that Žižek has made this book up as he has gone along). It's a book that cannot decide what its aim, ultimate or otherwise, is. All of the things which have a precision, clarity, rigour and discipline in Deleuze – including philosophizing as buggery – get turned into their opposite in Žižek. The reading of Deleuze is so imprecise with respect to key aspects and issues as to make the reader sceptical of all the major critical

* Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*, Routledge, New York and London, 2004. 217 pp., £50.00 hb., £13.99 pb., 0 415 96920 4 hb., 0 415 96921 2 pb.

claims it wishes to make. At one point, for example, Žižek declares that, ‘The “ultimate fact” of Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism is the absolute immanence of the continuous flux of becoming, while the “ultimate fact” of Hegel is the irreducible *rupture* of/in immanence’. One wonders how Žižek would place Deleuze’s figuration of the eternal return, which is absolutely central to the transcendental empiricism at work in *Difference and Repetition*, in this continuous flux of becoming, since it is clear that it operates as a *selective* ethics and *selective* ontology – that is, it imposes becoming on being and creates the superior forms. The repetition of the new and of the future is the superior form of all repetitions such as those of habit and memory. Žižek’s reading of Deleuze is often of this character, picking one aspect or facet and neglecting the genuinely intricate and complex character of the movements of thought at work in the texts.

I have a lot of sympathy with the point of Žižek’s attack, including his concern that the radical-chic aspects of Deleuze’s current assimilation have the effect of transforming him into the ideologist of digital capitalism. (At his best – his most Deleuzian one might say – he is a severe critic of its cerebral cretinization.) I am also in sympathy with his claim that Deleuze is very close to psychoanalysis and Hegel (so close that at the same time he is also something altogether different). Žižek’s book has some exacting and utterly brilliant moments: the section on Spinoza, for example, provocatively entitled ‘Is It Possible Not To Love Spinoza?’ stands out as an absolute gem. He is astute on the ambiguous character of the multitude in Spinoza and on the simple-minded way it gets figured in Hardt and Negri. But these are gems that are buried in the rambling flows of the text and are barely related to the alleged encounter with Deleuze. At one point, for example, we find Žižek on a flow about the death-drive, a notion that deeply occupies him for obvious reasons. Deleuze’s own dense and remarkable reworking of the death-drive in Chapter 2 of *Difference and Repetition* is never even mentioned. There are some odd mannerisms as well as odd claims on display in this book. For example, on the first page of the opening chapter on ‘The Reality of the Virtual’, Žižek writes: ‘The first determination that comes to mind apropos of Deleuze is that he is a philosopher of the Virtual.’ The casual nature of this remark is, in fact, characteristic of the undisciplined character of Žižek’s style of writing in this book. ‘Comes to mind’? ‘Apropos’? What language of thought is this? In fact, it is more revealing than it at first appears: it shows that Žižek is not at all writing or thinking about Deleuze; his mind

is elsewhere. A genuine encounter with Deleuze forces one to focus and concentrate the mind, to discipline it, to encounter strange forces of thought and life.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first, entitled ‘Deleuze’, has thought-provoking insights into Kant, Hegel, Spinoza, the quasi-cause, the thing in itself, and so on. Deleuze figures as an occasional point of reference. The second, ‘Consequences’, is divided into three sizeable chapters. Deleuze effectively disappears from the book at this point, re-emerging only in the final chapter on ‘Politics: A Plea for Cultural Revolution’. In the previous two chapters Žižek engages in the kind of superior intellectual tourism that has become his calling card, offering a series of instructive and provocative insights into cognitive science, autopoiesis, memetics, Kino-eye, Hitchcock, and so on. Žižek is severe on the politics of Deleuzism (or Deleuzo–Guattarism), especially the politics of *Anti-Oedipus*. This is one of the strongest and most effective parts of the book. He raises some disquieting but necessary questions; for example, are there *not* features of Deleuze’s work that indeed justify calling him the ‘ideologist’ of late capitalism? He is at his most astute in his treatment of Deleuze and Guattari’s micro- and molecular analysis of fascism. It is difficult to deny that this is one of the weakest aspects of their work, and alarmingly so. Žižek is, I think, spot on when he says that we need to appreciate fully the problematic nature of Deleuze’s sympathy for Wilhelm Reich.

We can add this critical point to his concerns. When at the start of *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari pose the fundamental problem of political philosophy as one of determining how desire comes to desire its own repression (for example, the masses and their alleged desire for fascism), they institute a badly posed problem from which they never recover. Although the analysis becomes a lot more nuanced by the time of *A Thousand Plateaus* (they effectively renounce the earlier question without making this clear and assessing its implications), serious problems continue to afflict their approach and analysis. Žižek is a good old-fashioned Western Marxist; in my view he is to be esteemed for being such. He argues powerfully against the view that holds that the situation would have been different if the Left had chosen to fight fascism at the level of libidinal micro-politics, or if, today, the Left abandoned what is called ‘class essentialism’ and accepted the ‘post-politics’ of the amorphous multitude as the proper terrain of resistance. This, he says, is a case of ‘Leftist arrogant intellectual stupidity’.

One can only take seriously Žižek’s critique of Deleuze on a certain level, that of the polemical and

the political: his critique is really one of ‘Deleuzism’. The book’s ‘encounter’ with Deleuze is deeply undisciplined as a work of philosophy. The book, it has to be said, is a chaotic mess. The encounter with Deleuze never effectively takes place, and so one has little idea of its desired effects. This is for several reasons. One is that Žižek is too keen to quote what commentators have made of Deleuze (especially de Landa), as opposed to reading the texts themselves, and this on some of the most crucial questions and issues surrounding Deleuze’s work. Another is that he has no feeling for Deleuze as a classical and modernist philosopher (in the way that Badiou does, for example, who would never discuss *Difference and Repetition* by relying upon a book that is allegedly about it or linked to it). A third is that he is too quick in his readings and thoughts. Žižek does have a thesis on Deleuze that is well worth staging, developing and putting to work; the problem is that he does not remain faithful to it in any philosophically rigorous sense.

Žižek’s thesis runs as follows. In Deleuze’s work we can identify a fundamental opposition between the virtual conceived as the site of productive Becoming, on the one hand, and as the site of the sterile Sense-Event, on the other. This is how, he argues, we can start to think the opposition between the ‘body without organs’ and the ‘organs without body’ (think of the cat’s smile without the body of the cat in *Alice in Wonderland*). It is also the difference between the Deleuze of *The Anti-Oedipus* and the Deleuze of *The Logic of Sense*. This focus on the ‘consequences’ of this inner tension at the heart of Deleuze’s work is put to work in the rest of the book with regard to the domains of science, art and politics. The results are indeed intriguing. The problem is that the specific nature of the inner tension is neither sufficiently examined nor closely probed.

Žižek is at his best when he turns things on their head and refuses to rest content with the cosy, undemanding stories we tell ourselves about knowledge and life. He has a habit of permanently introducing into reflections on culture a welcome element of discomforting surprise. This is fully and spectacularly on display in his book on ‘the perverse core of Christianity’, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, which is a superb contribution to his own series. We also encounter it in his book on Deleuze, though hardly ever in connection with Deleuze. The following provide good examples of the practice. In the face of Daniel Dennett’s compulsive selling of Darwin’s allegedly dangerous idea – that intentionality and mind emerge out of a blind, algorithmic process – what if this idea is one that contains the ultimate pacifying message: don’t get overexcited,

there is no meaning or obligation in our lives. In other words, just where lies its danger? What if the true danger and really unbearable trauma consist in accepting that we cannot be reduced to the outcome of evolutionary adaptation? (We are reminded here of Nietzsche’s disquieting exegesis of the *meaning* of the ascetic ideal in the *Genealogy of Morals*.) What if only a being like *Dasein*, with its obsession with impossible and unsolvable problems, can make breakthroughs in possible knowledge? Isn’t the problem with machines that they only break down in the purely mechanical sense of the word? (This last one is my own Žižekian-inspired offering.)

Žižek reveals his true (dogmatic) colours when, after noting that the genuine enigma is not that of the meaning of life as such but rather the fact that we continue to persist in probing into this meaning, he claims that metaphysical questions cannot be suspended as they form such a fundamental part of our nature. He notes the contribution of Kant to this issue and proposes that, since Hegel provides the necessary critique of Kant, it would be worthwhile to read the Kantian antinomies of today’s cognitive science – evident in the likes of Dennett, Colin McGinn, and Steven Pinker – through a Hegelian lens. It would indeed be interesting to do this. But one could also mention Nietzsche’s appeal to a new earth and a new people to come, a people that would learn how to live in new and different ways, becoming indifferent to metaphysics. This was a vision and a riddle that exerted such an influence on Deleuze. What Žižek takes to be impossible, Nietzsche took to be eminently possible. One could begin to reflect on Deleuze’s unique contribution to this debate and many of his texts provide a fascinating contribution to it. The appeal of perversity to him is immense – from the anti-nuptial nature of *A Thousand Plateaus* (symbiotic complexes, monstrous couplings, etc.) to the refrain of Melville’s *Bartleby*. The entire project of thinking ‘difference and repetition’ is informed by a search for the superior form of nature, a nature that goes against and ‘beyond’ what it institutes and creates. Alternatively, what kind of ‘nature’ is Lacanian psychoanalysis seeking to demonstrate and induct us in? What is the law of its nature and the nature of its law?

Žižek is one of the most important intellectual figures of our time. He is also, without doubt, the great Lacanian of our times, an educator who can instruct, inspire, provoke and shock. It is unfortunate that in his encounter with Deleuze he has not allowed his Lacanianism to be instructed in turn by the truths of another way of thinking and feeling. I can only advise him to persist with his trauma and to go deeper with it.

Our images, their humanity

Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2004. 232 pp., £57.00 hb., £10.99 pb., 0 8223 3255 8 hb., 0 8223 3293 0 pb.

Ted Honderich, *Terrorism for Humanity: Inquiries in Political Philosophy*, Pluto Press, London, 2003. 232 pp., £50.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 74532 134 8 hb., 0 74532 133 X pb.

Theories of justice don't originate in a void. They presuppose, and are driven by, images of the good social order, or, conversely, images of what we seek to avoid – human suffering and distress. That these images can motivate both political theory and action seems to be the common idea at the root of recent works by two of the most influential contemporary philosophers, Charles Taylor and Ted Honderich. Both trade on the idea that these images move us and affect us emotionally. We react morally to these images; they affect our conceptions of our moral standing, of the kind of people that we are and the kind of people that we would like to be. Our imagination, then, gives us the affective starting point from which we can go on and reason about political organization and action.

This idea seems to be in the background of all Charles Taylor's writings. For example, in his early 1990s essay 'The Politics of Recognition', a text that remains indispensable for anybody thinking about cultural diversity in a liberal state, he explored the cultural derivation of the idea of 'authenticity' – an image of the individual's struggle for the positive, public recognition of her distinctiveness and worth. Taylor's latest book, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, reiterates this preoccupation with authenticity, by arguing that different civilizations might well progress according to their own conceptions of the just and good social order. In other words, there isn't simply *one* modernity, but rather *multiple* modernities. Taylor pursues this idea by arguing that, since different societies *do* manifestly seek to develop according to different self-understandings, it is important to discover through a genealogical endeavour the origins of their beliefs about justice. Central to this genealogical task is the idea of a 'social imaginary' – a broad set of notions held collectively by a people, and which comes together to form a vision of social life. Through a fascinating historical analysis, Taylor argues that the Western social imaginary is characterized by three cultural forms: the public sphere (a 'metatopical' space for secular deliberation), the economy and self-governance.

Through this analysis, Taylor hopes to show that Western images of moral order, which are based on the assumed objective of mutual benefit for equal participants, can help us to 'provincialize' our deepest beliefs about value. By understanding their cultural origins we develop a sense of their contingency, their lack of universality, and so we can enhance our capacity to respond to others' beliefs. Although, Taylor argues, the world's greatest civilizations appear to be moving closer together, and although respect for basic human rights is evidenced in a growing number of international treaties, there remain profound differences between moral and political visions. The idea here is that enhanced international relations might well rest on a keener understanding of the differences, and not an emphasis on the superficial commonalities, between citizens of different states. This is because we can't begin to overcome our conflicts if we don't first understand the nature of our disagreements.

Taylor navigates skilfully between the dimensions of the Western social imaginary, explaining how they interrelate. The chapters evoke sections of his earlier work, *Sources of the Self* (1989): he discusses the problem of the European 'sovereign people', the 'direct-access' society, the issue of 'agency and objectification', and the growing importance of affirming ordinary family life, a phenomenon that helped shape the Western public-private dichotomy. Here, however, the wider project of 'provincializing' the universality of our images of justice appears rather unstable. For example, Taylor explains that the historical growth of new kinds of private spaces was imagined in opposition to an all-pervasive Church and State in Western Europe. This led, he claims, to unprecedented changes in our shared conception of the public itself. The rise of the public sphere was an outcome of a specific constellation of economic, ecclesial and intimate-sentimental pressures, finally leading to our image of political life as a sphere in which secular citizens come together to deliberate, freely and equally, about specific issues and outcomes. While this historical

account is impressive, one wonders how it can connect with alternative images of publicity and privacy that, say, religious minorities might hold *within* liberal democracies. In so far as Taylor seems concerned here to explain 'our' (Western, liberal) self-understanding, how does his genealogical study help us to respond generously to the different conceptions of 'modernity' arising not in distant parts of the world, but rather *in our midst*? Can Taylor's attention to history shed any light on the hybridity of identity and selfhood within liberal states?

Honderich's book is more determinate in its ethical commitments. The images he invokes, namely of human suffering and the atrocities and carnage associated with terrorism, urge political philosophers to inquire with an open mind into the justifications for forms of political violence. Honderich is one of the few mainstream contemporary philosophers, alongside Peter Singer, to have succeeded in unsettling unexamined conventions regarding the proper subject matter of academic philosophy. *Terrorism for Humanity* is a revised version of his twenty-year-old *Violence for Equality*, and Honderich explains why the questions he raised two decades ago become newly urgent for us. In light of recent world events, we need to consider the morality of a kind of political act that aims to satisfy the Principle of Humanity: that is, violence in the name of alleviating injustice, distress and wretchedness in the world. If the goal of terrorism can be the decrease of global distributive inequalities, why should we feel differently about this than we would other attempts to rid the world of wretchedness?

This is a richly and densely argued set of essays. It is very much a collection rather than a unified text with a coherent argument developed from beginning to end. However, taken as a whole, its effect is to dismantle some of our most comfortable (or convenient) self-understandings and perceptions of our place in the world. For part of the difference philosophers standardly assert between conditions of world poverty and acts of terrorism rests on the idea that extensive inequality in life-expectancy and nutrition are entrenched or unavoidable; whereas violence, by contrast, is a *choice* made by responsible human beings. 'Setting a bomb is a human action', Honderich explains, 'which like other human actions, might not have been performed. *The man might have done otherwise.*' But this distinction between choice and circumstance, he argues, is essentially unstable and contextual – it's a matter of what we collectively imagine to be immutable or within the realms of human change. For instance, it once seemed inevitable that children worked in the mines, and that

women did not vote. Add this to the fact that we, reading Honderich's book, may be horrified by images of terrorism, but are at the same time almost certainly beneficiaries of systems of inequality that might have given rise to these acts. The point here is not that all acts of terrorism can be justified, but rather that we need to entertain the possibility that some might be. And we need to think about not only actual terrorism, but possible or conceivable terrorism – terrorism as self-defence, as part of a liberation struggle; terrorism advancing the values of democracy, a defence against ethnic cleansing; terrorism in the name of cultural survival. We might even think of some possible acts of terrorism in terms of the classic conflict between political obligation and the demands of conscience brought into the international arena: terrorism as moral necessity, terrorism in the name of humanity.

In the essay 'Our Omissions and Their Terrorism', Honderich examines how the violent might respond to the law-abiding. Despite your moral confidence, they might argue, by your omissions you deny life and contribute to wretchedness. In other words, to those who hold them responsible for gross injustice, terrorists might well reply '*tu quoque*'. We can perhaps concede that our ordinary lives consist in omissions as wrong as certain conceivable acts, in the sense that omissions can cause suffering as intensely as some directly intentional act. But does recognizing this therefore make most ordinary people – that is, most of us – moral monsters? This objection fails, says Honderich, because 'an action's being wrong does not lead to the conclusion that it reduces or destroys the agent's moral standing'. It simply follows that the agent is 'open to question'. Honderich is aware that there is an important distinction here between intentionality and unintentionality: by omitting to contribute £4,000 of my salary to the Red Cross, for example, I do not *intend* to cause multiple deaths and extensive human suffering. Honderich concedes here that in order for our omissions to generate moral responsibility, we need, at the time of our omission, to have some sense of the side-effects of our failure to act. In other words, we need more than a fragmentary conception in our minds, more than a flicker of relevant images of human suffering, that add up to the relevant understanding of the implications of our failure to act. And the problem – which is in another sense the problem of apportioning blame – is that some of us have no such 'flicker of images'. We have too small a conception of our 'world of possible effectiveness'. Most of us do not suppose, for example, that we can do anything at all to contribute meaningfully to decreasing inequalities

in average lifetimes, or to reducing the stark disparity of levels of environmental toxicity in different parts of the world.

While Honderich seems right to argue that we need some conception of the causal connections between the facts of human wretchedness and the power of our own acts and omissions, ultimately it isn't clear that, if we fail to act, we are therefore blameworthy. For we might ask: blameworthy from which perspective? What are the boundaries of the relevant moral community in which we act (or, more frequently, don't act)? Again, these are large questions that are all the more complex for being set in an international arena. In the end, moreover, Honderich is aware that the terrorists' *tu quoque* faces the deontological objection that, regardless of the beneficial consequences of their actions, one must *never* kill outside of certain permissible situations – that is, outside the extremes of self-defence or in circumstances in which states judge that execution is 'necessary'. Terrorism disrupts this deontological rule. Terrorists' appeal to beneficial consequences is insufficient. Their appeal to the greater good, delivered to the comfortably-off who benefit from systems of global inequality, is unconvincing not because entirely irrelevant, but because it is trumped by the intrinsic wrongness of taking life. For one might be struck by the naivety, if not the futility, of cost-benefit analyses that 'justify', for example, the grisliness of wars for which the American invasion of Vietnam set a pattern. One might be inherently pessimistic about any attempt to weigh goods and bads in these situations. So, for all the sophisticated computational morality of the 'utilitarian' terrorist, maybe we should conclude that killing a person, maiming a child, destroying a family are atrocities that 'cannot be brought into the calculation of gains and losses'. It is not just that we are insufficiently intelligent to put a figure on the losses; rather, the acts are by nature inhuman or savage. However, this argument is particularly problematic for either consequentialists or intrinsicists who might reasonably hold that, while causing suffering is undoubtedly bad, terrorists face a conflict of moral necessities. Even the stringent Kantian, for example, will not say that killing is *never* justified.

So, even if we have the necessary mental images to respond empathically to distress in the world, how are we supposed to respond to terrorism in pursuit of humanity? What are we supposed to think, let alone do, in situations where necessities conflict? It is likely that outcomes are not the only morally relevant issues in struggles for justice and liberation. We need also to consider the means through which those outcomes are

achieved. Conscientious objection, abstention and non-violent protest are clearly less problematic ethically; but with respect to terrorism for humanity, it is probable that two wrongs may well not make a right. While Honderich does not deliver a determinate conclusion, finally he issues a 'set of doctrines and commitments' for anyone interested in these timely moral questions. The ascription of responsibility and blame, if appropriate at all, is pitched at those who don't accept that such moral questions can be legitimately posed.

Monica Mookherjee

Roots

Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian, eds, *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2002. 408 pp., £17.50 pb., 0 8223 2840 2.

This volume appears in the series 'Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics and Society'. Indeed, the editors of the series – Rey Chow, H.D. Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi – are all contributors to the volume. Those familiar with their work know that they are not fond of what can be read as an indifference to power, class and race in cultural and postcolonial studies. They warn against a marginalization of history, against a 'race for theory'. They also object to the disengagement of academia from politics and pursue a pedagogy that encourages a critical and political analysis of capitalism. Most of the essays published here focus on Japanese and Asian Studies and, from that context, seek to remind us of the politics at work in the production of knowledge and the role of the universities in the shaping of state and market decisions. A series of questions are raised. Who shapes the field of a discipline? How does funding affect the methodology and the production of academic knowledge? How should the scholar respond to invitations by the state to serve her nation and share her knowledge with its institutions? What kind of pedagogy must teachers devise to acknowledge the history of Area Studies?

The field of Area Studies has long been a contested one. Originating in the aftermath of the Second World War in the USA, it sought to gather and provide information about the cultures of future enemies, in order to develop counter-strategies against socialism and communism (which had attracted progressive movements in the Third World) and to demonstrate the superior values of democracy and freedom against the Soviet

Union and 'Red China'. Funded by the Ford Foundation and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Area Studies programmes were tied to the demands of the Cold War and the national security state, and the authors warn that we should never forget these roots. Staff members were in bed with corporate interests, the CIA and other villains; they contributed their knowledge and expertise to undercover operations and helped the US government and capital to further their policies in the name of freedom and liberal democracy. The Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, East Asia (Indochina, China, Cambodia, Laos), Africa, Latin America, the list of 'areas' reads like a reminder of the violence, US-supported coups, assassinations and lies of the twentieth century. Bruce Cummings's essay retraces that history before and after 1989 and the collapse of communism. Cummings argues that the 'ultimate force shaping scholarly studies of what used to be called "the non-Western world" is economic and political power'. It is a story worth remembering:

For a generation after the Second World War, the bipolar conflict between Moscow and Washington and the hegemonic position of the United States in the world economy drew academic boundaries that had the virtue of clarity: 'area studies' and its sister called 'international studies' had clear references to places or to issues and processes that became important to study, backed with enormous public and private resources.... The key processes were things like modernization, or what was for many years called 'political development' toward the explicit or implicit goal of liberal democracy.

Regions with clear borders emerged and students learned to understand the world according to these tropes which collapsed diverse localities into homogenous space: Pacific Rim, Southeast Asia and so on. The areas became identified with a series of qualifiers, 'dynamic' for the Pacific Rim, 'immature' for other areas. The market dictated the vocabulary of area studies, classifying each country into a category along a scale from 'backward' to 'modern', with the assumption that no country would ever reach the level of the United States. I remember students on the Political Science B.A. at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1980s who were adamant that freedom and democracy existed *only* in their country. Even Western Europe was seen as 'anarchic' and lacking freedom. The way in which the course for 'International Politics' was organized inevitably led to that conclusion.

When the Cold War ended, there was a re-evaluation of Area Studies and the trope of a 'world without borders' shaped the field. Foundations revised their policies and made clear their desire to have cross-regional scholarships. Areas were said to be more porous and thus comparative study appeared essential. If the state's role in shaping the agenda was clear in Area Studies prior to 1989, subsequently the global corporation became a more important player. Multi-culturalism, diversity, flexibility, multiple identity were adopted and adapted to the demands of the market. No global multinational today would be caught dismissing cultural diversity and difference. They have become part and parcel of globalspeak, which has helped the



dissemination of an ahistorical and apolitical vision of the world.

The restructuring of Area Studies was not only affected by external factors. The development of new disciplines, born of the struggles for recognition of cultural and gender identities – for instance, the departments of ethnic studies such as Asian American Studies, or sub-disciplines such as Japanese Cinema (discussed in the volume) – also influenced the transformation of Area Studies programmes. Yet, for all that they brought to Area Studies – an attention to marginalized groups, to the importance of sexualities, gender inequalities, cultural difference – these new disciplines contributed to the marginalization, if not dismissal, of the role of political and economic power in shaping our world. They also led to an essentialist representation of culture. For instance, Asian American Studies, Sylvia Yanagisako argues, ‘contributed to the institutionalization of the boundary between itself and Asian Studies’. By delineating borders, Area Studies required

the patrolling of borders between geo-political-cultural spaces. Individuals and groups that do not fit into this typology – that is to say, those whose politico-cultural features do not conform to the alleged distinctive features of their area location – are potential threats to the analytical coherence of the area and, consequently, to the broad knowledge claims of its experts.

In other words, the expert defines a territory, which in turn produces its experts, who become a police patrol checking the papers of anyone who dares to cross the borders. The spatiality imposed by Area Studies was accompanied by a rigid temporality that organizes time into tradition (immovable, unalterable, unchangeable) and the present (complex, elusive), and masks how ‘earlier conflicts were also multiply inflected with contradictory aims, motives, and effects’, as James A. Fujii explains in his essay on modern Japanese Literary Studies. Likewise, imagining a region such as ‘Asia-Pacific’ fits into an organization of the world in which, as Rob Wilson argues, Asia-Pacific becomes

a utopic discourse of the liberal market, an emerging signifier of transnational aspirations for some higher, supra-national unity in which global/local will meet in some kind of ‘win-win’ situation and the opened market will absorb culture and politics into its borderless affirmative flow.

The idiom of such transnationalism hides the internal tensions and conflicts that haunt the region as well as its relation with other ‘regions’.

The critique of Area Studies leads to a critique of Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies, which have not produced a radical critique of the assumptions, territorializations and conclusions of Area Studies. This is because, according to Rey Chow, ‘Cultural studies now becomes a means of legitimizing continual conceptual and methodological irresponsibility in the name of cultural otherness.’ While, according to Masao Miyoshi and Arif Dirlik, postcolonialism has served as ‘a license for ignoring the contemporary actuality of global politics within a capitalist world system.’ Dirlik claims that ‘The word “postcolonial” mystifies both politically and methodologically a situation that represents not the abolition but the reconfiguration of earlier forms of domination.’ Edward Said and Homi Bhabha are taken to task for muddling the waters. Bhabha is targeted by many authors for his influential contribution in the field. Bhabha’s affiliation with the language model leads Benita Parry to the conclusion that there is no knowledge – political or otherwise – outside representation. Though the contributions of postcolonial critiques are acknowledged (pointing to the importance of discourse, representations and language), the contributors, who all share a strong Marxian ethics, cannot adopt their problematic. They criticize postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and identity politics, for their tendency to ignore the centrality of capitalism in the organization of subjectivity, culture, society, politics. But if ‘Area Studies and postcoloniality are historically yoked’ (Harootunian), if ‘identity politics, to which the idea of diversity irresistibly leads, can easily be played into the hands of corporate management’ (Miyoshi), ‘what, then can we hope from postcoloniality?’ (Harootunian).

Not much, it seems, unless ‘postcoloniality might be reconfigured into an act of memoration, rather than just a chronology or critique masquerading exceptionalism and unnamed theories of the social, one that might help us to avoid the confusion of history and memory and restore to each their own order of knowledge and experience’ (Harootunian). It must be said that the authors do not simply criticize; they suggest pedagogical moves, methodological approaches and research questions to escape the impasses of both Area Studies and Postcolonial/Cultural Studies. Their celebration of Frantz Fanon comes to this reader as a surprise. What makes Fanon so attractive to them? Why do they think so highly of his theory? Fanon never spoke of the importance of capitalism (which the editors insist on), his gender politics were questionable, his political choice of an FLN clan could be criticized, his ignorance of the pluri-lingual, pluri-cultural making

of Algerian society could give pause, his project for a 'national culture' was far from being without problematic implications for the future. Is it because Fanon's Frenchness can be rescued whereas other 'French theorists' are too 'postmodern'? Or because he draws the picture of a romantic hero for our postcolonial times (Lacan and Sartre but with racial politics and an untimely death)? Fanon's insights should not mask his serious oversights and if Said and Bhabha's texts must be questioned, we should expect the same rigour with Fanon.

The contributors justly remind us of the politics and economics of knowledge production in academia and of the complicity of Area/International Studies with power. A good majority of my students at Goldsmiths College would benefit from this reminder. Yet it seems that the 'fortress' of Area Studies is coming under attack not only from the Left but from the Right. According to an article by Sara Roy in *London*

Review of Books (1 April 2004), conservative institutions are pushing towards another restructuring of Area Studies. The target of their attack is Middle East Studies, which Martin Kramer, a member of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, accuses of being 'dominated – indeed crippled – by pro-Arab and anti-American sentiment'. There is 'too much attention to historical and cultural subjects that are no use to the state and its national security imperatives'. Following a series of similar reports, we learn that the House of Representatives passed the International Studies in Higher Education Act, HR 3077. One of the recommendations is the establishment of an international higher education advisory board. One of the board's functions, Roy writes, will be to recommend ways 'to improve programmes ... to better reflect the national needs related to homeland security'. We have gone back to the beginning. The task of Area Studies' critics is not done.

Françoise Vergès

Farts and formalization

Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, trans. and ed. Nina Power and Alberto Toscano, Clinamen Press, Manchester, 2003. xxxvi + 164 pp., £40.00 hb., £12.50 pb., 1 903083 26 5 hb., 1 903083 30 3 pb.

In his 1997 book *Very Little... Almost Nothing* Simon Critchley suggests that the 'writings of Samuel Beckett seem to be particularly, perhaps uniquely, resistant to philosophical interpretation', rendering every attempt at philosophical understanding seem either 'to lag behind' or 'to overshoot' the text. Such a view has become something of a self-reflexive platitude in recent Beckett scholarship. However, it has not, apparently lessened the feeling that, as Adorno remarked back in the 1950s, something of 'the criterion of a philosophy whose hour has struck' is that it prove equal to the 'challenge' of Beckett's writings. Indeed, from Adorno to Blanchot to Cavell to Deleuze, postwar philosophy appears to have found such a challenge irresistible. At the same time, the likes of Derrida, for example, while tacitly identifying with such a challenge, have explicitly doubted the possibility of *any* extended 'philosophical' account of Beckett, citing the unavoidable dangers of a 'supposed academic metalanguage'. And given the singular 'idiom' of Beckett's own writing, such concerns are evidently not without justification.

Not, however, it would seem, for Alain Badiou. If Beckett is the 'challenge', then Badiou is quite prepared to accept it head-on, and with a gusto that perhaps only Deleuze has come close to matching among recent readers. Hence, in the current context, everything that

is undeniably bracing and exciting about this book, which brings together translations of four (at times rather repetitive) pieces written between 1992 and 1998. As the editors assert in their useful introduction, by contrast to what can appear to be the 'timidity' and 'trepidation' of contemporary 'deconstructive' approaches – doubting the possibility of *asserting* 'anything at all about Beckett' – Badiou's 'unusually strong reading' is certainly refreshing. Whether, in the end, such 'strength' is quite so much of a virtue as his editors think is, however, rather more questionable.

The central arguments of Badiou's philosophy – resting on an account of the ways in which rare and singular 'evental' truths supposedly 'take place' through a 'subtraction' from already given *doxa*, and persist through the 'fidelity' of a militant subject constituted by that event – will be largely familiar to readers of *Radical Philosophy* by now, and hardly require repetition. At any rate, as both the editors, and Andrew Gibson in his 'Postface', note, part of the undoubted interest that these particular essays possess is the fact that, while many of the expected terms of Badiou's philosophy are here – most clearly in the lengthy argument that Beckett's 'ill said' is best understood as that which 'subtracts' from the 'meaning' of the 'well said' as the 'reiteration of established significations' – there

are equally a number of issues broached in *On Beckett* that are largely absent elsewhere in his philosophy. Most obvious among these is a 'positive characterization of the Other', which emerges through a reading of Beckett's posited overcoming of 'solipsism', in the late works, leading toward 'the pregnant theme of the Two, which opens out onto infinity'; a reading illustrated by some, not always entirely convincing, citations of Beckett's treatment of 'the question of love'. More broadly, this account takes place through a characteristic *formalization* of Beckett's supposed 'writing of the generic', which reduces 'the complexity of experience to a few principal functions' constituting a purified 'axiomatic of humanity as such' which is explicitly Platonist in form.

This is an account of Beckett's oft-remarked minimalism that understands it as engendered, therefore, not through a 'nihilistic' articulation of 'abandoned existence', but through a process of *subtraction* or *lessening* which attests to a fundamentally 'hopeful' exercise in 'measure, exactitude and courage'. The novelty and appeal of such a theorization is evident, particularly in so far as it is set against any 'two-bit, dinner-party vision of despair'. (Though, it should be said, such a target is in itself a rather anachronistic one with regard to the current moment of Beckett studies.) Yet the nature of this distancing of Beckett from sub-existentialist world-views also raises some questions which impact more generally upon Badiou's philosophical project, and, in particular, upon the potential historical 'application' of the key concept of 'subtraction'. For there appears to be a certain ambiguity in Badiou's recent work as regards whether such a concept properly relates to a specifically *modern* (even twentieth-century) procedure or to a formal characteristic of *any* 'event' as that which emerges at the 'edge' of any given situation's 'void'. Unfortunately, this ambiguity is simply passed over here, and the modernism of Beckett's texts – so central to the readings of, for example, Adorno, Cavell or Bersani and Dutoit – is left unaddressed. Such apparent disregard for the historical and social relations which might be immanent to the 'truth-content' of the work is also reflected in the unwillingness to engage critically with the writings of other contemporary critics. One does not need to be a fully paid-up post-structuralist to believe that the editors' (presumably unintentional) reassertion of 1950s' New Critical principles – 'what we are dealing with, quite simply, is Beckett's texts *themselves*, and not their critical reception' – is hardly adequate justification for such a lack.

If the historical character of Beckett's work is

'bracketed' in this sense, nonetheless in another sense the internal historical logic of the work is clearly foregrounded in Badiou's attempt to periodize his oeuvre, displaying a typically post-Althusserian taste for the radical break thesis by positing a caesura around the time of the prose piece *How It Is*. According to this argument, Beckett reaches an impasse with *Texts for Nothing*, caught between 'the neutrality of the grey black of being' and 'the endless torture of the solipsistic *cogito*'. It is this impasse which, Badiou argues, Beckett finally 'comes out' of in 1960, leading to a 'growing importance of the event (which *adds* itself to the grey black of being)' and of the encounter with the Other. Neat as such a narrative may be, I have to say that, for a number of reasons, I find it pretty spurious. It is seemingly proffered on the basis only of an enormously speculative (and selective) reading of the 'late' work. More crucially, the conventional logics of chronological periodization that underlie it are, all too obviously, inadequate to the complex temporalities that mark the dynamic movements of Beckett's own texts.

In a rare interview Beckett once argued: 'Perhaps, like the composer Schoenberg or the painter Kandinsky, I turned toward an abstract language. Unlike them, however, I have tried not to concretize the abstraction – not to give it another formal context.' This implies a rather different reading of the temporal dynamic of 'lateness' in Beckett, and of its relation to the event, more akin perhaps to Adorno's account of Beethoven's 'late style'. For, at the very least, as Gibson acknowledges here, even on Badiou's reading, Beckett's 'fidelity', such as it is, would finally seem to be less to an event that has 'taken place', than to the restless and unending anticipation of an event's future *possibility* which the boring of 'holes' in conventional language might keep alive. In this sense, someone like Schoenberg could, in fact, seem a rather better subject for the kind of detailed account proposed by Badiou, regarding the generic formalization of the twelve-tone row, and serialism's fidelity to its 'truth'. As far as Beckett is concerned, however, the very 'strength' of Badiou's reading may well appear, to some, as reflective of the kind of 'flat-footed' attempt at an inappropriate philosophical mastery that Critchley rightly chides.

No doubt this would not be entirely fair, but it is hard to avoid the impression that this unremittingly serious and unequivocal reading is somewhat deaf to crucial aspects and ambivalences of Beckett's text. This is not of course to say that, in one sense, Beckett shouldn't be taken absolutely 'seriously', yet there is

something, in itself, rather humorous about Badiou's apparent inability to imagine, even for a moment, that any of the passages he so lovingly 'deciphers' might have a *parodic* dimension to them (not least, with respect to their 'philosophical' content). It is certainly tempting – not for the first time – to see Beckett (both 'early' and 'late') getting in a series of pre-emptive strikes against precisely the kinds of formalization so dear to Badiou. This, after all, is an author who, in *Molloy*, devotes a passage to the exhaustive delineation of a day's farting: 'Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour... Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself.' Not the kind of passage that fits easily into chapters entitled 'Love and its Numericality'.

The effects of Badiou's inattention to such moments (as well as his neglect, more generally, of the particular politics of literary form and syntax) are perhaps clearest in his most detailed reading of a specific text – *Worstward Ho* – which is presented as a 'short philosophical treatise' on 'the question of being'. Despite the efforts of the editors in their introduction, the justification for such a purely conceptual account is far from persuasive, particularly as it fails to make evident how this might square with Badiou's broader insistence on the autonomy of 'art' and 'philosophy',

whereby the latter may 'register' but not 'produce' truths. Despite the somewhat literal attempt to locate an event proper in the final pages of *Worstward Ho* – apparently justified by a supposedly Mallarméan 'irruption' marked by the word 'sudden' – Badiou himself seems uncertain, so far as I can tell, whether this piece is to be understood *as* an event or is rather, in some enigmatically 'philosophical' manner, *about* the event and the 'conditions' of its happening.

In Adorno's famous essay on *Endgame*, a good deal rests on the ambivalence of his *trying* to understand Beckett. Perhaps this might be perceived as a sign of 'weakness'. Yet such hesitancy might also be taken to signify a necessary wariness with regard to the philosophical domination of Beckett's difficult texts. For all the insistence on a so-called 'inaesthetics', which would make 'no claim to turn [art] into an object for philosophy', it is hard to shake the feeling that the work of this latest French master is (no doubt against his intentions) destined not to provoke the kind of inventive new readings that Gibson hopes for, but to engender a strangely closed theoretical framework that others will follow. In this sense, a show of strength may not be all it's cracked up to be.

David Cunningham

Boogie woogie

Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore, Continuum, London and New York, 2004. 128 pp., £55.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 8264 6993 0 hb., 0 8264 7299 0 pb.

Stuart Elden, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible*, Continuum, London and New York, 2004. 272 pp., £60.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 0 8264 7002 5 hb., 0 8264 7003 3 pb.

There has been more and more interest in Henri Lefebvre's work of late. With the publication in France in 2002 of his *Méthodologie des Sciences*, written in 1945–6 but subject to Stalinist censure, the heterogeneity of his interests has once again been confirmed. *Rhythmanalysis* brings together Lefebvre's final writing, 'Éléments de rythmanalyse' of 1992, along with two shorter pieces co-authored with his last wife, Catherine Régulier, 'Le projet rythmanalytique' of 1985, and 'Essai de rythmanalyse des villes méditerranéennes' of 1986. *Elements of Rhythmanalysis* is often considered the de facto fourth volume of Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* and it represents the concise culmination of his thought in a synthesis neatly summarized in the English subtitle of this book: space, time and everyday life.

Lefebvre's was a philosophy that began to take on its original character through the French synthesis of Marx and Heidegger, in such discussions as the 1959 roundtable with Kostas Axelos, Jean Beaufret and François Châtelet, entitled 'Karl Marx and Heidegger'. The free exchange of ideas between Axelos and Lefebvre included a revisiting of Heraclitus against the new Eleatics, the Zenos of Structuralism, which remains of great philosophical interest today. There is a direct continuity of thought from Axelos to Deleuze, via thinkers like Gilbert Simondon, and Lefebvre's extrapolations upon time and space are another link. Lefebvre's reading of Nietzsche is a further connection. But for Lefebvre the priorities of perspective were ordered by an ethical imperative: philosophy is a critical conscience; to separate it from human life

amounts to a philosophical abnegation. In opposition to other philosophers of difference, Lefebvre pronounced a new humanism and a new praxis following Marx and Nietzsche.

Lefebvre saw pre-human, cosmic time as cyclical, but, like Gaston Bachelard, he also studied the linear, vertical and instantaneous time of man, the interruptions of practice. The two cannot be separated. The everyday includes both the ordinary and difference in repetition, the dressage of the everyday. Indeed, one can see Lefebvre's entire oeuvre as an exploration of the practical consequences and possibilities resulting from a certain temporal ontology. Moments are studied sociologically, and *Rhythmanalysis* continues this approach.

Now, there is not yet a general theory of rhythms. Entrenched ways of thinking, it has already been stressed, separate time from space, despite the contemporary theories in physics that posit a relation between them. Up until the present, these theories have failed to give a unitary concept that would also enable us to understand diversities (differences).

For Lefebvre, following other philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Bergson, it is through music that a new understanding can be reached; 'by and through rhythm, music becomes worldly [*se mondialisel*]', by returning to the body.

It was from Bachelard that Lefebvre derived the inspiration for his writings on space and time. The concept of rhythmanalysis comes directly from Bachelard's 1936 *The Dialectic of Duration* (trans. Clinamen Press, 2000). Bachelard had himself found this concept in a now seemingly vanished text by the Brazilian philosopher Lucio Alberto Pinheiro Dos Santos. Both Bachelard and Lefebvre develop conceptions of time that allow for different spatial tracings of the vertical, the horizontal and the cyclical, and draw their classical inspirations from a combination of Hegel and Nietzsche. Indeed, it was in Lefebvre's early study of Nietzsche (1939) that he first explored the concept of rhythm, while investigating the concepts of energy and force.

Through an analysis of the fibrous network of social, psychological and vital rhythms, Lefebvre developed a Marxist argument that identified the technological roots of alienation in malformed technical attempts to manipulate a natural genetic temporality. Modern labour disrupts and breaks down natural rhythms. The linear temporalities of industrial production can be contrasted with the cyclical nature of cosmic and biological time. There are clear echoes of Fernand



Braudel in Lefebvre's 'Rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean Cities', in the causal historical significance of cosmic, geological rhythms: 'If it is true that Mediterranean towns are solar towns, one can expect from them a more intense urban life than in lunar towns.' The concept of technocracy is important here. Existing technocrats are distinctly bad ones – in fact, not really technocrats at all. A bad understanding and use of technology results in a catastrophic spatial and temporal antagonism between man and nature, establishing a certain inescapable alienation in everyday life. But a good understanding of technology has infinite potential for life as a work of creation. For technology mediates the production of space. It needs to be placed in symbiosis, 'eurhythmia', with cosmic space and time through the preventative therapy of rhythmanalysis. As Elden puts it: 'Technology should be put at the service of everyday life, of social life rather than being precisely the condition of its suppression and control.' Le Corbusier's urban plans demonstrate this bad technocracy; where everything is given over to circulation, the city is no longer a meeting place. 'There is a danger that through this functionalization the town simply becomes a dormitory.'

Axelos also influenced Lefebvre with his concepts of 'the worldly' and 'planetary thought'. These involve a conceptualization of the world as becoming, but also of the becoming worldly of phenomena. In *Of the State* (1976–8), Lefebvre uses this to describe the transformation from nation-states, in which 'We

already know how the state is becoming world-wide [*se mondialise*] and at the same time opposes the worldwide.' He sees it as both obscuring and illuminating. Once again there is a relation to Heidegger: 'world never is, but worlds', yet it is conceived as an externally actualized resource, something with which thought does not need to harmonize, being treated as *res extensa*, as the 'world-picture'. Spatial thinking needs to be transformed, away from historically determined conceptions of space as territory. For Elden, globalization relies upon this same flawed, Cartesian, territorial ontology.

Autogestion is one of Lefebvre's proposals for an alternative spatial practice, a self-generating political action, technology precipitating the withering away of the state. Lefebvre is not entirely consistent on the subject of technology, but the concept of technique was of particular importance to him as, like many of his contemporaries, he sought a secure philosophical footing between idealism and materialism. But he was wary of reducing the practical problems of politics to pure philosophical problems, as he thought Axelos occasionally did:

His [Axelos's] consideration of the 'problematic of reconciliation' between technique and nature, philosophy and history, thought and society, simply puts the problem of reproduction into parentheses. It leaps over the problem in one bound, going straight from capitalism to the problem of man in the world.

Lefebvre expounds a Heideggerian critique of Nietzsche's meditation on the pre-technical character of nature, without inside or outside, while Axelos elaborates Marx's insight into the extreme possibilities of technique as non-work. For both Axelos and Lefebvre, Marx played an equal role with Nietzsche in the last act of metaphysics.

Lefebvre was extraordinarily prolific and his oeuvre contains numerous works that are often neglected or have yet to be brought into focus by commentators. This is something that Elden's truly compendious *Understanding Henri Lefebvre* helps to correct. For instance, Lefebvre's literary works are often only referred to in passing; Elden connects them up to the immanent direction of his thought. As he notes, 'Lefebvre argues that the history of philosophy can only be written as a chapter in the more general history of culture, ideas and knowledge.' Especially important here is Lefebvre's 1955 book *Rabelais*, as it presents his central concept of 'the festival', which ties into his voluminous work on the rural, the subject of his doctorate. For Lefebvre, both the Commune and '1968' show that 'the festival of the city amplifies rural

traditions of transgression and disorder.' Elden has performed a fine service to Lefebvre scholarship here. His book will help to orient an English-speaking audience to the sophisticated philosophical background of one of the most original calls to revolutionary thought and action of the twentieth century.

Andrew Aitken

Spotless

Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2003. 176 pp., £45.00 hb, £14.95, 0 7456 2488 X hb., 0 7456 2489 8 pb.

It is nearly two decades since *Legislators and Interpreters*, in which Bauman began to sketch his vision of the epochal shift from modernity to post-modernity, and since then he has rehearsed this binary, and the binaries that support it and are consequential on it, in a body of work that vies with Giddens and Žižek in both volume and compulsion to repeat. Of late, this thematic obsessiveness has become allied with an increasingly pared-down prose, so that, like Adorno at his most mannered, Bauman's books have become collections of fragments, welded together into more or less contingent assemblages. Their titles are betrayed by the errant drive of the thought as it circulates around its *idées fixes* before moving on, or merely stopping, always denying the reader the satisfaction of a conclusion or a point.

So it is with *Liquid Love*, presented as concerned with 'the central figure of our contemporary "liquid modern" times', the man or woman with no bonds, or rather the man or woman whose bonds are in perpetual re-creation. For the first two chapters, it is a sort of meditation on what has happened to love and sexuality as the centrifugal forces of late capitalism pull individuals apart and ideologies and consumerism come to model relationships beyond the structures of kinship. As such, it makes the sort of observations that you would expect: relationships, as relationships, as pure connection lacking any other social *raison d'être*, are fragile, prone to imitate the transient connections of consumers with their goods, and often fail to allay the insecurity for which they are offered as remedies. Love (an attentive being-with that eschews an instrumental relation to the other) has given way to desire (desire to incorporate, digest and move on), which threatens to de-substantialize into wish, the

ephemeral connection, invoked by consumer capital, whose very volatility is of the essence. Though love itself is beset by ethical dangers (its will-to-control or its passive self-abnegation), nevertheless the passing of the lifelong bonds of the 'love communion' evokes a hardly disguised nostalgia. Sexuality too loses its transcendent possibilities, the *jouissance* of loving passion attenuating to the mere *pleasure* of purely sexual relationships. Even child-bearing becomes the satisfaction of a commodity appetite. All that is missing is a jeremiad about pornography and masturbation.

What is objectionable is not so much the thesis as its exaggeration and lack of supporting evidence. Taking Weber to a rhetorical limit, Bauman produces descriptions of ideal types based on nothing more substantial than articles in the *Guardian* and the *Observer* colour supplement, buttressed by quotation from writers whose own sociological authority remains unclear: one Volkmar Sigusch writing in the *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* was new to me. The limitation of this theoretical impressionism becomes very quickly apparent, and no amount of Levinas or Rozenzweig as ballast makes it more palatable or plausible.

Halfway through, love drops out of the frame and Bauman moves on to migration and its discontents, a topic that forms the focus of his latest collection *Wasted Lives*. The hinge of this shift is the nature of the city, which has become, as he rightly says, a 'dumping ground ... for globally begotten problems', where local politics has to deal with globally produced contradictions. Here he seems more persuasive: his reflections on 'mixophobia', the attempts to separate off private and public space from these global flows

of difference, are trenchant and are balanced by an awareness of the potential that this urban *mestizaje* has to offer. He is attentive to the delicate business of constructing *modi convivendi* in a situation where the bulk of life will be transacted among those who are strangers, and where these mobile others will always be at risk of becoming the perceived culprits for the trials and tribulations of the less nomadic.

These new ethics of togetherness are forced on us, he claims, as Kant's vision of a single space of humanity has become a reality, and the apparent *terra nullius* to which the nation-state could expel its excess population has vanished. These populations which are surplus to requirements but which are interminably produced by the twin processes of state-nation formation and economic reconfiguration are the symptom of a new global crisis, and the refugee is a harbinger of a new (and contrary to the blurb writer's claim) central figure of the human. The presiding influence of Arendt and Agamben is explicit here, and the refugee takes on a totemic value. Just as the Jew was the first 'to taste and fathom the full incongruity of the assimilation process' of the nation-state, so present-day refugees may have an 'avant-garde' role in 'exploring the taste of *nowhereville* life and the stubborn permanence of transience that may become the habitat of the denizens of the full globalized planet'.

But the political solution to the problem of the refugee can only come with the generation of global institutions adequate to Kant's 'universal unity of mankind', and here Bauman is sensibly pessimistic, if tendentially rapid. The perception of migration as the political and ethical problem of globalization is



acute, if hardly novel, and its philosophical portrait is striking, and strikingly apposite as Little Britain shudders into one of its fits of politically motivated xenophobia. Bauman is sincerely interested in the fate of the migrant and the refugee, but you feel he can't really be bothered with the struggles to find an authentic mode of relating among those who might well be crucial in deciding their destiny.

Philip Derbyshire

Whatever you say I am

Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary*, Blackwell, Oxford and Malden MA, 2003. 182 + xii pp., £50.00 hb., £17.99 pb., 0 631 2184 2 4 hb., 0 631 2184 3 2 pb.

Under the entry for 'artificiality' in *A Derrida Dictionary*, Niall Lucy quotes from Derrida's collaboration with Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*: 'Hegel was right to remind the philosopher of his time to read the papers daily. Today, the same responsibility obliges him to learn how the dailies, the weeklies, the television news programs are *made* and *by whom*.' For today's academic readership (let's not extend the term 'philosopher' too hastily) it is important to question whether the general interest is well served by current processes of publication, although the pressing interrogative here is perhaps not how or by whom, but *why*. Amongst the slew of recent books, it seems hard to uncover a handful that meet even the minimal justificatory criterion of contribution to scholarship. *A Derrida Dictionary* is not one of them. To help it miss the contrasting benchmark of unit sales, let me state clearly: this is a terrible book.

Blackwell's dictionary series, which ranges from Rousseau to Wittgenstein, has included such gems as Howard Caygill's *Kant Dictionary*. Now it is the turn of Derrida, yet a deep shift in purpose has occurred. Admittedly, the prefatory gestures towards the impossibility of giving fixed definitions regarding deconstruction have some substance, yet such caution is undermined by the substitution of a 'series of outlines and interpretations of some of Derrida's key ideas and arguments'. Without the necessary discipline, this subjective slant slips into the kind of glib summaries and constative declarations that deconstruction's engagement with the sign seeks to problematize. Isolated from their patient development these assertions ('what

Derrida says') appear as surds occupying the form of dogmatic authority that deconstruction is supposed to oppose.

Everywhere the mark of haste is apparent, as if the author had decompressed his lecture notes into something resembling syntax. Tellingly, towards the end of the entry on 'trace', Lucy offers a sort of confession: 'It goes without saying that Derrida has a lot more to say about the trace, and a good deal else, than I can say here; and of course it goes without saying that it is not only the constraints of time and space that limit what I'm able to say...' Just what exactly were the constraints imposed? Why should a Derrida dictionary be limited to under two hundred pages? Certainly, the previous books in this series do not all exhibit this brevity. Perhaps it is a sign of the changed conditions in publishing, which also seem to have precipitated a change in projected audience.

The blurb and puff warn of Derrida's 'notoriously difficult' and extensive works for which the reader might need 'points of entry'. But when was a dictionary ever about points of entry rather than authoritative reference? Perhaps once the idea of selling books to today's undergraduates came to the fore. Nothing else can explain the cack-handed decision to explicate Derrida's texts through pop culture references. Introducing the 'event' through reference to Bob Dylan's performance at the Manchester Free Trade Hall in 1966 (and 'messianism' via his *Slow Train Coming*) is at best confusing and at worst wrong-headed. Hidden here is the creeping crisis of modern pedagogy's anti-elitist anamnesis: deconstruction is not difficult, you already



know it all already. Dissemination? Eminem says the same thing: 'I am whatever you say I am/ If I wasn't why would I say I am.' Reader, I kid you not. The dangers in this approach should be manifest, but in his discussion of there being no 'core' to the concept of masculinity (since it covers John Wayne, Mick Jagger and Boy George) Lucy fails to distinguish the specificity of deconstruction from a nominalist or sceptical argument.

The book is replete with such examples. Po-faced high seriousness is not the only reason to reject the attempt to approximate the idea of 'democracy-to-come' through Funkadelic's 'One Nation under a Groove': 'To try to imagine a nation under a "groove", rather than under a government or a constitution, would be to try to think of nationhood differently, as something other than a self-proclaimed territory with the self-appointed "right" to ward off "intruders".' This might escape 'tediousness' and display 'wit' – Caputo's and Kamuf's puffs respectively – but it is nothing other than 'mollifying exegesis' masquerading as humour. The performance of mastery designed to enthuse students is transmogrified into charlatanry when moved from the lecture hall into print.

So why not simply write another *Introduction to...*? Does the 'dictionary' tag give it a veneer that the others don't have? Given the worries about the dictionary idea, why not simply call it an encyclopaedia instead? Because then its abject failure would be too obvious. Lucy tells us that he is going to discuss Derrida within the 'widest possible context of Continental thought'. So let's seek out information on Derrida's predecessors: there is no entry for Husserl, no entry for Hegel, no *reference* to Kierkegaard, to Augustine. Context? No references to Althusser, Lacan, Barthes, Foucault, Habermas. There is a single nod to Levinas regarding the paternity of the term 'trace' but, given Derrida's engagement, to have no separate entry seems a gross dereliction. Structuralism has to make do with a very brief discussion of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss; grammatology is conflated with deconstruction; logocentrism is treated without concern for the problem of epochal history thus generated. The latter oversight is exacerbated by the discussion of Heidegger solely in terms of 'gathering' where Lucy notes that deconstruction 'owes a lot to Heidegger' without making any effort to discuss that influence – the entry comprises barely more than a page.

Justice might be done to this book simply by noting that there are more references to John Caputo than to Hegel and Husserl combined. There is no entry for: philosophy, phenomenology, GREPH. No reference to

Glas, citation, graft, binaries... Furthermore, it seems inconsistent to present this as a 'point of entry' and to ignore the various 'affairs' and 'controversies': the only residue of this history is the intermittent apologetic tone with respect to relativism and Derrida's distance from it.

It would be charitable to give Lucy the benefit of the doubt, defer to his other publications and mark this down as a potboiler produced to meet contractual obligations. But the errors and oversights suggest that he has no facility with the material and that Lucy could not have written a better book – the lacunae are perhaps rather a sign of a need to rush over his own difficulties. A couple of examples: J.L. Austin is described as an American philosopher; Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' is confused with the much earlier 'Critique of Violence'. These faults are inexcusable. Given the still polarized academic environment, the onus is on books on Derrida to be as well-written as possible. Instead this book provides further ammunition for those who lump him under the catch-all of trendy, French, slapdash 'postmodernism'. The imperatives of this kind of publishing are incompatible with the demands of academic politics today.

Andrew McGettigan

Wicked?

Lance Morrow, *Evil: An Investigation*, Basic Books, New York, 2003, 276 pp., £18.50 hb., 0 465 04754 8.

Lance Morrow is primarily a journalist, and *Evil: An Investigation* is written with journalistic flair, in short snappy phrases, filled with stories, reports and anecdotes. The thirty-four chapters are short essays, some almost self-contained, and there is little reference to theories, no footnotes, no bibliography, nothing to prevent the reader from travelling freely through a landscape filled with despair and horror, and, occasionally, hope.

On the other hand, the reader is challenged to piece together the overall narrative, to detect Morrow's metaphysics of evil – because there is one here, in fragments throughout the reports and speculations. Gradually, as you read the text, you build a theory of what evil is in the contemporary world. And this is Morrow's starting point and ending – that evil *does* exist. He warns against using the word too glibly, as opportunistic politicians are prone to do in their efforts

to mobilize fear and panic, but it is 'fatuous to deny the existence of evil.... The question is not whether evil exists, but how it exists, how it works.'

This metaphysics is concealed, however, not only because it is in fragments, but also because it is expressed through metaphor and imagery. 'I like the image of evil as a current that passes through the world, as it has, in one way or another, from the beginning, a sort of invisible electromagnetic flow.' Elsewhere evil is, after Hannah Arendt, like a fungus on the surface of the world, and in another place – 'I like to imagine evil sometimes as a kind of gas, toxic and possibly undetectable, making its way through the world, slithering upon the currents of air.'

The challenge for the theorist of evil is whether there is a genuine metaphysics here, hidden behind the colourful imagery, or whether metaphor is all there is. The descriptions of evil as electromagnetic current or toxic gas are striking, but are they profound? Do they tell us anything about the nature of evil?

But then Morrow makes it clear that his project is not to explain, because 'it is ultimately not possible to understand evil'. It is only possible to describe it, either through the harrowing details of inhumanity or through imagery, and the book is filled with both. Evil is beyond explanation, but this is not necessarily a disadvantage, says Morrow, because perhaps it should not be explained, 'since explanation is a slippery slope that tends to tilt towards acceptance'. In that case the only moral stance is to say: 'I refuse to understand evil, I refuse to grant it the dispensation of comprehending analysis and sympathy.'

I detect three levels to Morrow's metaphysics. The first is at the level of motivation, a pessimistic view of human nature that sees a capacity for motiveless malignity for which there is all too much historical evidence. The second level is also pessimistic, warning that evil has become globalized and democratized through technology, so that vast human suffering can be caused by anybody who has a mind to it. This is 'a new metaphysics that, by empowering individual zealots or agitated tribes with unappeasable grievances, makes the world unstable and dangerous in radically new ways'. This globalization of evil means that we live in 'a new world characterized by the chronic anxiety of imminent surprise'.

But at the third level there is hope. Here Morrow is at his most cosmological, speculating that good and evil are necessary, balancing components of the world, and that if all evil were removed the human story would be ended. Evil is 'one necessary half of a cosmic exchange', and without it 'history ceases'.

Here there are hints of a theodicy that can only make sense of evil by this appeal to balance, and this must be connected with his conviction that evil should not be understood. 'Evil by definition defies understanding.' We should not, in the end, delve too deeply into God's purposes.

Morrow's contention that evil cannot, should not, be understood, goes some way to explaining why his book did not help me towards an understanding of it. But there are other reasons for this failure. The short, snappy, journalistic style does not sustain a narrative; what we have is a set of rather disconnected, repetitive and sometimes contradictory essays, asking the same questions over and over again. This is not so much an investigation as a speculation.

But Morrow does reinforce a suspicion that has been growing the more I have thought about the concept of evil: that it is not a philosophical concept at all, nor even a theological one. Its primary place is not in philosophy or theology, but in mythology. It is a narrative device. Morrow seems to think something like this. 'Evil is always a story. Evil is the indispensable stuff of stories.' His conclusion is that this does not detract from the reality of evil. 'The proof of the existence of evil is in the stories about evil. More accurately, more to the point: The reality of evil is in the stories. And no where else.'

My own view is that evil is a concept that can only be part of a mythology about the human condition. It is a narrative device which has its traditional role in ancient mythologies, and only through that role does it enter religion, where religion takes the form of narrative myth. Christianity that does not take this form – of the struggle between Satan and Christ – has as much difficulty with the concept of evil as secular philosophy. This narrative function means that the concept has an expansive role to play in all literary forms, and in other patterns of thought that take a narrative form, such as history.

Mythologies, of course, have a point, and the concept of evil has a point, perhaps the one Morrow identifies as marking out a boundary for humanity beyond which lies that disturbing and baffling aspect of us, our inhumanity. 'To use the word "evil" is to draw a line. The word "evil", I think, is necessary to the human community, because it indicates what we collectively will not tolerate.' But then all boundaries are fabricated in the imagination, and if evil is such boundary, then it too is a fabrication, and the border between humanity and inhumanity is revealed as fragile, vulnerable and, most alarming of all, fictional.

Philip Cole

Still waiting

Peter Fenves, *Late Kant: Towards Another Law of the Earth*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003. 240 pp., £60.00 hb., £18.99 pb., 0 415 24680 6 hb., 0 415 24681 4 pb.

The late Kant was a rare spectacle during his lifetime, even if his notorious punctuality was a case of mistaken identity. The obsessive ‘Man of the Clock’ who featured in his contemporary T.G. Hippel’s play was not modelled on Kant but on his friend Joseph Green – Kant was probably the original protesting and unpunctual ‘magister’ of the same play. Nevertheless, Kant with age grew increasingly concerned with philosophical punctuality: his response to Eberhard’s Leibnizian critique of his work consisted in showing that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was not late, not made superfluous by an earlier philosophy.

The most severe case of philosophical delay to afflict Kant concerned the work that its author himself considered ‘his most important work’ or his ‘masterpiece’, now known as the *Opus Postumum*. This definitively late work – written by the late Kant – still remains untimely for many Kantians. The text has been subjected to an extraordinary campaign of exclusion, extending as far as to question Kant’s judgement or even sanity while writing it. The delays in its publication and reception ensure that this text remains in many respects outside of the canon of Kant’s writings. With a few notable and honourable exceptions, the full interpretation of the late Kant remains neglected by Kant scholarship.

In the context of this delayed reception of the late Kant, Peter Fenves’ book is genuinely perplexing. The premiss of Fenves’ reading – the other ‘law of the earth’ – is supplied by the *Opus Postumum*. The passage ‘human beings, as rational beings, exist for the sake of other human beings of a different species (race)’ that guides the reading is drawn from the *Opus Postumum* and readers might justly expect this to be the focus of the reading. Yet, although the book contains some interestingly inflected reflections on Kant’s concept of race and the ‘law of the earth’, it systematically avoids extended discussion of the *Opus Postumum*. Not until the end of the final chapter, ‘Revolution in the Air’, is there any elaborated discussion of this text, and even here it is an episodic, partial and by no means full or considered account of the ‘late Kant’.

Much of Fenves’ discussion is dedicated to the essays of the first half of the 1790s, these being the occasion of some subtle and even entertaining read-

ings. Yet the question of the relationship of these texts to the late Kant of the second half of the 1790s remains unasked. Either these texts prepare the way for the statement of the new law of the earth in the *Opus Postumum* – in which case their anticipations should be examined – or the latter text is considered to be a new departure, which surely qualifies it to be genuine ‘late Kant’.

Fenves’ book is thus an extremely perplexing performance. Is it a late, symptomatic repetition of the exclusion of the *Opus Postumum*, the ironic and spectacular staging of the same exclusionary gesture? The rigour of its exclusion and the hints towards the absent text suggest so – indeed, would point to a deep hermeneutic at play in this reading. Perhaps it is an exercise in Kantian negative theology; perhaps the ‘towards’ of the subtitle should alert readers to the problem of an impossible transition essayed by the *Opus Postumum*. Perhaps it even evokes a Kantian messianism, the Kant still to come? Unfortunately, and for whatever motive, Fenves’ book leaves us still waiting for the late Kant.

Howard Caygill

Deleuziana

Gilles Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous: Textes et entretiens 1975–1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, Minuit, Paris, 2003. 2 7073 1834 5.

During the past two years, readers of works by Gilles Deleuze in both French and English have seen some of his more inaccessible texts become available. In 2002, the first volume, *L’Île déserte et autres textes*, was edited by David Lapoujade (reviewed in *RP* 116). Including essays, prefaces, interviews, and other pieces from 1953 to 1974, the volume was celebrated in a special issue of *Magazine littéraire* (no. 406, February 2002) under the title ‘The Deleuze Effect’, with a broad review of the significance of his work (see www.langlab.wayne.edu/CStivale/D-G/EffetD/EffetD-TOC.html). Now, almost simultaneously, two more volumes have been released for Deleuzian degustation: the translation of the first volume, as *Desert Islands and Other Texts* (MIT Press, 2004) and the second volume in French, *Deux régimes de fous*, with sixty-two texts from the period 1975–95.

The latest volume resembles the first in terms of the kinds of writing that Deleuze undertook: the many essays in journals and edited volumes, prefaces

(formal and in letters) to works by different friends, previously uncollected interviews, two transcriptions of conference notes, and even the copy of a handout by Deleuze from a 1978 conference at IRCAM (on audible and non-audible forces with reference to Pierre Boulez). Another genre is the prefaces to Deleuze's own works, now finally translated here into French from English (seven texts) and Italian (two texts), to which many non-French speakers have, ironically, been privy for quite some time. There are also two previously untranslated letters to Kuniichi Uno (Deleuze's Japanese translator), originally published in Japanese journals, and an open letter on behalf of Toni Negri addressed to his judges (*La Repubblica*, 1979).

The Negri letter is part of the largest genre of texts in the volume, those in the cultural and general press and/or of a political nature. In the former group, one finds Deleuze's 1977 intervention against the *nouveaux philosophes*, the essay 'Desire and Pleasure' (1994, addressed originally to Foucault in 1977), a brief notice on Pierre Fédida's book *L'Absence* (*Le Monde* 1978), and the homage to François Châtelet (*Libération*, 1985). In the latter group is Deleuze's brief essay, 'Le juif riche', protesting the censorship of a film by Daniel Schmid, *L'Ombre des anges* (*Le Monde*, 1977); a political text co-written with Guattari protesting the request for extradition of Klaus Croissant, lawyer for certain members of the Baader–Meinhof group (*Le Monde*, 1977); another statement in support of Negri (*Le Matin de Paris*, 1979); an essay (co-written with Guattari) explicating their vision of the legacy of May '68; and three statements of protest, one against

the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon (*Le Monde*, 1978), another against the first Intifada (in the Arab journal *Al-Karmel*, 1988), and a third against the United States' invasion of Iraq in the first Gulf War, co-written with René Scherer. I should also add to this group two interviews of political import, one on Palestine (1982), another on pacifism today (1983), and his 1983 essay 'Grandeur de Yasser Arafat'.

What strikes me above all is the extraordinary expression of friendship revealed in the majority of texts in this volume. Besides the prefaces and letters that support his friends in various ways, Deleuze wrote extensively and generously *about* his friends and their work. Four such texts stand out: 'Sur les principaux concepts de Michel Foucault' (On Foucault's Principal Concepts) is a set of notes from 1984 in preparation for Deleuze's 1985–86 course at Saint-Denis that resulted in the 1986 book *Foucault*. At the time, Deleuze had already been working on Leibniz in his seminar for several years, and his essay 'Les plages d'immanence' (The Shores of Immanence) is homage to Deleuze's teacher and friend Maurice de Gandillac as well as a taste of things to come in *Le Pli. Leibniz et le baroque*. Finally, a pair of texts at the end of the volume pay homage to Félix Guattari. One is from *Le Nouvel Observateur* in which Deleuze and Guattari speak jointly with Didier Eribon about their vision of philosophy in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* The other text, 'Pour Félix', appeared in the journal of schizoanalysis *Chimères* shortly after Guattari's death in 1992. It is a tribute to the works that Guattari authored on his own.

Charles J. Stivale

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The unmaking of a treaty

The convention on biological diversity

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), formulated in 1992, was a toughly negotiated international treaty. Although negotiated in the global political ambience of the new unipolar world order and the first, unopposed Western victory in Iraq, the Southern negotiators displayed unusual unity and negotiation skills. The result was a fairly balanced treaty that accommodates the legitimate interests of both the South and North. But perhaps that is all that can be said of the Convention. More than a decade after its entry into force, its achievements remain volumes of repetitive documents, endless surrealistically named committees and fissiparous meetings. While the CBD process has indulged in its own virtual world, in the real one biopiracy remains unabated.

The proceedings of the recent seventh meeting of the Conference of Parties (CoP) do not leave room for much hope. The Kuala Lumpur meeting, in fact, marked another retrogressive step in terms of enforcement. The Convention unequivocally recognizes national sovereign rights over biodiversity; requires prior, informed consent for access to biodiversity; and stipulates that such access should be based on mutually agreed terms. CBD also stipulates that any commercial benefit derived from the use of biodiversity should be equitably shared with the providing country. CBD has thus made biopiracy an international offence and set the fundamental legal framework for providing access to biodiversity and benefit sharing. However, these hard-negotiated provisions of the Convention have been ingeniously undermined by the North, skilfully sidestepped by the Convention Secretariat, and blissfully ignored by the Southern Parties. As a result, species after species has been misappropriated from the bio-rich South, worked on and patented, in obvious violation of the treaty.

A centrepiece of the Kuala Lumpur meeting is the decision to develop an 'international regime' for access to biodiversity and benefit sharing. Such a decision has been the culmination of a lengthy process initiated at the third Conference of Parties. While the basis for access and benefit-sharing is clearly laid out in the Convention, this new exercise will only help Parties from the developed countries to circumvent the legally binding requirements for benefit-sharing as provided in the Convention, apart from providing an excuse for continued inaction on this count. Developing countries have, in fact, been tricked into asking for an international regime, while they should actually have been asking the CoP to review the implementation (or lack of it) of the relevant articles on Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS), especially Article 15.7. By agreeing to negotiate the international regime, developed countries hope to reopen issues that have already been settled in the Convention. For instance, they already object to calling the proposed regime a 'legally binding' one, while the Convention has already provided the legally binding provisions for ABS.

There has been an abysmal weakening of the negotiating position of the developing countries. This is especially disappointing when one considers the unusual strength maintained by developing countries in the CBD formulation negotiations. In retrospect, it was this strength that enabled the developing countries to reject totally the articles drafted by IUCN (The World Conservation Union) and their underlying notions such as states being simply 'guardians or custodians' of biodiversity (and not owners), payment of a levy to a proposed international fund for biodiversity-use within their territory, placing the principal emphasis on access to biodiversity, and so on. In its clamouring for a convention on biodiversity in the late 1980s, the key objective of the USA was to legalize free and open access to biodiversity of the Southern countries before they instituted protective measures. It was indeed a remarkable achievement of the Southern negotiators that they were able to discard the IUCN draft articles

and the notions contained therein that formed the broad Western negotiation position. It was this North–South balance of the CBD that prompted the USA, the original initiator of the convention proposal, to boycott the treaty.

Yet such unity and efficiency have withered once the treaty has come into force. Developing countries have since remained largely reactive and at best defensive. At Kuala Lumpur the G77 arrangement was not at all effective, due in part to the late decision on its chair. The half-minded Like Minded Megadiverse Countries did not have any significant technical support. The regional group meetings of Asia and Africa were largely composed of monologues.

The Conference has adopted new programmes of work on protected areas, mountain biodiversity and technology transfer. The protected areas programme is a means to achieve the 2010 target of significantly reducing the loss of biodiversity, set by the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Although the roles of indigenous and local communities are factored in, there was no departure from the exclusionary doctrine of protected areas. While the programme on technology transfer seeks to promote ways to enable the transfer of appropriate technologies to developing countries, the debate on the subject did not address the issue of how the Parties have complied with the Convention.

The West has never been comfortable with CBD's recognition of national sovereign rights over biodiversity. In a panel discussion on the sidelines of the CoP, I was surprised to hear the former Chilean ambassador Vincent Sanchez observe that the sovereignty issue had 'suddenly cropped up' in the negotiations. One wonders as to when it was that the resources, and for that matter anything else, within the territory of a nation were regarded as a global resource in a supposedly post-colonial world. The remark was suitably answered by Ambassador Ting Wen Lian, the 'dragon lady' of Malaysia, who had been the vanguard of the South in the Convention formulation negotiations.

At least for some, the global resource argument has been the result of confusing biodiversity with the subject of a prolonged debate within the parlance of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The subject there was the genetic resources appropriated from the South and held in the seed/gene banks in the North. Within the FAO fora the South took the lenient position of regarding these translocated genetic resources as a global resource, while the North opposed access for the South to these resources. And these resources remain untouchable to CBD too by having denied retrospective effect of CBD (Article 15.3). The CBD's sovereignty provision is simple: a country owns biodiversity within its territory. The indigenous communities have come a long way in playing a significant role in the CBD process. They have turned out in fairly good numbers and have been reasonably well organized. However, I was disappointed to see a small segment of indigenous groups being influenced by fund-wielding Western agencies in shaping their positions.

Emil Salim, who chaired the UN preparatory for the Johannesburg Summit, asked his colleagues on the podium, in desperation, at the adjournment of an inconclusive session during the critical final meeting of the committee, 'What shall we do with the US?' (The saintly Salim had forgotten to switch his microphone off and the next day NGO representatives appeared at the meeting venue wearing T-shirts printed with the quotation.) How could CBD achieve the 2010 target of substantially reducing the loss of biodiversity without bringing the country with the largest number of endangered reptilian, amphibian and fish species in the world into its ambit? Nobody has raised the issue of bringing the USA to accede to the Convention, not even the Ministerial Declaration which calls on all countries to accede to the Biosafety Protocol. It may be that delegates were not entirely unhappy not having the intimidating voice of the USA in the negotiation halls. The United States can be brought into the fold of the treaty only if a forthcoming Conference of Parties decides not to provide access to biodiversity for non-Parties.

CBD is a fair international legal mechanism available for the sustainable management of biodiversity, but its implementation depends on the strength that the countries of the South can show in future negotiations, without forgetting their own responsibilities.

S. Faizi

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