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COMMENTARY

After Iraq: Vulnerable Imperial Stasis

Neil Smith 2

ARTICLES

Agonized Liberalism: The Liberal Theory of William E. Connolly

Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo 8

The Reproach of Abstraction

Peter Osborne 21

Karatani's Marxian Parallax

Harry Harootunian 29

REVIEWS

Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-technology and the Mutations
of Desire*

Mario Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic: Philosophies of Desire in
the Modern World*

Stella Sandford 35

Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*
Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German
Romanticism*

Stewart Martin 40

David M. Kaplan, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*
Judith Wajcman, *Technofeminism*

Megan Stern 44

Lars Iyer, *Blanchot's Communism: Art, Philosophy and the Political*

David Cunningham 48

Hugh P. McDonald, *John Dewey and Environmental Philosophy*

Alison Stone 50

NEWS

It Could Have Been Worse: Walter Benjamin as Opera

Esther Leslie 52

Il Profeta? Antonio Negri in London

Stewart Martin 56

LETTERS

Where Does Meaning Get Its Fix? Response to Malik and Reply

Howard Feather/Rachel Malik 58

After Iraq

Vulnerable imperial stasis

Neil Smith

I dread our being too much dreaded.

Edmund Burke

At the end of the twentieth century the American ascendancy appeared almost inexorable. Despite personal scandal and impeachment hearings, a seemingly unassailable Bill Clinton led a global neoliberalism that was methodically sweeping all other contenders aside. At home he pursued a dismantling of welfare that none of his predecessors could even have contemplated, and the domestic economy was recovering. Globally, the Kyoto environmental protocol had been signed, agreement on the International Criminal Court (ICC) seemed assured, and a breathtakingly comprehensive Multilateral Investment Agreement (MIA) was in the works. In Israel, the ‘moderate’ Ehud Barak was elected, giving hope of a renewed US-brokered settlement with the globally humiliated Palestinians. East Timor gained long-sought independence. Peace was not exactly universal – Iraq was subject to constant low-intensity bombing, Afghanistan and Sudan were attacked a year earlier, NATO planes were bombing Serb forces in Kosovo, and alienated youths were gunning down their classmates in Columbine, Colorado. There was the extraordinary anti-globalization protest in Seattle. And fear of the ‘millennium bug’. But in retrospect, the mood was upbeat and in 1999 the future looked pretty rosy for an American-led neoliberalism. Even as late as 2001, the USA drew overwhelming global sympathy when nearly three thousand people perished in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. German leader Gerhard Schröder and the French newspaper *Le Monde* declared in unison: ‘We are all Americans now.’

A couple of years of global boorishness can make a lot of difference. The Bush administration jettisoned Kyoto, the MIA was defeated in the face of global opposition, the ICC was rejected as a threat to US imperial prerogatives, and, with icons of American capitalism especially in its sights, a vibrant anti-globalization movement burgeoned around the world, morphing into an anti-war movement. Chaotic impasse in Afghanistan, perpetrator Osama bin Laden never brought to justice, flame-out in a relinquished Iraq, and grotesque revelations about US and British torture of Iraqis have completed the circle. The furtive handover of power to new Iraqi leaders in June 2004 was conducted at 2 a.m. Washington time with barely a dozen officials present: ‘Behind silver miles of new razor wire, high concrete barriers stronger than most medieval fortifications’, wrote the *Guardian* (29 June 2004), ‘behind sandbags, five security checks, US armoured vehicles, US armoured soldiers, special forces of various countries and private security guards, behind secrecy and a fear of killing ... an American bureaucrat handed a piece of paper to an Iraqi judge, jumped on a helicopter and left the country.’

Rushed forward by two days to dodge the prospect of violent disruption, and a total surprise even to the majority of the world's press – the few allowed to witness the note-passing were prevented from communicating its details by cellphone – the paternalistic return of Iraqi sovereignty to a new American-sponsored administration was a global fizzle. 'Full sovereignty' was ensured by total US military control as Iraq administrator L. Paul Bremer III fled back to Washington, tail tightly lodged between his legs. The sum of progress in Iraq since the March 2003 invasion might be calculated as follows: some 13,000 to 15,000 lives were lost, including nearly 1,000 US troops, the economy of Iraq was destroyed, and an international insurrection was sparked, while on the positive side one CIA client – Saddam Hussein – was replaced by another – new Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi.

The rise of the Neo-cons

It is widely argued that the new bellicosity of the United States is due to the rise of the neo-conservatives – people such as Dick Cheney (Bush's vice-president), Donald Rumsfeld (secretary of defense), Paul Wolfowitz (assistant secretary of defense) and many others, associated with the 'Project for a New American Century' (PNAC – see, *inter alia*, www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm). Their vision of US global power represents a continuity with an imagined past in which the United States was established as a beacon of universal good and right, its exercise of power blessed with predetermined philosophical and political justification and authority. For the Neo-cons, France is a failed eighteenth-century promise and America *is* the Enlightenment, however much a sceptical world fails to follow. The *new* American century will be like the old one except better: complete, a pure crystallization of legitimate force against recalcitrants. The mistakes of the past will be corrected, power will be unself-consciously deployed, America's imperial role as world policeman will be accepted with honour and pride rather than embarrassed half-heartedness. Global power is embraced.

Yet the Neo-con vision also thrives on a sense of discontinuity already implicit in this story: the delusions of the past, unambitious neo-liberal incrementalism and global compromise, a certain penchant for reconciling global conflicts diplomatically rather than militarily – all are eschewed in this unbridled ambition for a forceful American globalism. Might, again, makes right. The liberal internationalism of the 1990s is replaced by a much flintier nationalism; a willingness to work through international agreements, treaties, institutions and protocols is replaced by an authoritarian unilateralism.

Does this apparent discontinuity, from Clinton's slick global magnanimity to the sullen churlishness of George W. Bush – from an embracing neoliberalism to a military neoconservatism, from world economic treaties to Homeland Security – amount to a 'new imperialism'? The novelty of the moment, it has been suggested, lies precisely in the ascent of neo-conservatism, the final blossoming of a four-decade quest by both opponents of 1960s' radicalism and those whom it disillusioned. It also depends on the victory of what has been called the 'territorial' logic of power over the 'capitalist' logic of power.¹ In contradiction to the geo-economic calculations of the Clinton administration, neo-conservatives are seen to focus on the geopolitical: national borders, failed states, oil, war on Afghanistan and Iraq, the axis of evil.

These kinds of shifts certainly mark the turn of the twenty-first century and they have a clear class dimension. An old socialist saw has it that bourgeois democracy is a system whereby every four years the working class gets to vote for someone from the ruling class. The right wing in the USA may have despised Bill Clinton as an Arkansas social climber – not to the ruling class born – but his administration nonetheless rooted itself in the bluest blood of financial capital, Wall Street. More than any other administration in recent history, it gave pure expression to that branch

of capital which more than any other has had quintessentially global interests. The Clinton Treasury Department under Robert Rubin enjoyed unprecedented influence in this period and arguably represented the most powerful cabinet seat. In its geographical fluidity, finance capital takes the global as its appropriate scale of operation. A certain homology pertained, in other words, between the class basis of Clinton's power and a global neoliberalism that sought to establish, deregulate and open up financial as well as commodity markets.

By contrast, the social basis of Bush–Cheney power lay in a quite different fraction of the ruling class. The list of companies benighted for the multi-billion-dollar publicly funded privatization of Iraq – including but not restricted to Dick Cheney's Halliburton and Bechtel – or the list of companies meeting with Cheney to design a new corporate energy sector in the USA suggests the class shift that occurred with the accession of that administration. The latter's social power pivots on the nexus between energy and the military, rooted not in financial capital but in corporate capital devoted to the production of oil, energy equipment, armaments, aeronautics, military hardware and the like. Its first Treasury secretary, Paul O'Neill, came not from the financial sector but from the aluminium, mining, manufacturing and energy corporation Alcoa, but even he was treated with disdain by the Bush administration and soon forced to resign from a cabinet post, relegated, in favour of the Defense Department, to the political margins.² Meanwhile, back in Iraq, the war that was advertised ahead of time as a 'turkey-shoot' became a deadly quagmire. Only for the US companies supplying the war, flooding the country with highly-paid consultants, building a destroyed economy anew in the image of American corporatism, was this a turkey-shoot. A country is a terrible thing to waste.

There are of course many linkages between the financial and more productive/corporate wings of the capitalist class, between Wall Street and Houston or Los Angeles, or for that matter the City of London. Wall Street and London are dependent on productive corporations for the profits they invest, while corporate producers need Wall Street to float their stocks, issue credit, bankroll corporate takeovers, and so forth. Densely interlocking directorates also weave these sectors together. And yet for all their connections the pursuit of industrial profit involves different kinds of calculations from the pursuit of interest on capital lent. And so it is not surprising that administrations whose power is rooted in different factions of the capitalist class wield global power and express their global ambitions somewhat differently.

As theorists from Marx to Schumpeter, Kondratieff to Kuznets, have argued, capitalist expansion is highly cyclical. For Giovanni Arrighi, these 'systemic cycles' exhibit a clear geo-historical pattern. Cycles of economic expansion built on the production of commodities – material and immaterial – gradually morph into economies where the greatest concentration of paper profit comes from the financial sector. The reasons for this are not especially mysterious. Long cycles of investment in the productive sectors of an economy heighten competition and lead eventually to flattened profit rates. To the extent that they are successful in the global market, national economies have larger and larger quantities of capital in search of investment possibilities, and the tendency is to seek more and more profit by financial rather than productive means, by simply lending to others rather than investing it oneself. Interest on lent capital seems increasingly attractive compared with the riskiness of industrial profit. Arrighi observes this movement in prior historical periods, most recently at the end of the nineteenth century when the economies of Britain, France, the United States and elsewhere experienced an extraordinary shift of power away from industrial capital towards finance capital. The era of the robber barons was supplanted by the power of the House of Morgan, the Rothschilds and others. Such a dramatic centralization of financial power in these economies after the 1890s was momentary, however, and would not



be repeated until nearly a century later. Moreover, and more ominously in the present context, the rise of financial power generally also witnessed a consolidation of financial power in Britain vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Britain became lender to the world in this period, a rentier state, but beneath the appearance of such vast global power it soon became obvious that financial hegemony marked the zenith of this imperialism. The sun began to set on the British Empire. As one famously critical commentator put it at the time, a 'rentier state is a state of parasitic, decaying capitalism'.³ The centralization of financial capital in the United States after the 1980s – the ascendancy of Wall Street as the aortae of global capital flow – has the same hallmark, as the economy is sustained only by courtesy of unprecedented levels of foreign capital flowing into the US economy.

After 2001 it looked as though the new imperialism may have muscled Wall Street power aside in favour of Pentagon pugilism, Clintonian neoliberalism in favour of neo-conservative geopolitics. But the Bush reversion to a global geopolitical calculus and the rise of the Neo-cons always had echoes of the past more than the future. First, the blunt geography of predation practised after 2001 by the US administration, with Tony Blair in supporting role, should be seen as a sign of weakness rather than strength. A truly hegemonic power does not have to unsheath its sword, especially against smaller foes. There is no question but that the Bush administration attacked Afghanistan and Iraq because it had the power and it could. The world may never have seen such widespread and total military dominance by a single power, and the drumbeat of war against such places was all the more pathetic for their impoverishment. Even more so when it became clear that the ability to use such awesome military power effectively, to finance it, to win global and domestic support for the effort, and to keep the social economy intact, seemed beyond Washington's ability. The commitment of hundreds of billions of dollars, a quarter of a million troops, and the betting of global credibility in an ill-conceived and eventually disastrous Iraqi war drags on in military and political failure.

Second, for all the strained justifications of these adventures as part of the so-called war on terrorism, despite the failure to find any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq or to document any connection between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and al-Qaeda, the rationale for war lay elsewhere. Many on the Left have seen the Iraq invasion as a war for that country's oil, and others have raised the question of oil and gas pipelines from southern Asia across Afghanistan as part of the geopolitical calculation for these wars. Noting the class basis of the Bush–Cheney wing of the US ruling class, one can also raise the question of US control over future oil sources, especially vis-à-vis European and Chinese power in the world market. There is no question that a deep economic rationale weaves through whatever public justifications have been manufactured for war in Iraq, and that oil plays a key role. But this does not translate into a dramatically new imperialism. The military concern for oil in the Middle East is matched by demands among the same Neo-cons that businesses around the world adopt US accounting systems and obey US rules of financial exchange, and by an aggressive diplomatic effort to bend World Trade Organization rules in favour of US steelmakers, cotton growers, biotechnology firms, and intellectual and cultural propertyholders. At best, in its nakedness, this renewed imperialism might be conceived as the culmination of a long-term US gambit for global power – the ugly endgame of globalization.⁷ That ambition only repeats in modern form the global Monroe Doctrine anticipated by Woodrow Wilson in 1919 or the New World Order envisaged by Roosevelt at the end of World War II. By the same token, and over the longer term, it suggests more of a continuity between the Clinton and Bush administrations than a discontinuity. Whatever the vicious battles between these camps, neo-conservatism and neoliberalism may at best represent tactical rather than strategic differences on the US Right, two sides of the same world-historical coin. The inability of John Kerry to differentiate himself adequately from George W. Bush on Iraq suggests that a Democratic administration would hardly follow a dramatically different path.

Superimperialism?

So why is American neo-conservatism now going down in flames? The Iraq war ought to have been their crowning victory. In 2003 'Washington was at the feet of the neo-conservatives who had been plotting and propagandizing for an invasion for years', reports conservative Patrick Buchanan, but within months they were in disarray. The conservative movement split on the eve of war as a powerful group of more traditional 'paleo' conservatives denounced the adventurism of Iraq, and conservatives began calling conservatives unpatriotic, ignorant, liberal! According to one bitter participant, an ex-columnist for Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post*:

Some [Middle Eastern] hatred has been turned – should we be surprised? – into an anti-American terror. Now, as it prepares to occupy Iraq against the will of much of the Middle East while facing a rejuvenated al-Qaeda, America has fewer real friends and more ill-wishers than ever in its history. This is in considerable part the 'accomplishment' of America's neocons, the fruit of the power they have achieved in the conservative movement and the influence they wield with an inexperienced and simple president. It will take years to undo the damage they have done.⁴

The Iraq war was the Neo-cons' war, a Neo-con wet dream since 1991 when Bush Sr., who has never endorsed his son's war, failed to go for the throat. Marines sped to Baghdad; and Syria, Iran ('real men go to Tehran', said one PNACer) and North Korea (just to prove we aren't racist...) were meant to follow. But instead of their Camelot, Iraq quickly became the Neo-con Waterloo, and its dramatic and grizzly failure left them publicly indicted. The glint in their imperial eyes has been reabsorbed within the momentum of a neoliberalism that has also run out of steam and that does not have a clear sense of whether it wants to resume a global posture or fortify the national borders. After Iraq, both strategies are operative.

If we take Lenin's classic analysis of imperialism, the present situation looks rather different to that a century ago. For Lenin, imperialism resulted from the monopoly power that accrued from the competitively driven process of economic concentration endemic to capitalism. The increased power of finance capital generated a 'new capitalism' of financial monopolies which superseded the old capitalism of industrial entrepreneurs; with it came imperial ambition, indeed imperial necessity. Lenin did not think this an entirely bad process, brutal as it was, but sensed, however optimistically, that a certain socialization of power might be squeezed from the interstices of economic monopolization.

Imperialism cannot now be seen as the highest stage of capitalism, at least not as Lenin willed himself to believe, but rather as a long-term symptom. But Lenin was on to something. First, imperialism posits a close relationship between monopoly capital, especially finance capital, and the national states from which these capitals issue. That connection today is significantly loosened under the aegis of transnational capital, and the allegiance of finance capital is significantly, although not completely, unhinged from the interests of specific national states; as such its support for narrowly nationalist state policies, especially policies that may disrupt global commerce, is much more circumspect. Second, although Lenin was surely correct to reject the territorial fetishism of his contemporary, the 'renegade' Karl Kautsky, Lenin's own assumption of the national definition of finance capital may have blinded him to something that Kautsky glimpsed. Kautsky raised the possibility, contrary to Lenin's argument that inter-imperialist rivalries would lead inevitably to war (as they did in 1914), that a coalition of imperialist states may fashion a relatively stable global rule among themselves in order to pursue global economic plunder. That has not happened, but present-day US unilateralism – the bared fist of the only remaining superpower – does raise the possibility that Kautsky may have been half right, that he was insufficiently ambitious in his theorizing, and that a single state may take on the role of 'superimperialist'. Third, Lenin's analysis conceives colonialism as a special instance of imperialism. Imperialism results from the logic of capitalist expansion; its specific territorial expression in colonial aggrandizement is nowhere seen as a necessary result of that logic. Indeed he later envisages a continuous 'redivision' and reallocation of territories around the world. Here at least Lenin and the Neo-cons are on the same page: imperialism does not necessarily entail colonies in the traditional territorial sense.

'In the beginning', wrote John Locke, 'all the world was America.'⁵ If this tells us anything today, it tells us that we live in a dangerous moment. Crusading but ineffable military power, economic dominance yet unsustainable global debt, cultural hegemony stirred with global scorn – the US stands today as an impossible mix. Living out a vulnerable imperial stasis, it is a nation that, in Burke's terms, should 'dread being too much dreaded'. Yet, as the hardest edge of neo-conservatism melts back into a wayward global neoliberalism, there is no sign that within the confines of electoral politics any significant alternative is emerging. Perhaps it is time to take Locke seriously and for all the world to become America.

Notes

1. David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003. Harvey borrows from Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, Verso, London, 1994.
2. See Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2004.
3. V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1975, p. 122.
4. Scott McConnell, 'Among the Neocons', *The American Conservative*, 21 April 2003; Patrick J. Buchanan, 'The Dog Days of the War Party', 7 June 2004, www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.
5. John Locke, quoted in Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1955, p. 61.

Agonized liberalism

The liberal theory of William E. Connolly

Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo

‘Democracy’ in the discourse of the ‘Free West’ does not carry the same meaning as it does when we speak of ‘popular-democratic’ struggle or of deepening the democratic content of political life. We cannot allow the term to be wholly expropriated... Instead, we need to develop a strategy of contestation around the term itself.

Stuart Hall

In the last two decades, William E. Connolly has emerged as a significant figure in American academic political theory by framing his theoretical reflections on identity, difference and politics in terms of a ‘reworking of the democratic imagination’.¹ The novelty of these reflections mostly resides in his combination of post-structuralist motifs with the traditional concerns of Anglo-American liberal theory. Meanwhile, the radical/critical import of his reflections has been taken for granted both tacitly and explicitly, to the extent that one of his essays even found a home in the pages of this journal.² Connolly has simultaneously insisted that he is contributing to both the liberal and the democratic imaginations. Yet in his writings the compatibility of these two traditions is never addressed, let alone questioned. Rather, Connolly has constantly moved, almost interchangeably, from one to the other.

I shall argue that the tension between these two traditions emerges in his writings in a particularly revealing way. This tension raises several important questions about the status of democracy in liberal theory and in Connolly’s particular contribution. What is the role of democracy and liberalism in Connolly’s theoretical reflections? What, if any, are the possibilities of democratic renewal that his various formulations open up or foreclose? What limits does Connolly’s commitment to liberalism impose on his conception of democracy? By addressing these questions, this article presents a critical engagement with Connolly’s writings in relation to his professed adherence to democracy. Before I proceed, I shall state some of

the assumptions of this article in order to clarify the stakes of the argument.

Liberal democracy is awash with promises of freedom and equality but it is incapable of realizing them. This impossibility is largely due to the contradictions between the terms the formula pairs together. Their coupling in the formula *liberal democracy* notwithstanding, democracy and liberalism constitute two distinct historical traditions. In the West, at least since 1945, liberal democracy has come to signify the combination of an electoral regime with a popular base and a constitutional framework of rights, operative within a capitalist political economy. It is no surprise, then, that the articulation of this ideal is ridden with tensions. Gopal Balakrishnan has starkly formulated the current stakes in this coupling: ‘To the extent that neoliberalism is a liberal doctrine, the relationship between [democracy and liberalism] today is probably about as complex and antagonistic as it was during the Weimar Republic.’³

Alongside the march of liberal democracy in the twentieth century there has been a gross increase in inequalities of power and status, both locally and globally. The global configurations of economic and political power impose new demands of local governance. At the global level, a new cast of characters has emerged to replace the old bourgeoisie: indeed, in the contemporary scene, technocrats, CEOs and ‘financial buccaneers’ squash obstacles in ways the old bourgeoisie probably never dreamt of.⁴ The contemporary world is one full of asymmetries of power and status – political, cultural and economic. If the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie is no longer present as a visible oppressor, its counterpart, the oppressed groups and classes, has far from disappeared. This is a world where ‘the rulers have ceased to rule’, but where ‘the slaves remain slaves’.⁵

Politically, neoliberalism and the liberal-democratic consensus make few demands in terms of democratic

participation. Rather, there is what Sheldon S. Wolin has fittingly called ‘the citizen–spectator’, whose role is to cheer fervently in an outburst of abstract patriotism, like the one that emerged after 11 September 2001.⁶ Or, as Perry Anderson has put it, in the age of liberal democracy what often reigns ‘is not democratic aspiration from below, but the asphyxiation of public and political difference by capital above.’⁷ Moreover, the early twenty-first century has witnessed a relocation of the structural interdependency of the liberal state and capitalism from the national level to an interdependency of the leading national economy (the USA) with the global economy, in a relation of mediation that is far from consonant with the egalitarian and participatory aspirations of democracy.⁸ Connolly’s refashioning of the liberal imagination hardly transcends this predicament. On the contrary, it has sought to make it less stingy.

Democracy as culture

We urgently need a new *modus vivendi* today....

What is called for is a rewriting of liberal ideals not their elimination.

William E. Connolly

From *Politics and Ambiguity* (1987) on, Connolly has presented a theory whose main goal has been a refashioning of the liberal-democratic imagination by rethinking the paradoxical relation between identity and difference. In the process, Connolly has taken several turns: from a brief flirtation with Habermas in the late 1970s and early 1980s, to an immersion in Foucault during the 1980s, then an idiosyncratic blend of Foucault–Nietzsche–Heidegger in the 1990s, to the new trend of Deleuze–Guattari, as well as a blend of neo-cognitive brain research and his latest label, ‘neo-Spinozism’. By somewhat hastily assimilating all these theoretical trends in his reflections on subjects such as identity/difference, democracy and ambiguity, pluralism and pluralization, secularism and rhizomes, Connolly has carved a distinctive place for himself in the landscape of recent American political theory.

Out of these engagements has emerged a theory that, according to its author, fosters generosity and responsiveness among different constituencies in a predicament in which final markers for politics and morality are not only uncertain but suspicious. In this vein, Connolly has emphasized the need for what he calls ‘agonistic respect’ and practices of forbearance among different identities and the differences that either dialogically or linguistically serve as their conditions of possibility.⁹ Accordingly, his theory seeks to foster an ethic of cultivation towards difference, an

ethic that is emplotted in a rhetoric of forbearance and reciprocity which, in turn, seeks to deflate antagonisms towards difference and reformulate these in an ethical stance honouring what he calls the ‘plurivocity of being’.¹⁰ Stated somewhat differently, the politics of ‘agonistic respect’ is one that seeks to translate the antagonisms of politics into an agonism of difference.¹¹ Connolly’s agonistic respect embodies an ideal of civility in a world marred by deep conflicts – an ideal of civility that I would suggest is more conducive to the establishment of a stable *modus vivendi*, a historically long-term liberal hope, than to a reinvigoration of democratic contestation. For as long as agonistic respect seeks *abstractly* to lessen the conflicts of politics, and to transform these in a more benign way, one of its byproducts is the lessening of any sense of crisis that could emerge from political antagonisms. A sense of crisis, however, has historically accompanied transformative political action even if it is sometimes at the price of stability. Once posited abstractly, agonistic respect also lessens the tensions ensuing from the unfulfilled promises of liberty and equality in liberal democracy. It thus becomes a release valve for the built-in tensions of contemporary capitalist–liberal-democratic politics.

But what is the role of democracy in this quest for a new *modus vivendi*? In one of his earliest formulations, in *Identity/Difference*, Connolly defends democracy as the best regime to confront and accept the contingency of our identities.¹² There is, to be sure, validity to this assertion: historically, democracy has represented the shattering of contingent institutions, cultural practices, and arrangements that impeded the demos’s access to meaningful participation in political power. In many instances, such shattering involved showing the contingency of social and political arrangements in order to challenge their claim to intrinsic natural order, or divine preordination, and, therefore, it significantly altered or eliminated entrenched dynamics of domination anchored in ideologies of class, race and gender, among others.¹³ Yet this is not precisely what Connolly’s writings suggest. By means of an increasingly culturalist conception of democracy, Connolly subtly but effectively downplays important aspects of the historical experience of democracy: namely, the centrality of meaningful participation in power, substantial political equality, and the subversion of linguistic and civic codes that impaired access to political power and equal status. For Connolly, as I show below, order and restrained partisanship seem to take precedence over democratic participation and equality. At this juncture, the liberal moment increasingly starts to take over.

Such displacements are manifest in Connolly's recent formulations, in *Ethos, Why I Am Not a Secularist* and *Neuropolitics*, where democracy is defined as

an egalitarian constitution of cultural life that encourages people to participate in defining their own troubles and possibilities, regardless of where these troubles originate and how narrow or broad they are in scope; it is, moreover, an *ethos* through which newly emerging constellations might reconstitute identities previously impressed upon them, thereby disturbing the established priorities of identity/difference through which social relations are organized; it is, therefore, a social process through which fixed identities and naturalized conventions *are pressed periodically to come to terms* with their constructed characters.¹⁴

or as 'a *distinctive culture* in which constituencies have a significant hand in modelling and moving the identities that constitute them'.¹⁵

Over the past fifteen years or so, I have sought to valorize productive tension in democratic life between, on one side, being, recognition, predictability, rights, governance, and tolerance, and, on the other, disturbance, becoming, critical responsiveness to the surge of the new, and a generous ethos of public engagement between constituencies honouring different final sources.¹⁶

The effort to foster a sensitivity to the cultural dimension of democratic life is praiseworthy, especially when contrasted to the electoral, market-oriented conception of democracy fashionable in American political science. Even so, there is something disquieting about these formulations, especially once they are historicized in the context of US liberal democracy, its theorists, and its often over-hyped *Kulturkampf*. Far from being an invigorating credo, liberal democracy, especially after its proclamation of the end of history, has increasingly evolved more sharply into an accommodationist ideology of power that tames potential rivals and subsumes substantial differences in a highly abstract, often prophylactic, consensual discourse of tolerance and plurality.

Once cast in this light, to formulate democracy as an *ethos* has important (anti-) political implications, especially in its subtle way of restricting the range of concerns traditionally associated with democratic experience. A 'political ethos' has more to do with 'modes of civic conduct' than with the mainstay of political theory: constitutional principles, democratic institutions, political economy. In a contemporary liberal democracy such as the USA, the stabilization of institutional juridico-political arrangements serves

as a condition of possibility for the limited forms of democratic participation, as well as for the dynamic stability of capitalism.¹⁷ What is more, as this ethos limits the range of concerns deemed political within the democratic imaginary, it might end up depoliticizing issues historically associated with democratic struggles. In a predicament marred by inequalities and injustices, a theorization of democracy cannot afford to bracket 'the mainstay of political theory'. Contemporary obstacles for democracy include class structures, bureaucratic–corporate power, the military–industrial power complex, an often reified constitutionalist–capitalist institutional order, and the quasi-despotic monopoly of public discourse by corporate power. In other words, the current concrete forms of the mainstay of the political are deeply anti-democratic. Connolly, however, fails to address these questions. It thus seems as if the structural role of political economy is unthinkable for Connolly, as it has been for most of the liberal orthodoxy.¹⁸ In this theory, there is a built-in failure to consider structural and institutional aspects of power in contemporary capitalist liberal democracies. This failure ultimately sabotages the possibilities of democratic renewal, while allowing for centralized and crystallized forms of power to operate unnoticed and unhindered.

Yet the explanation for these displacements is found in Connolly's insistence that he is crafting a new version of the liberal *modus vivendi*. The latter has historically entailed a reductive role for democracy in both classic and contemporary liberal theory from Hobbes to Rawls. By reducing the role of democracy to an ethos, Connolly is able to prescribe, among other things, rules of engagement and civility (agonistic respect), while severely taming the normative grounds for political contestations (framed by the language of selective disturbances) and instilling therapeutic practices to make life *less stingy* (self-artistry). Meanwhile, a democratic pluralism is flourishing, in which expanded 'sabbatical leaves' are more constitutive of an increasingly culturalist 'democratic utopia' than substantial equality and meaningful political participation. This is a democratic pluralism that seems better suited for an American Political Science Association panel with like-minded white-pluralism-loving liberals than for raucous democratic contestation.¹⁹

By framing democracy in this way, Connolly has significantly altered the concerns traditionally associated with it. In their place, he offers a new 'fast-paced' version of the liberal quest for a *modus vivendi* as the primary focus. Stated differently, rather than offering a democratic critique of the tensions between democracy,

liberalism and the ideas he cherishes, Connolly has proceeded to cast democratic pluralism in a liberal light. This might merit renaming his enterprise as a *reworking of the liberal imagination in a fast-paced world*; a renaming that is perfectly consistent with Connolly's sporadic confessions, or perhaps self-reassurances, throughout his books.²⁰

Caring colonization

The limits imposed on democracy by Connolly's reinvigoration of liberalism can be more clearly discerned in the Rawlsian connotations of his notion of an 'ironic consensus' and a *modus vivendi*. Historically, in the aftermath of European religious wars and revolutions, liberal quests for a *modus vivendi* and its surrogates, stability and cooperation over time, have been yearnings for repose. But after 1991, this has been the yearning of a fatigued doctrine that has sought repose while proclaiming its triumph at the same time. It is important to note that in these quests for a *modus vivendi* liberal theorists have traditionally overlooked the histories and memories that are coalesced in the institutions that serve as a background for the liberal resting place. This attribute is especially evident in the contractarian versions of liberal theory where the theorization of the *modus vivendi* involves a theoretical suspension of the structural inequalities of power and status already in place, while presenting a reified and ephemeral moment of equality.²¹

Connolly's self-image notwithstanding, there is an equivalent of this rhetorical move at work in his liberal ethos. Whereas in Connolly's reflections there is a professed sensitivity to the way in which theoretical devices (such as originary social contracts, ideal speech situations and veils of ignorance) silence the voices of some constituencies and exclude, frequently in advance, from the public sphere voices whose modes of expression are articulated in terms that are alien to the rational thinker, his liberalism shares some of the most fastidious and anti-democratic aspects of these formulations. It presupposes, mostly tacitly but also explicitly, the willingness to enter into dialogues of agonistic respect, whose entry point is adopting the language of contingency; it asks constituencies to frame discussions bounded by selective disturbances; it asks participants, irrespective of their backgrounds, histories and subject positions, to accept the contestability of their views, no matter how intrinsic these are considered to be, and, presumably, to 'laugh together', even if only in principle. The cumulative effect of this discourse is not only to neutralize alternative idioms and the modes of speech of those who do not share

the vocabulary privileged by Connolly (the language of contingency and contestability); it also silences historically constituted modes of speech that demand retribution for past injuries and resist framing their concerns as contestable.

Connolly would most likely object to this account of his position. He might point out that he has a metaphysical disposition, and also how he does not expect these metaphysical encumbrances not to bear on the public sphere. In other words, contra Rawls, comprehensive doctrines are welcomed in Connolly's *modus vivendi* – an assertion that surely introduces a sense of historicity into Rawls's otherwise fixed secular conception of persons. Also, Connolly admits a sense of fluidity that resists the fixity that the secular imagination imposes on prevalent cultural understandings by means of its interplay of remembrance and forgetfulness. Accordingly, Connolly's ethos of critical responsiveness presumably cuts deeper than Rawlsian ideals of tolerance. Even so, his alternative is not free from the dangers he ascribes to Rawls, since, by positing an ahistorical agonistic ethos of engagement, he at once *silences* the history behind some of these soon-to-be agonistic combatants, and, in doing so, undermines the openness he otherwise seeks. As he imposes the language of contingency and contestability, Connolly is imposing a new set of imperatives, especially when silencing the language of most forms of democratic public discourse: from school boards to town meetings, labour assemblies, or coalitional politics. None of these is articulated with the ambiguousness Connolly invites.

In good liberal fashion, Connolly has sought to colonize potential rivals. To be sure, to enter into the agonistic encounter, or to live up to the Connollian ethos of engagement, participants do not have to endorse the abundance of life and being. Instead, they are expected *merely* to accept the contingency of their identity and the contestability of their views and articles of faith. In a formulation that either attests political candour or plain disingenuousness, Connolly writes:

Appreciation of such a pluralist/pluralizing *ethos* need not draw upon Nietzschean sources alone, though they do provide an excellent source for it, and they do deserve agonistic respect from those not moved by them.... It can ... draw sustenance from a modest rewriting of the Rawlsian problematic. In this refigured Rawlsianism, we pursue restrained terms of contestation and collaboration between multiple, overlapping traditions, each of which recognizes a certain reciprocity between the element of contestability in its own faith and the alternative

faiths with which it contends and collaborates. Such a rewriting touches the Rawlsian idea that the modern age is incompatible with a fixed conception of the good. *But it no longer calls upon each constituency to leave its metaphysical/religious doctrine in the private sphere before it enters public, secular life.* Rather, it calls upon it to acknowledge the contestability of its own presumptions and to allow that acknowledgement to infuse restraint, agonistic respect, and responsiveness into its relations to other constituencies. That is, it calls upon each to revise its self-understanding in the light of these considerations. Such an *ethos* ... fosters restrained partisanship within and between multiple constituencies, each of which may be able to identify lines of connection and collaboration to a series of others.²²

Connolly's *ethos* 'merely' asks one to acknowledge what he posits in advance as two of his articles of faith: contestability and agonistic respect. In this refashioned *modus vivendi*, one needs to agree to be a good agonistic combatant, perhaps even engage in collective laughter, and not impose too many pressures on the system, or on others, even if both the system and those others contribute to one's position of subordination within it. To the best of my knowledge, Connolly does not make any exceptions, or dispensations, in terms of historical injuries and inequalities, to this rule, thus sharing one of the most fastidious pitfalls of contractualism: the temporary theoretical suspension of *concrete* inequalities that leads to an *abstract* equality. This last point is particularly clear in Connolly's utterly abstract negotiation of the para-

doxical tension between pluralization and equality. Instead of addressing this question as one that needs to be negotiated politically – at the end, it is the collectivity that politically redresses the problems that might arise, by devising flexible institutions, for instance as a practice of *democratic constitutionalism*, or an open experimental constitutionalism – Connolly restricts this discussion with the language of consensus.

In contrast to liberalism, democracy has traditionally been the means by which subordinated constituencies have sought to change their social lot – namely the means by which constituencies that have traditionally been dominated and displaced in liberal-capitalist societies have put forward their claims. To reinvigorate the democratic imagination in the present therefore requires a more powerful challenge to the socio-economic structures of late capitalism, something that, against the liberal *in* Connolly, involves more than progressive taxation, or a practice of forbearance, especially when the latter includes those in charge of the oppressive structures that are in place. Accordingly, rather than enhancing the prospects for democratic contestation, Connolly's relentless commitment to liberalism sabotages the democratic impulse of his theory.

At this point, it might be worthwhile to pursue further the parallels between Connolly's liberalism and Rawls's. 'Political liberals' have emphasized either 'respect for persons' (Larmore) or 'the primacy of justice as fairness' (Rawls) as universal rational principles that constitute core moral commitments,



as antecedent of democratic will. In the case of Connolly, he argues for the primacy of acknowledging the contingency of one's identity in order to foster a more generous public life.²³ Consequently, identifying and accepting the contingency and contestability of one's identity becomes a principle that seems to be a precondition for engagement in Connolly's allegedly more generous public space. On this register, despite his occasional sniping against contemporary liberals – which parallels the way American *Kulturkampf* misleadingly overstated the differences between liberals and conservatives, or, in the academy, between liberals and communitarians – Connolly is closer to political liberals than he may be willing to admit: he requires the recognition and acceptance of the element of contingency in one's identity as the passport for public deliberation guided by the standards of 'agonistic respect'. This last aspect is better understood in relation to two other attributes of liberalism: state-centredness and the presence of colonizing drives.

In both *Identity/Difference* and *Why I Am Not A Secularist*, Connolly has called for a more 'expansive practice of public discourse' that 'does not have to be rolled back into strategies of conversion'.²⁴ Still, there is something strikingly disingenuous in Connolly's claim that his theory does not seek colonization, as there is certainly a moment of conversion in his plea for the incorporation of the language of contingency into one's identity. And this is where a strong element of disingenuousness resides, especially in the way in which the recognition of contingency is elevated to a liberal principle of engagement. Stated differently, for Connolly the recognition of the contingency of one's identity leads to the realization of its contestability. Both are set as preconditions for a new ethics of care for difference in a radicalized liberalism that is statist even while claiming not to be so.²⁵ Liberals like Connolly often neglect the statist dimensions of liberalism, although the *modus vivendi* that is theorized frequently requires a powerful state that at once regulates the conflicts and inequalities that it produces – the very same state power that, like a big leviathan, also watches over civil society and remedies/pasteurizes its fissures. Yet, according to Connolly, it seems that only the cultural realm needs to be refashioned while the state stands in the background watching over the people, guaranteeing order and stability. But as in Thomas Hobbes's universe, its citizens are incapable of deliberation over the nature and uses of the forms of power crystallized in the institutional framework that provides imperatives that often structure their choices. The innocence in relation to state power and its uses

is a sore spot for liberals given liberalism's professed concern with arbitrary power.²⁶

The tacit reliance of Connolly's democratic ethos on the state, and the imposition of the language of contingency, along with the colonizing drive of his liberalism, can be further discerned in his portrayal of the encounter between someone who endorses his ethical stance and those considered either 'fundamentalists' or 'puritans.'

Soul-craft

Connolly's ethos expects puritans 'to modify the way they hold' their faith (to hold their faith as *good* liberals presumably hold their truths) and to accept its contestability.²⁷ Perhaps more important is the bold expectation that a fundamentalist will 'acknowledge the contestability of its claim to intrinsic moral order'. These expectations undeniably constitute fairly thick criteria for the agonistically bounded dialogue to take place. They are expectations that, in spite of the misleadingly modest tone in which Connolly formulates them, echo Rawls's call for people to accept the primacy of justice as fairness, as well as Larmore's norm of equal respect, along with both theorists' invocation of reasonableness, something that Connolly has recently come to invoke.²⁸ Additionally, Connolly's supposedly more generous public space turns out to be very demanding, albeit still confined to a liberal mode of reasoning. It carries with it an irrefutable moment of conversion that is built into the 'invitation' that Connolly extends to fundamentalists.

Ironically, Connolly has chastised Rawls's idea of personhood because it 'obscures ... dense *cultural differentiation*' and 'deflects ethical attention from thick cultural demarcations of what is inside, marginal to, and excluded from personhood *before* justice as fairness arrives to the scene'. Yet, his call for establishing contestability and contingency as passports to the agon is equally or perhaps even more oblivious to the 'thick cultural demarcations' and assumptions operative in non-liberal identities. Regardless of his professed sensitivity to the natality of the political, or what he calls 'the politics of becoming', Connolly nonetheless expects people to accept the norms of engagement that he imposes.²⁹ As soon as a fundamentalist accepts the contingency of her/his beliefs, s/he ceases to be so, and becomes a liberal who happens to have a different religious view. Such a position is certainly no less ambitious than Rawls's. Actually, the Rawlsian formulation that Connolly so vehemently criticizes is more compelling than Connolly's in at least one sense: it is honest about its demands, and, even if it

brackets one's metaphysical views from the public sphere, it does not impose their modification in the ways Connolly does. In 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus' Rawls writes:

how might it happen that over generations the initial acquiescence in a liberal conception of justice as a *modus vivendi* develops into a stable and enduring overlapping consensus? In this connection I think *a certain looseness* in our comprehensive views, as well as their not being fully comprehensive, may be particularly significant. ... many if not most citizens come to affirm the political conception [of justice] without seeing any particular connection, one way or the other, between it and their other views. Hence it is possible for them first to affirm the political conception.... Should an incompatibility later be recognized between the political conception and their wider doctrines, then they might very well adjust or revise these doctrines rather than reject the political conception.³⁰

Or so Rawls hopes. Connolly has something similar to say after the challenge to the puritans is made, and/or the invitation to the fundamentalist extended:

Some might become post-puritans over time, either in the form of the faith they adopt or in the way they now articulate it. Or in both ways. Others might become *more reticent* to generalize what they are in the name of religious truth.... The cumulative effect of such enactments, when a generous ethos is operative, links a growing number of constituencies to appreciation of the fundamental contingency of things.³¹

The expectation is that citizens would restrain the range of their comprehensive views and articles of faith – these are either *loose* or *contestable* – for the sake of the advantages of living in a society with a fair system of cooperation over time (Rawls), or in a more generous ethos in which 'more partisans acknowledge their own ambiguous implication in many of the differences they engage' (Connolly).³² Here Connolly is bringing back the ancient tradition of soul-craft. In Plato's *Republic*, soul-craft and state-craft go together. And both are ordered according to the principle of justice and stability. With Machiavelli modern political theorizing shifted from the realm of consciousness to an almost exclusive focus on the arena of collective political power. Whenever considered, the passions of the soul were cast politically, not the other way around. Writers like Connolly want to send us back into the realm of soul-crafting but not for the sake of justice; stability, though, remains a crucial consideration. The focus is on how to make contemporary life, the status quo, bearable for liberals, less stingy.

Presumably, even if the fundamentalist refuses to engage s/he will see the advantages that 'agonistic respect' as a *modus vivendi* presents, and discover how s/he is better off with the affirmation of 'self-restrictions' in a public ethos of 'selective disturbances'.³³ Formulations like these clearly exemplify an increasingly prominent theoretical temperament, where conviction becomes a synonym of authoritarianism while fuzziness has become identified as democratic.³⁴ This is a theoretical temperament that at once impairs the capacity to be passionate about democracy while it raises the anxieties of liberal democracy to a virtue. Theoretical fuzziness notwithstanding, the state that is usually behind it is everything but fuzzy: it is powerful, aggressive and pretty much principled in its exportation of neoliberalism and liberal democracy. The statement in *The Augustinian Imperative*, 'No writer is free from the drive to convert', is as much a testament of Connolly's sense of irony as it might be a reluctant admission of his failure to escape the colonizing tendencies of the liberal tradition.³⁵ Sadly, this is liberal colonization at its best. Something perhaps unexpected from a thinker who has zealously defended 'the plurivocity of being'.

Don't worry, be happy

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negroes' great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not ... the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

To state the matter bluntly, had blacks waited for liberals for deliverance from the caste system, they would still be consigned to the back of the bus. Blacks have had to overcome not just the vicious opposition of their political enemies, but also the well-intentioned counsel of 'friends' who, whether inspired by utopian ideals or swayed by practical politics, actively discouraged the aggressive pursuit of civil rights.

*Stephen Steinberg*³⁶

In focusing almost exclusively on the quest for a *modus vivendi*, Connolly ultimately sabotages even the most democratic moment within his theory, which resides in its resistance to rights-centred discourse. Connolly's sensibility to the natality of the political notwithstanding, his formulations do not go beyond traditional understandings of liberal tolerance. For critical responsiveness to be *critical*, a more vigilant attitude towards liberal tolerance, 'its kissing cousin', is called for.³⁷ And for this ethos to be critical, a more concrete rendering is needed. Discussions of tolerance

usually take place along an axis in which liberty and equality are pitted against each other. In actuality, however, these are negotiated politically. In Tzvetan Todorov's formulation, 'the form and the direction that the fight for toleration will take depend on the historical, cultural, and political context in which one lives.'³⁸ But this is not the path chosen by Connolly.

Evidently, a theory of any complexity involves an important degree of abstraction in order to gain critical distance and formulate a comprehensive view of the reality it seeks to comprehend. Therefore the point is not merely to take Connolly to task for what he fails to say. Rather, it is to ponder critically whether or not the exclusions of Connolly's theory are built into its structure, and what effects these have on its normative and explanatory power. Up to now, I have argued that once certain exclusions of Connolly's theory are brought to bear, its accommodation to the liberal status quo, as well as its limitations from a democratic perspective, become apparent. Such theory conveniently brushes aside class and bureaucratic structures, the imperatives of military and corporate power in a constitutional capitalist democracy, and the absence of a democratic public discourse. Likewise, the compatibility, or lack thereof, of Connolly's ethico-political stance with the historical experience of democracy, or with capitalism, is not considered in any sustained way. Furthermore, Connolly's increasingly prophylactic understanding of agonistic conflicts mirrors the no less prophylactic mass-media culture of 'safe' conflict and risk in a liberal society such as the USA, as well as its therapeutic trends. In fact, Connolly's emphasis on agonism presupposes a rough equality that is hardly attainable within its own terms.

This built-in obstacle to equality can be better seen if one extends the 'drive to convert' to questions of significant economic redistribution and the distribution of power and status. Historically, especially in the USA, it has not been the good faith of those in privileged positions that has allowed democracy to take place. On the contrary, democracy has involved shattering obstacles to power and, in some circumstances, the use of violence and force.³⁹ Democratic movements attempt to resist the terms of discussion and engagements that the status quo imposes. In brushing this aside, Connolly's theory further imposes a domesticating language of engagement – a language that deprives of political teeth what might otherwise be radical claims of equality and justice, and incorporates these as part of a liberal *modus vivendi*. As a result, the established neoliberal corporate–constitutional order remains unthreatened. It would be cynical to

expect injured and displaced constituencies (racial or sexual minorities and targeted poor constituencies, for example) to enter into agonistic contestation with the source of their suffering. Historical experience has involved precisely the opposite: transgressing the impediments for ordinary people to share in power. Ordinary people, who are striving to open up space for political contestation to redress unequal access to power and status cannot afford to practise the kind of forbearance that Connolly prescribes, let alone engage others on the basis of the mutual contestability of their positions. Doing so would lessen the critical import of their claims. An egalitarian cannot accept that the presence of inequalities and domination is merely 'contestable' when these are part of the everyday life experiences of people who suffer these in their bodies and psyches. Connolly is a thinker who is fond of bringing the body to bear on theoretical discussions, yet, ironically, he fails to consider the incontestability of this material dimension of the suffering of real bodies.

In light of the preceding discussions, Connolly's emphasis, at least since *The Ethos of Pluralization*, on 'work on the self' and 'self artistry' could be cast in a different light. Practices like these remain too close to a discredited white-liberal strategy in the American academy that often reduces racialized inequality and domination to the language of prejudice, and is oblivious to the complex socio-economic processes intrinsic to contemporary patterns of injustice and inequality.⁴⁰ The strong emphasis on therapeutic strategies serves further to clarify the audience Connolly is addressing, while absolving him from the charge of cynicism. It seems that these practices on the self are hardly intended for those who do not share in power, for the dispossessed, the inhabitant of urban ghettos, poor inner city neighbourhoods, or forgotten countryside areas. Rather, the strong emphasis placed on forbearance seems directed to those already sharing power, privilege and status: these are asked to practise forbearance to the forces unleashed by the disadvantaged members, to react more generously to new constituencies seeking parity of status and cultural capital. The prescription seems to be: a dosage of work on the self and the colonization of rivals by means of providing an emplotment of their claims in a 'don't worry be happy' narrative that privileges the protean 'politics of becoming' as an offspring of 'the abundance of being'. In other words, the work on the self is a prescription for fellow-traveller liberals to be less static, and more responsive, in relation to new political and cultural constituencies.

Historically, in the USA, white liberals do not have the best record in dealing with issues of inequality, especially in relation to questions of race and class. During moments of democratic upheaval, liberalism has functioned as an accommodationist ideology of power that has often reverted to reformist rhetoric (by means of a call for the preservation of order and moderation) in order to tame democratic energies. This is one of the foremost anti-democratic bents in the liberal tradition. While presenting a politics of selective disturbances for the *have-nots*, Connolly proposes practices of work on the self for the *haves*, so the upper mobility within corporations, or the education of targeted constituencies, does not evoke too much of a visceral reaction in the establishment, or resentment among whites. In the meantime, the *have-nots* not only abide by the terms of restrained participation, but as long as they emplot their claims in the narrative of contestability it is less difficult for the *haves* to admit them.

Historically, liberalism has harboured inequalities of power, class and status. Such inequalities are not only the product of historical contingencies, or of ascriptive traditions that have developed alongside liberalism. A good number of them are liberal in character, and intrinsic to the liberal tradition in its historical coupling with capitalism and its market imperatives.⁴¹ As Wolin, democracy's pre-eminent contemporary theorist, has put it: in a world defined by structural tendencies and imperatives that in spirit and design lead to increased inequalities and powerlessness, active political action 'on the part of the socially and economically disadvantaged becomes the crucial means of saving themselves'.⁴² Rather than questioning the structural forms that produce and perpetuate inequalities in a liberal society (corporations, managerial and economic class structures, educational elitism, the corporate media, centralized power in an increasingly unaccountable government, unaccountable bureaucratic and governmental institutions, among others), Connolly focuses on mild redistribution (a policy he first formulated thirty years ago with Michael Best) in order to transform political antagonism into an agonism of difference. Potential claims for equality and recognition are bounded by the politics of selective disturbances: 'If every settlement came up for grabs at the same time, then a sustaining condition of pluralization would self-destruct.'⁴³

Democratic contestation involving different constituencies with disparate languages involves reciprocal translation, not the imposition of a mode of speech, or colonization.⁴⁴ Perhaps Connolly is so invested

in the academic politics of the culture wars that he fails to notice how his ethos of engagement based on an agonistic respect, once extended to other issues, contributes to the liberal stalemate and ends up colonizing rivals as much as traditional liberals do. This is an ironic twist for a thinker who has so zealously affirmed that 'difference is fundamental'.

One measure of the lack of political import of Connolly's theory is his silence in relation to the events unfolding in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, a silence that attests to either an overly academic conception of politics or to the ethnocentric nature of his critique of fundamentalism. After all, this is someone who has written quite a bit on secularism and fundamentalism – in 1999 he published *Why I Am Not a Secularist*. In relation to the heated exchange in the pages of *Grand Street* between Edward Said and Michael Walzer on the question of Zionism in Palestine, Connolly writes: 'They sink to a level that is *unacceptable* within an ethics of agonistic respect in intellectual engagement.'⁴⁵ This assertion is at once mind-boggling and revealing. Mind-boggling because of the way in which a deeply political discussion, framed in relation to a concrete political situation that has taken tragic overtones, is deemed unacceptable unless phrased according to Connolly's rules of civility; revealing because of the way that it illustrates how deaf Connolly's ethos is to politically infused, passionate modes of speech and contestation. Furthermore, there seems to be a culturalism at work in his theory. In a formulation that adds insult to injury, Connolly frames the divergent persecutions and stigmatizations of "Gypsies," "Jews," "women," "homosexuals," "Indians," "prostitutes," "welfare free-loaders," "blacks," "atheists," and "postmodernists" as the offspring of 'an accusatory culture' that resents the speed he associates with late modernity. Remarks like these suggest a vulgar culturalism at the core of Connolly's theory.⁴⁶

Evidence of the intellectual dearth of 'agonistic respect' as an ethos of *intellectual* engagement is also found in Connolly's fondness for an *us/them* matrix of oppositions, which serves as a pre-emptive rhetorical strategy that avoids engaging thinkers and positions that challenge his own. Yet this strategy has proven superficial in the way it serializes thinkers. For an instance: 'Friedrich Nietzsche, ... Gilles Deleuze, Stuart Hampshire, Moira Gatens, Michel Foucault, Paul Patton, Jane Bennett, Thomas Dumm and Brian Massumi are all neo-Spinozists.'⁴⁷ Sentences like these beset Connolly's writings. What this matrix effectively achieves is an avoidance of serious engagement with

critics who do not share Connolly's assumptions. His introduction to Wolin's *Festschrift* provides a good example. Connolly almost writes more about himself than about Wolin, and when he is dealing with Wolin it is done, almost exclusively, self-referentially.⁴⁸ In other words, affirmations of difference and openness notwithstanding, substantial differences are hardly dealt with. Perhaps here one is witnessing a display of Connolly's practices of self-artistry. Connolly has asserted that distorting the ideas of those critical of his own is part of the tactics of the self: 'You misrepresent a religious or metaphysical perspective that troubles you, to relieve the feeling of disturbance it generates.'⁴⁹ This is yet another ironic twist for a thinker who unflinchingly announces the virtues of 'agonistic respect' as a mode of intellectual engagement.

One of the features of American academic political theory is the lack of resonance between the problems on which its doyens reflect and the political questions afflicting the American imperial polity and the rest of the world. Seldom is the gap between one and the other closed. An arresting example of this paradoxical inversion is the now worn-out debate between 'liberals and communitarians' – a debate that, as many critics have observed, overstated the differences between both camps in what turned out to be a debate among liberals bearing little weight in the USA.⁵⁰ In contrast, conservative theorists like Friedrich Hayek and Leo Strauss enjoyed immense popularity in the centres of power in both England and the USA. Their ideas shaped public discourse and rhetoric during the Reagan/Thatcher years, when Rawls's reign was at its peak.⁵¹ The only common thread within the academy and outside was the displacement of the theory and practice of democracy in any meaningful sense. This is perhaps the only arena where theoretical articulations of academic liberalism correlate with public practice. Democracy was increasingly becoming an archaic term whose only meaning resided in its coupling with liberalism. In Rawls's formulations democracy is seldom present, while Hayek and Strauss were consistently hostile to it. In the USA of the early twenty-first century the *liberal* part of liberal democracy has taken over its *democratic* counterpart to the extent that the historical discourse and practice of democracy are pretty much absent from public discourse. Simultaneously, a retreat from substantial and concrete equality, along with its by-product – increasing inequalities that are growing at an amazing rate – is masqueraded by the abstract liberal discourse of diversity, tolerance and difference that simultaneously structures the coordinates of public rhetoric and marketing.⁵²

Reflections like Connolly's, however, are not innocent in relation to the structure of power and privilege that saturates the present. In fact, they are symptomatic of a larger trend in Anglo-American political theory that unreflectively mirrors contemporary forms of power. Authors like Connolly, who has taken pretty much every 'turn' there has been in the last twenty-five years, praise theoretical novelty as an end in itself. If postmodernism was once considered 'the cultural logic of late capitalism', in the American academic scene it has arguably become the *theoretical logic* of neoliberal liberal democracy.⁵³ With few exceptions, contemporary political-theory politics has become academic. Meanwhile, academic politics, though waging insatiable battles in relation to canons and cultures, fails to consider the ways in which its institutional supports (mainly universities) are implicated in the present-day structures of power.

Forty years ago political theory was a marginal discipline in the Anglo-American academy. Nowadays 'theory' reigns, even if its political import is elusive. The Western tradition of political theory is richer. Historically, it has been constituted by different genres of reflection and writing: aphorisms, comedies, counsel-pamphlet, dialogue, historical-textual commentary, history, poetry, tragedy, pamphlets, philosophical treatises, theological and political treatises, sermons and speeches. The contemporary challenge might thus reside in breaking with the yoke of 'theory'. Better still, the key might be in starting to think about theory politically.

Notes

1. In this article I draw from the following texts by Connolly: *Politics and Ambiguity*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1987; *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1991; *Political Theory and Modernity*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993; *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality*, Sage, Newbury Park, 1993; 'Beyond Good and Evil: The Ethical Sensibility of Michel Foucault', *Political Theory* 21, August 1993; *The Ethos of Pluralization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995; 'Reworking the Democratic Imagination', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, 1997; *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999; 'Assembling the Left', *Boundary 2*, 26, Fall 1999; 'The Nobility of Democracy', John Tamborino and Jason Frank, eds, *Vocations of Political Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999; 'Secularism, Partisanship and the Ambiguity of Justice', in Edward B. Portis et al., eds, *Political Theory and Partisan Politics*, SUNY Press, Albany, 2001; 'Politics and Vision', in Aryeh Botwinick and William Connolly, eds, *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001; 'Confessing Identity/

- Belonging to Difference', *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of a Political Paradox*, expanded edition, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2002; *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, and Speed*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2002.
2. William E. Connolly, 'Brain Waves, Transcendental Fields, and Techniques of Thought', *Radical Philosophy* 94, March/April 1999.
 3. See Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt*, Verso, London and New York, 2000, p. 263. For a different formulation of the relationship between democracy and liberalism, see Chantal Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London and New York, 2001. Unfortunately, Mouffe is consistently superficial in dealing with this question.
 4. For a discussion, see Perry Anderson, 'Confronting Defeat', *London Review of Books*, 17 October 2002, pp. 11ff.
 5. Lutz Niethammer as quoted in Perry Anderson's 'The Ends of History', in *A Zone of Engagement*, Verso, London and New York, 1992, p. 280.
 6. See Sheldon S. Wolin, 'Brave New World', *Theory & Event*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2002, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/. See also his *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded edition, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004, pp. 520–23, 557ff.
 7. See Perry Anderson, 'Renewals', *New Left Review* 1, January/February 2000, p. 16.
 8. For an informative treatment of this dynamics post-1945 to the present, see Robert Brenner, *The Boom and the Bubble: The US in the World Economy*, Verso, London and New York, 2002.
 9. Right away in *Identity/Difference* Connolly writes: 'the relational and constructed character of identity can nevertheless make a difference to the ethical quality of political life' (p. ix). Later on he will define his 'ethic of care for life' as 'an ethic in which alter-identities foster agonistic respect for the differences that constitutes them' (p. 166).
 10. See, for instance, *Identity/Difference*, pp. 166, 168, 170; *Ethos*, pp. xv, xxii, 28, 38, 99, 183, 200. See also *Why I Am Not a Secularist*; 'Brain Waves, Transcendental Fields, and Techniques of Thought'; and *Neuropolitics*, especially ch. 4.
 11. *Identity/Difference*, p. 178.
 12. In Connolly's rendering: 'the ambiguity of democracy adds the possibility of engaging the contingency of existence' and 'more than other social forms, democracy accentuates exposure to contingency and increases the likelihood that the affirmation of difference in identity will find expression in public life'. *Identity/Difference*, p. 193.
 13. Commonplace narratives on contingency suggest that the contingency of social and political affairs always leaves open the possibility for things to be otherwise, and thus spontaneity, freedom and action are possible. But, as Connolly rightly suggests, there are 'entrenched' and 'obdurate' contingencies. Furthermore, contingent relations and events often inaugurate their own patterns and imperatives of legitimization and justification. Historically, contingent events have inaugurated modes of domination and oppression that often bring about their own patterns of justification; that is, contingently hegemonic institutions impose and develop patterns and practices to assure their continuity: practices that have been carried out in the name of 'reason of state', the glory and security of the nation, a peaceful social order, racial purism, a consensual politics à la 'third way', among others. Nevertheless, the length of duration of a contingent event, discourse or system depends on a variety of factors, including its coherence, the combination of cultural and economic imperatives, as well as the effectiveness of its affirmation and/or contestation.
 14. *Ethos*, p. 153, emphasis added.
 15. *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, p. 154, emphasis added; see also *ibid.*, p. 185.
 16. *Neuropolitics*, p. 173.
 17. See James Tully, 'The Agonic Freedom of Citizens', *Economy and Society* 28, May 1999, p. 169. On the relationship between a stable politico-juridical framework and capitalism, see Ellen Meiksins Wood's suggestive accounts in *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View*, Verso, London and New York, 2002; and *The Empire of Capital*, Verso, London and New York, 2003. See also Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism and Form', *New Left Review* 14, March/April 2002.
 18. An arresting discussion of the role of the unthinkable as one of the discursive strategies of silencing is found in Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995.
 19. *Neuropolitics*, p. 144.
 20. 'I do not have radical hopes', he has stated; 'This perspective is, of course, a liberalism.' 'This would be a radicalized liberalism, but not in the direction of revolutionary overthrow, socialist abundance or the universalization of the late-modern state' – no, the gods forbid; rather, 'I myself aspire to a critical liberalism that both expands and thickens the range of secularism.' See 'Beyond Good and Evil', p. 338; *Identity/Difference*, p. 94; *Political Theory and Modernity*, pp. 174–5; *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, p. 20.
 21. On this point my discussion is deeply indebted to Wolin, 'The Liberal/Democratic Divide: On John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*', *Political Theory* 24, February 1996, p. 103.
 22. 'Secularism', pp. 168–9; emphasis added.
 23. See Charles Larmore, 'The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism', *The Journal of Philosophy* 91, December 1999, pp. 599–625.
 24. *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, pp. 42–3; *Identity/Difference*, p. 179.
 25. This point is forcefully made by Roberto Alejandro in his essay 'Ethics and Politics', unpublished manuscript. I would like to thank Alejandro for generously sharing this essay with me. It brought to my attention the similarities between Connolly and Rawls, and my argument is indebted to it.
 26. Cf. Wolin's 'The Liberal/Democratic Divide'. An account of the dynamics of contemporary capitalism might shed a different light on Connolly's theory, in relation to material dynamics of redistribution and recognition, equality and status, in liberal-democratic societies. On this point, see Fraser's essay 'Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism', *Social Text* 52/53, Fall/Winter 1997.
 27. *Ethos*, p. 181.
 28. 'The Nobility of Democracy', p. 308.
 29. 'Secularism', p. 158.
 30. John Rawls, 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus', in *John Rawls: Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freedman,

- Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, p. 441; emphasis added. See also *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2001, pp. 192–5.
31. *Ethos*, p. 181.
 32. *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, p. 155. In the most recent restatement of his positions, Connolly has introduced a distinction between accepting the contestability of one's views and accepting that others see them as such. In 'Confessing' he has offered the following statements: 'The idea is to attend to the persistence of multiple ethical sources in political life while dramatizing the comparative contestability of the candidates, and to work on ourselves and others to affirm, without existential resentment, the contestability on each in the eyes of others'; 'I also find it noble to treat one's faith as contestable in one's own eyes, not just to affirm that it is so in the eyes of others.... But I do not contend that everyone must hold this view for a positive ethos of engagement to emerge. It suffices if numerous partisans appreciate the contestability of their faith in the minds and souls of others, and struggle to overcome resentment against this persistent feature of the human condition.' See 'Confessing', pp. xxi and xxiii, respectively. This distinction seems to reduce the demands imposed on others, but it hardly eliminates the drive to colonize.
 33. On 'selective disturbances', see *Ethos*, pp. 74–104; Alejandro's 'Ethics and Politics' offers a good discussion of this theme.
 34. See Terry Eagleton's remarks in *After Theory*, Basic Books, New York, 2003, p. 103.
 35. *The Augustinian Imperative*, p. 86. For two discussions of this feature of liberalism, see Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995; and Roberto Alejandro, *The Limits of Rawlsian Justice*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD, 1997.
 36. Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995, p. 56.
 37. For Connolly, 'tolerance and agonistic respect are kissing cousins', even if 'they are not equivalent'. 'Confessing', p. xxvii.
 38. See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Morals of History*, trans. Alyson Waters, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p. 156.
 39. See and contrast with Étienne Balibar, 'Outlines of a Topography of Cruelty: Citizenship and Civility in the Era of Global Violence', *Constellations* 8, March 2001, p. 27.
 40. Steinberg, *Turning Back*, pp. 68–93. For Connolly's views on how a practice of agonistic respect opens up the possibility for an ethical understanding of democracy, linking practices of the self with democratic politics, see *Identity/Difference*, pp. 178–97; *Ethos*, pp. 41–74; *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, pp. 143–61; 'The Nobility of Democracy', pp. 319–23.
 41. For a highly sanitized view of liberalism that largely ascribes its coexistence with inequalities to ascriptive traditions outside of its core, see Rogers Smith's otherwise stimulating book *Civic Ideals*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1997). For a critique, see Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001. For a stimulating elucidation of the link between liberalism and territoriality, see Uday S. Metha, *Liberalism and Empire*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999.
 42. See Wolin, 'The Liberal/Democratic Divide', p. 101.
 43. *Ethos*, p.194.
 44. See the stimulating treatment of these questions in Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror*, Verso, London and New York, 2003.
 45. *Ethos*, pp. 225–6 n16; emphasis added.
 46. *Neuropolitics*, p. 163. On this point, see Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking Recognition', *New Left Review* 3, May/June 2000.
 47. See William E. Connolly, 'The Radical Enlightenment: Faith, Power, and Theory', *Theory & Event*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2004, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/.
 48. See Connolly, 'Politics and Vision'.
 49. Connolly, *Neuropolitics*, p. 102.
 50. Although one of its offspring, the debate on the rights of 'minorities' has had a larger impact on Canadian politics. Its main theorists, Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka and James Tully, are Canadians.
 51. See Perry Anderson, 'The Intransigent Right at the End of the Century', *London Review of Books*, 24 September 1992, pp. 7–11.
 52. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2000, p. x. For an excellent discussion of how the discourses of difference have diluted the commitment to racial equality, see Claire Jean Kim, 'Clinton's Race Initiative: Recasting the American Dilemma', *Polity* 33, Winter 2000, pp. 175–97. See also Steinberg, *Turning Back*. More recent treatments of the eclipse of equality in the USA are found in Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality?*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2002; and Godfrey Hodgson, *More Equal than Others*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004.
 53. Cf. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 567.

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The reproach of abstraction

Peter Osborne

This is a paper about abstraction, in particular, but by no means exclusively – and this ‘by no means exclusively’ is a large part of its point – philosophical abstraction.* It is concerned at the outset with what might be called the *reproach* of abstraction: the commonly held view, across a wide variety of theoretical standpoints, more or less explicit, that there is some inadequacy inherent to abstraction per se, which is both *cognitive* and *practical* (ethico-political) in character. I aim to cast doubt on this reproach, in its exclusive form at least, in order to clear the way for a thinking of the idea of ‘actual abstractions’ as the medium of social experience in capitalist modernities. I take ‘global capitalist modernity’ to be the transdisciplinary object unifying inquiries in the humanities and social sciences, if only implicitly – the idea of global capitalist modernity is the transcendental horizon of their possible unification. I therefore take the notion of actual abstractions to be a methodological key to a philosophically reflective form of transdisciplinarity. It is only a transdisciplinarity such as this, I believe, that can rescue the idea of philosophy as a discourse of universal mediation from the corrosive critiques of its claims to an absolute universality, familiar in recent years in various pragmatist, historicist, contextualist and deconstructive forms. As Ricoeur once put it:

Philosophical discourse achieves universality only by passing through the contingency of cultures ... its rigour is dependent upon equivocal languages ... its coherence must traverse the war between hermeneutics.¹

What is wrong with abstraction?

The epistemological version of what I am calling the reproach of abstraction derives mainly from Humean empiricism, with its psychological conception of abstract ideas as the product of ‘customary conjunctions’ of particular ideas, based on resemblances, annexed to ‘general names’.² This is essentially a psychologistic updating of medieval nominalism. The

practical-political version of the reproach is perhaps most commonly associated with the Lukácsian trajectory of Western Marxism, although it is also found in various sociologies of modernity, such as Simmel’s, and it appears in a more literary-philosophical form in the complexly entwined traditions of French Heideggerianism and French Nietzscheanism. It is epitomized in its Marxist variant by Moishe Postone’s concept of ‘abstract domination’, set out in *Time, Labour, and Social Domination* (1993). Abstract domination is ‘the domination of people by abstract, quasi-independent structures of social relations, mediated by commodity determined labour ... the impersonal, nonconscious, nonmotivational, mediate form of necessity characteristic of capitalism.’³ Abstract domination, in other words, is domination by abstractions.

These two critical tendencies – epistemological and practical-political – often converge within Marxism, as in Derek Sayers’s *The Violence of Abstraction* (1987).⁴ But their combination is by no means restricted to the Marxist tradition. Indeed, there is a paradoxical position, more or less explicit in a great deal of contemporary theory (it is shared, for example, by deconstruction and Adorno’s version of critical theory), which holds that, not merely *despite* but precisely *because of* the necessity of abstraction to thought (the character of the necessity, that is), there is something both cognitively and politically inadequate about knowledge itself: not only existing knowledge, but all possible knowledges. For Feyerabend, for example, the history of Western thought could be told as ‘A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being’.⁵ Increasingly, it seems, from a variety of different standpoints, abstraction – understood here as conceptual abstraction – is accompanied by both a certain *melancholy* (loss of the real object) and a certain *shame* (complicity in the domination of the concept and hence repression of other, more vibrant, more creative aspects of existence).

This can be seen, I think, in the growing reverence and enthusiasm for ‘singularities’ of various sorts:

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reverence in the spirit of the construal of alterity in the Levinas–Nancy tradition, that religious ‘dream of a purely heterological thought’ otherwise called ‘pure empiricism’;⁶ enthusiasm on the model of Žižek’s embrace of Badiou’s ‘act as event’. It is also visible in the turn within literary studies away from ‘theory’, strictly construed, towards a historicist particularism, on the one hand, and a revival of interest in ‘aesthetics’ (in its nineteenth-century disciplinary sense – quite different from Kant’s philosophical sense of aesthetic as critique), on the other. This movement has a correlate in studies in the visual arts, in which the Anglo-American reception of Deleuze has become entangled. Indeed, in this context, certain theoretical terminologies have themselves become primarily aesthetic means. However, things are complicated in matters of aesthetics – and the problem of abstraction is rendered ironic – by the proximity of a visual paradigm in which ‘abstraction’ (in the sense of abstract painting, for example) appears as the privileged *non*-conceptual term: the object of the intuition of sensuously concrete form. This is, in part, a misrecognition (formalist modernism’s mislocation of meaning in pure *aesthesis*), but it is also a sign of often neglected complexities in the concept of abstraction which the notion of ‘actual abstractions’ seeks to address: both the force and the ‘feeling’ of abstraction itself.

There are, then, importantly, both conceptual and non-conceptual versions of abstraction. Yet the very opposition between them appears to confirm the one-sidedness, and hence inadequacy, of both types, and hence of abstraction itself. (Dialectically construed, abstract painting appears as the ‘other side’ of conceptual abstraction, the melancholy mimetic mark of the excluded.⁷ Yet in registering what is lost by abstract thinking, it reproduces its one-sidedness in an ontologically inverted form.) In terms of Kant’s famous dictum, ‘Concepts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind’, *both* are merely abstracted ‘elements’ of a unitary process of cognition. In its root form, the Latin *abstrahere*, to abstract means ‘to draw away or remove (something from something else)’; hence its inherent epistemological negativity, at least in so far as ‘original unity’ is the implicit measure of authentic knowledge and experience. But this is, of course, the very problem. The dominant discourse of abstraction is infused not only with empiricism but with a Romanticism of origins. It is this combination of empiricism and Romanticism that imparts to it its distinctive cultural tone. This is the contradictory philosophical common sense of bourgeois culture,

this mixture of empiricism and Romanticism, narrow-minded realism and unfulfillable desire.

However, let us not forget the other, ‘good’ side of conceptual abstraction. For abstraction is, historically, philosophically double-coded: it is an epistemological virtue as well as a vice. While abstraction may, in its modern psychological form, be associated with a withdrawal from the reality (or particularity) of the object of experience, and hence a certain epistemological inadequacy, its deeper philosophical history is that of a focusing in on the essence of an object (a separation out of the contingent and inessential) as a condition of the possibility of knowledge. Abstraction is a condition of knowledge, of thinking the object; and abstraction is, apparently, a loss of the sensuous particularity of the object. Hence the melancholy, which at times takes on tragic tones. For Simmel, for example, ‘the fact that the higher concept, which through its breadth embraces a growing number of details, must count upon increasing loss of content’ is ‘the tragedy of human concept formation’.⁸ The *problem* of abstraction is the problem of how to deal with this contradictory double-coding, beyond the simple declaration of an impasse: that brute declaration of the ‘necessity but impossibility’ of knowledge to be found in both Adorno and Derrida, for example, which flattens out the tragic aspect of Kantianism into a generalized epistemological melancholia.⁹

Prior to the late eighteenth century, the contradictory double-coding of abstraction tended to be distributed between two competing positions: a nominalism about universals, to which modern empiricism is the successor, and a realism about universals, retained by modern rationalism. With Kant, however, the problem was famously transformed in a way that opened up the conceptual space that would subsequently itself be transformed by Marx’s concept of ‘real abstraction’, the broader significance of which remains to be thought. This change in the structure of the problem of abstraction was the result of Kant’s transformation of the understanding of objectivity. In transforming the concept of objectivity Kant’s philosophy opened it up to precisely those issues about normativity and disciplinarity that so trouble the humanities and social sciences today. We are still in certain crucial respects, both in philosophy and, especially, in other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, within a Kantian field. (Gillian Rose was largely right about that.¹⁰) A brief recapitulation of the structure of this field will serve as a prelude to some remarks about the dialectical redemption of abstraction as experience performed by the concept of actual abstractions.

Abstraction, objectivity, normativity

As is well known, Kant redefined knowledge in terms of an essentially subjective conception of ‘objectivity’ (*Objektivität*), rejecting the metaphysical conception of knowledge, shared in their different ways by rationalism and empiricism, as a correspondence of ideas to the properties of independent objects or things (*Dinge*) in favour of a transcendental-logical or essential ‘subjective’ conception of the objectivity of knowledge. The independent reality of the thing ceased to be the measure of knowledge – that notion is incoherent. It was replaced by an ontologically ambiguous notion of the ‘object’ of knowledge, the ‘objective’ character of which depends on the demonstration of the universality and necessity of its various subjective ‘elements’, along with that of the process of their unification or synthesis. (There is a strong conceptual and terminological opposition here of ‘object’ (*Objekt*) to ‘thing’ (*Ding*). For Kant, ‘objectivity’ is not about things; it is about the conditions under which the given yields ‘objects’ – that is, becomes conceptually apprehendable and hence ‘knowable’.)

The conceptual aspect of this process of object-formation is presented in Kant’s *Logic* as the product of a sequence of three ‘logical acts’, of which abstraction is the third. Following comparison and reflection – ‘the *likening* of presentations to one another in relation to the unity of consciousness’ and ‘the *going back over* different presentations ... in one consciousness’ – abstraction is ‘the *segregation* of everything else by which presentations differ’.¹¹ This is described by Kant as a ‘negative’ act, whereas the other two are termed ‘positive’. There is a residue here of the psychological process of Humean empiricism – the separation out of resemblances – but its epistemological function is rendered transcendently ideal and, in the process, *constitutive of the object*. In its formative role in the generation of concepts, abstraction thus has a positive epistemological significance, not merely despite, but precisely *by virtue of* its ‘negative’ role in distancing certain presentations from others, within the manifold of intuition through which the given appears.

Kant was the first philosopher to give an unequivocally positive epistemological value to abstraction as constitutive of the object of knowledge, while nonetheless retaining its negative connotation of leaving out of consideration certain presentations given to the senses. (It is important to note here that just as the object of knowledge (*Objekt*) is ontologically distinct from the thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) so, no less importantly, is the object of knowledge to be distinguished from the object as mere appearance (*Gegenstand*) given to

consciousness by sensibility – the unknowing appearance of the thing – which will become ‘known’ only through its transformation into an object of knowledge, by the concepts of the understanding. So there are three levels of analysis here.) This is an internally complex transformation in the concept of objectivity, from ‘thinghood’ to ‘object-constitution’, but it does not (contra someone like Rorty) wholly leave ‘things’ behind, since it is the realm of thinghood that appears, although it is not known ‘in itself’. *No amount of pragmatist epistemology can eradicate the existential dimension of the thingness of appearing*; indeed, ultimately, pragmatism requires it in order to make sense of its own central concept of ‘purpose for life’ (Hume), as Peirce saw so clearly. It is, after all, the common ontological substrate of subject and object that makes human subjects mortal. As conditions of the possibility of knowledge, mortality and natality are of transcendental-epistemological, as well as existential, significance.

This shift in the measure of knowledge from the idea of the thing (which is unknowable in its independence) to the ‘objectivity’, that is, universality and necessity, of objects of knowledge – a shift from self-evidence, quasi-mathematical proofs and laws of association to a discursive logic of justification – brought to the fore the normative dimension of the concept of knowledge. This is manifest in Kant’s text in the famous metaphors of its legal terminology – most explicitly, in its legal understanding of the terms ‘deduction’ and ‘proof’, the transcoding of which (from logic and mathematics to law) was the semiotic condition of Kant’s critical philosophy taking over the mantle of rationalist metaphysics. It needed to appropriate and transform the old terminology. Methodologically, Kantian philosophy reduces the laws of science to the status of the decisions of an eighteenth-century court of law. For some, this leads to the impasse and anxiety of ‘undecidability’, and the thrill of the decision; for others it is, more deeply, the belated philosophical recognition that the human is the social. And if the human is the social, the human is the historical, since the historical is the temporality of the globally social. All questions of the universally human thus become questions of history, in the collective singular. This is the decisive (Hegelian) result of Kantian philosophy. To the extent that recent revivals of mathematics as the model for philosophy fail to engage with this problematic, they risk the fate of all neo-classicisms.

Kant’s notion of objectivity is bound up with normativity not in the sense that it requires ‘disinterest’ or ‘altruism’ as its condition (for such notions derive

from a pre-Kantian conception of objectivity as undistorted access to the thing), but in the sense that it requires demonstration, in the form of the discursive redemption of a universality of interest. Nietzsche and later pragmatisms are in this respect the legitimate, albeit rebellious, heirs to Kant's concept of objectivity. What is misrecognized as 'scepticism about objectivity' in contemporary thought in the humanities is, rather, from this standpoint better understood as an exploitation of the possibilities for plurality – different forms of object-constitution – inherent within Kant's transcendental concept of objectivity. This is neither scepticism nor relativism but a play internal to the universality of a discursively based concept of objectivity. The practical-political critique of abstraction as conceptual domination is located within this discursive space. It depends upon the historical character and variability of object-constitution, and hence upon the possibility of alternative forms of the subject–object relation, alternative forms of human existence.

However, as indicated by Kant's retention of the horizon of the thing as a negative- or limit-concept, there is an absolute limit to such play (which is nonetheless infinite in scope), detectable in practice, at the limits of the subject, as the limits of experience. But this is not something that can be specified in advance. It is technologically elastic, for example, especially biotechnologically: hence the essentially experimental character of knowledge. The post-Kantian transcendentalism common to neo-Nietzschean and non-Peircean pragmatisms alike tends to discount this limit, theoretically, in favour of a pure practicalism, precisely because it cannot be specified in advance. Yet it is the existence of the limit that determines the meaning and existential significance of 'knowledge'. This is not a matter of 'criteria', or the epistemological 'indistinguishability' of this position from its opposite, anti-metaphysical one at the level of individual claims to knowledge, as a philosopher like Rorty supposes. Abstraction is constitutive of the object of knowledge, which is nonetheless actual for that.

This problem of the limit reappears, theoretically, as the problem of 'the whole' (Kant's 'totality of conditions and hence the unconditioned') consequent upon the interconnectedness of objects of knowledge within the transcendental unity of experience – the realm of Kantian ideas. This continued necessity of a thinking of the unconditioned, as a thinking of the whole, gave rise, after Kant, to the requirement for an ontological concept of truth, beyond the subject–object relations of an epistemological conception – a demand to which both Hegel's and Heidegger's thought were explicit

responses. In this respect, the problems internal to Kant's concept of objectivity determine the unity of the problematic of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European philosophy as a whole. For his part, Hegel attempted to develop an ontological concept of truth critically (in the Kantian sense), in its identity with the totality of possible knowledge, and hence as a speculative system. It is from this context that Hegel's reformulation of the problem of abstraction in terms of a 'dialectic of the abstract and concrete' derives both its philosophical meaning and its continuing significance for a transdisciplinary thinking of universality.

Abstraction, systematicity, disciplinarity

In logic, Hegel wrote in his *Science of Logic* ('the absolute culture and discipline of consciousness'), thought 'becomes at home in abstraction' (*Er wind dem Abstrakten ... einheimisch*).¹² This was, no doubt, in polemical response to Novalis's Romantic definition of philosophy as 'homesickness, an urge to be at home everywhere' – a position that was revived early in the twentieth century by both Lukács and Heidegger, and which continues to lie behind much of the contemporary melancholy about abstraction;¹³ although Lukács's conception of modernity as 'transcendental homelessness' may also be taken in another, more positive direction by an affirmative conception of non-place.¹⁴ Being at home in abstraction, Hegel believed, philosophical thought (that is, dialectical logic) is peculiarly suited to the comprehension of the modern world. For Hegel's understanding of modernity is already that of a *culture* of abstraction – of the 'abstract individual' with its 'abstract rights' engaging in monetary exchanges determined by 'the abstract value of goods'. (These are all phrases of Hegel's.) In modernity there is a paradoxical concreteness to certain abstractions. Yet, despite this paradoxical concreteness possessed by some abstractions – in the sense that they have a kind of empirical 'reality' (holding open the hope of philosophical thought becoming a genuine medium of knowledge of the actual, rather than the merely second-order activity which it was largely to be in the neo-Kantian and analytical wakes of Hegel's system) – the type of concreteness possessed by these abstractions belongs, for Hegel, to only the first stage in knowledge of the actual. It is an abstract type of *pseudo*-concreteness, familiar from his critique of empiricism. It is neither a true concreteness of *thought* nor an expression of the deeper truth-function of *the abstract*. Only the concrete concept, the concrete universal, Hegel's version of the 'idea', or what, more methodologically (following Marx), we might

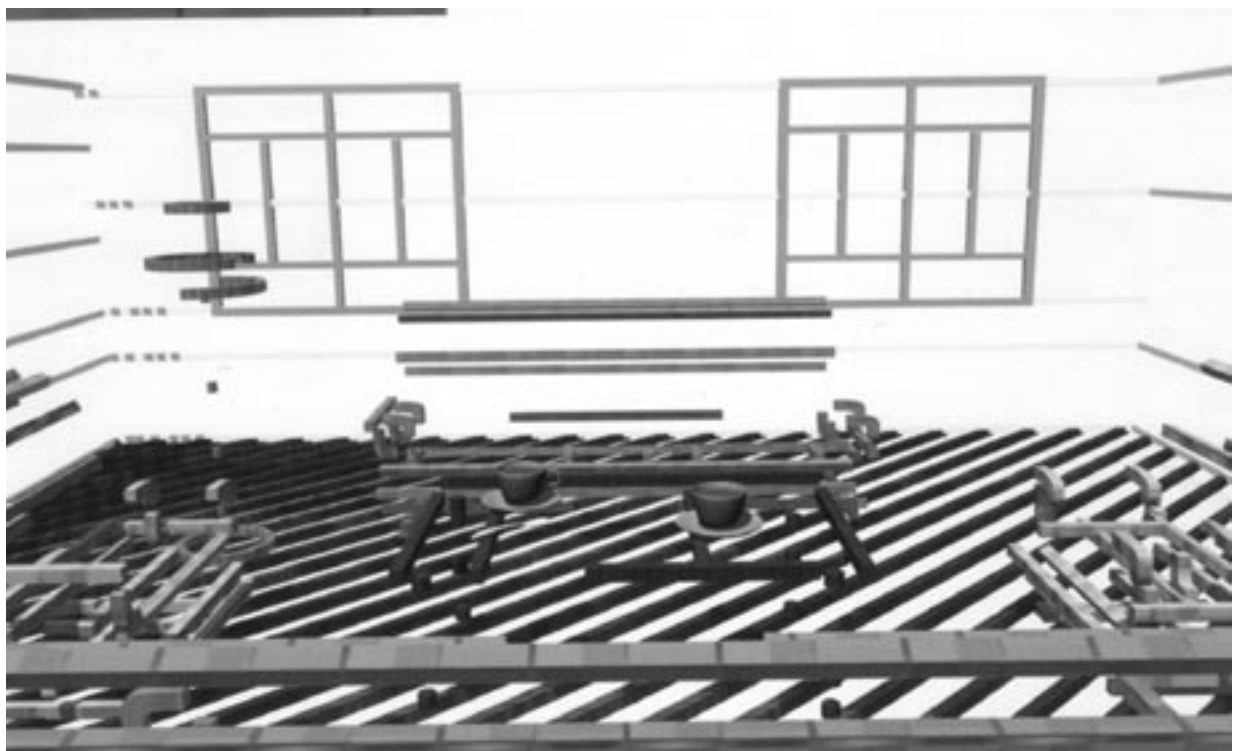
call the 'concrete in thought', can achieve that. In its adjectival form 'abstract' (*abstrakt*) thus remained a predominantly derogatory term in Hegel's lexicon. It denotes the one-sidedness and finitude of the concepts of the understanding (*Verstand*) in distinction from reason's (*Vernunft*) dialectically comprehensive conceptual grasp of the whole.

As Hegel put in his early *feuilleton*, 'Who Thinks Abstractly?', it is thinking abstractly 'to see nothing in the murderer except the abstract fact that he is a murderer, and to annul all other human essence [*Wesen*] in him with this simple quality' (or indeed, in her – since abstract right should abstract from gender in the formality of the law).¹⁵ This is the historico-philosophical basis of the critique of abstraction as conceptual domination: abstract domination is a practical effect of conceptual one-sidedness. And it can take on ferocious forms. The paradigmatic instance in Hegel is, of course, the famous section on 'Absolute Freedom and Terror' in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There the division within the concept of universal freedom between the 'equally abstract extremes' of 'a simple, inflexible cold universality' and 'the discrete, absolute hard rigidity and self-willed atomism of actual self-consciousness[es]' leads to the preparation by representatives of the former of 'the coldest and meanest of all deaths' for the latter, 'with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water'. There can be few sentences in Hegel's oeuvre of such chilling current significance as the one that reads: 'The sole work and

deed of universal freedom [that is, abstractly universal freedom] is ... death.'¹⁶

We find in Hegel a systematic set of distinctions between different types of abstraction – good, bad and indifferent – derived from the relationship between the oneness of truth and the variety of logical forms. Briefly, for Hegel, 'bad' abstractions are the one-sided, oppositional abstractions of the understanding, considered as if they are true forms of knowledge. (They are bad because they are forms of misrecognition.) 'Good' abstraction is the concrete abstraction of the absolute idea, containing within itself the systematic relations between the abstractions of the understanding ('all determinateness', in Hegel's expression¹⁷); or, alternatively, it is an abstraction of the understanding viewed from the standpoint of its place within the whole, as a merely partial manifestation of the absolute idea. 'Indifferent' abstractions are abstractions of the understanding viewed independently from the question of truth, from the standpoint of their limited, partial function within the process of knowledge as a whole. One need not adopt a strictly Hegelian position in order to borrow this structure of distinctions so as to develop them analogically, in a transposed form; or at least, in order to problematize certain prevailing critiques of abstraction, some of which themselves have an implicit, quasi-Hegelian form. In fact, they are largely universalizations Hegel's conception of 'bad' abstraction into the sole form.

Hegel's attempt to *actualize* an ontological concept of truth in the immediate unity of the totality of



knowledge was inevitably a failure, since, given the radical openness of the temporal horizon, systematicity can only take the form of an ongoing, infinitely revisable, inherently partial, speculative achievement – which was not Hegel's own ultimately Christian, neo-Platonic idea of speculative experience. As a result, Kant's subjective requirement for a continued thinking of the unconditioned was displaced from being the postulated *ground* of knowledge to its speculative historical *horizon*. (Once knowledge is historicized, totality becomes historically, as well as metaphysically, speculative.) With this, the idea of the systematic interconnectedness of knowledges takes on the new function of negatively determining the limitations of specific knowledges – something which became integral to the early Horkheimer's conception of Critical Theory. Systematic orientation (rather than system as a form of presentation) became, in part, a reflexive means to overcome the illusory self-sufficiency of specific knowledges, immanently and speculatively, via reference to the absent whole. (There is an affinity here between Horkheimer's Kantian Hegelianism and Benjamin's Romanticism.) Hence the revival of philosophical Romanticism after Hegelianism as a model of thought, in Adorno among others – although, in Adorno, outside of art theory, the positive content of interconnectedness became increasingly attenuated. This post-Hegelian problematic involves a change in the philosophical conditions and meaning of disciplinarity.

There is a common historical narrative of the relationship between philosophy and other disciplines that tells the tale of modern philosophy as a tale of incremental depletion. It runs something like this. Following the foundation of modern empirical science in the seventeenth century, philosophy lost progressively more and more of the empirical totality of objects of knowledge to the various emergent sciences, until by the early twentieth century nothing remained outside of science. Philosophy was left with either the purely formal sphere of the various types of logical universality alone (this is the story of logical positivism) or some separate ontological domain (Bergson's duration or Heidegger's Being, for example). Henceforth philosophy would therefore have to confine itself to these domains alone. From this point of view, any attempt to know the world through philosophical concepts involves regression to a pre-critical type of pseudo-science based on empirically arbitrary and hence scientifically (rather than philosophically) 'bad' abstractions. This is still a widely prevalent view among professional philosophers. Indeed, holding it

is, in most places, a condition of entry into philosophy as a discipline.

There are two main problems with this scenario. The first is that it conflates a transcendental (constitutive) with an empirical (given) conception of scientific object-domains. The second is that it leaves out of account altogether the problem of the whole. In the first case, the idea that the empirical totality of objects of possible knowledge could be exhaustively divided up between different sciences presupposes that this totality is empirically given and as such 'divisible'. Yet, on the post-Kantian conception, such objects must be theoretically *constituted* as 'objects of knowledge', as varying means of knowing what is given. And such constitutions must be discursively redeemed. The conceptual arbitrariness in the historical formation of actual disciplines – hardly a model of 'empirical method' – provides rich materials here for philosophical reconstruction and critique of object-constitution. From this point of view, the so-called 'epistemological crisis of the humanities' is not a crisis about 'realism, scepticism and relativism' (this is the misunderstanding that perpetuates it); it is a crisis of changing and overlapping object-formations, and hence of interdisciplinarity. It is also, of course, a crisis of genres (of how different practices of writing figure, and cross, particular object-domains) and of the social relations of intellectual production – the institutional sustainability of different forms of collaboration. (Serious inter- or trans-disciplinarity can only be a collective project, but the social form of intellectual work in the humanities remains, importantly, predominantly individual.) This is a philosophical issue because it concerns the interconnection of knowledges and their functions within the whole. This is the second problem: the problem of the whole.

Disciplinarity only makes sense against an implicit speculative background of inter- and trans-disciplinarity of various sorts, which requires more than a merely methodological thinking of the whole. Hence the importance of certain general transdisciplinary concepts in historical, social and cultural theory – production/reproduction, modernity/tradition, desire/gender (to name but a few) – as the point of mediation between different disciplinary discourses in the humanities and social sciences, as historico-philosophical forms of object-constitution mediating the relations between different forms of inquiry; and also the importance, ultimately, of ontological concepts of natural history, mediating the 'natural' and 'historical' domains.¹⁸ This transdisciplinary domain is the point of mediation with experience and social practice

since what is given in experience is never less than an aspect of the whole. The question thus arises as to the precise logical, ontological and phenomenological characteristics of those mediating forms constituting ‘global capitalist modernity’ and, indeed, their historical content.¹⁹

Actual abstractions

From a Hegelian point of view, such forms will be grasped in thought as ‘good’ – that is, logically and hence ontologically ‘concrete’, and therefore *actual* – abstractions. However, once we divest ourselves of Hegel’s notion of an *achieved* absolute, the theoretical and practical sides of Hegel’s theory of abstraction begin to come apart. Since subjectivity can no longer be wholly assimilated to the subjective aspect of the absolute, the analytical virtue of ‘good’ (that is, concrete) abstraction is no longer at one with the practical virtue hitherto associated with it: namely freedom, in Hegel’s sense of a recognized necessity. Analytically ‘good’ abstraction, ‘concrete fullness of abstraction’, or the unity of the categorial forms of a systematic dialectic, may now correspond to *practically* ‘bad’ abstraction: paradigmatically, in Marx’s analysis, domination by the abstractions of the value-form. For if there is a ‘substance which is subject’ in Marx’s analysis of capitalism, it is *capital*, not the collective worker. (Adorno had a more accurate reading of the logic of *Capital* than the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* on this point, let alone Negri, for all his late Frankfurtean stress on the universalization of ‘real subsumption’.) In terms of the logical form of Marx’s analysis in *Capital*, it is self-valorizing capital – not the proletariat – that corresponds to Hegel’s ‘idea’.²⁰ Indeed, in so far as analytically ‘good’ abstraction (Marx’s ‘concrete in thought’) takes the ultimate form of a self-sufficient totality of interconnected abstractions, it will presumably *always* correspond to practically ‘bad’ abstractions that stand over and against individual subjects, in so far as there are a plurality of social subjects. However, and this is my main point here, this kind of practically ‘bad’ abstraction has a different logical form to the ‘one-sided’ bad abstractions of the understanding, from which the discourse of good and bad abstraction derives.

For there is decisive transformation in the Hegelian-inspired critique of abstraction as domination once it is extended beyond the merely empirical ‘reality’ (*Realität*) of the one-sided abstractions of the understanding in ‘the abstract individual’, ‘abstract right’ and the like (an empiricism of everyday economic, legal and political life) to the more concretely abstract

forms that unify dialectically structured totalities. In terms of Hegel’s ontology, such forms are not merely ‘real’ (*real*) but ‘actual’ (*wirklich*). They are *actual* abstractions; indeed, ultimately, aspects of *self-actualizing* abstraction. As such, they are constitutive of the unity of the totality as a self-developing whole, and so contain ‘subjectivity’ within themselves. This is a specific form of ‘conceptual domination’ in which the deep social structure of subjectivity is implicated. It is quite different from the ‘domination’ associated with the one-sidedness of abstract universals of the understanding, which is epitomized in the terror of absolute freedom and which, on Adorno’s analysis, takes an everyday form in capitalist societies in the schematizations of the cultural industry. (Adorno’s analysis is explicitly Kantian on that point.) Yet the practical-political critique of abstraction, as currently formulated, conflates the two forms. It operates with only one form. The whole set of relations between these different concepts of the *abstract* and the *concrete*, and of the *real* and the *actual*, thus needs to be rethought in order to take account of the ontological distinctiveness of the ‘actual abstractions’ at issue. For the ontology of the value form is that of an *objective ideality* which is nonetheless immanent to a *social materialism*.²¹

A number of questions arise. First, politically: are ‘actual abstractions’ necessarily forms of social domination, qua abstractions, rather than relative to their historically specific forms and social contents? For if, for example, it is the very abstractness of the value form that is the condition of its universality as a social mediation, how are we to conceive of alternative forms of equally universal social mediation other than as being in some sense equally abstract? Are certain experiences of abstraction not the necessary condition of *any* global social interconnectedness in such a way that it makes no sense to criticize them for their abstraction per se? In which case a certain pervasive political discourse requires a new conception of the relationship between emancipation and actual abstraction – some conception of appropriation *within* abstraction, perhaps. But what form of subjectivity would that be – individual and collective? Or is the very metaphor of ‘appropriation’ (derived from the theory of alienation) redundant at this point – a blockage to thinking new kinds of relations between subjectivity and abstract social forms? What new possibilities of the human are produced by the mediating force of actual abstractions?²²

Hardt and Negri, for example, still seem bound to a Romanticism of origins – originary subjectivization

– in this respect. Their social generalization of the concept of the collective worker into the ‘multitude’ masks the fact that in terms of its social productivity in capitalist societies living labour is a moment in the self-mediation of capital. The generalization of the concept of real subsumption from the sphere of production to society as a whole registers the internality of labour to capital at one level, social form, but Negri insulates this level from the (fundamental) ontological level of living labour itself. Living labour is thus granted an ontological exemption from history, which is an exemption from abstraction itself.²³

Second, epistemologically: how far can we legitimately extend the Hegelian notion of actual abstraction in the investigation of the status, the scope and the critical function of general, transdisciplinary concepts in the theory of global capitalist modernity? Crucially, does it have an application beyond the mediations of the value form? Can it be legitimately applied, as I have suggested elsewhere, to the most general temporal and spatial forms associated with modernity as a structure of historical experience – the temporal logic of the historically new and the spatial logic of ‘non-places’ – since these, like value, are fundamental modes of unity of the total global social whole, although in other respects they are very different kinds of form?²⁴ And, if so, to what else? What is the productive range of this kind of concept? Alternatively, is there anything actual outside it?

Notes

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1970, p. 47.
2. David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, Book 1, §7.
3. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour, and Social Domination*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 126, 127.
4. Derek Sayers, *The Violence of Abstraction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1987.
5. Paul Feyerabend, *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1999.
6. The phrase is Derrida’s, from his early critique of Levinas. Jacques Derrida, ‘Violence and Metaphysics’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1978, p. 151.
7. See, for example, Jay Bernstein, ‘The Death of Sensuous Particulars: Adorno and Abstract Expressionism’, *Radical Philosophy* 76, March–April 1996, pp. 7–16.
8. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (1900; 1907), trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, p. 221. For Simmel, this tragedy, which is the tragedy of ‘the evolutionary process of the practical mind’, is quintessentially the tragedy – but also, importantly, the ‘infinite possibility’ – of money.
9. This flattening out is more pronounced in Derrida than

in Adorno, whose thought crucially retains a historical dimension. However, in so far as for him the contradiction within the idea of knowledge is structural, the historicity of its genesis is cancelled in its result.

10. Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Athlone, London, 1981, ch. 1.
11. Immanuel Kant, *Logic* (1800), trans. Robert S. Hartman and Wolfgang Schwarz, Dover, New York, 1974, p. 100.
12. *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, 1989, pp. 58–9; G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke 5, Wissenschaft der Logik I*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1986, p. 55.
13. Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (1920), trans. Anna Bostock, Merlin Press, London, 1971, pp. 29, 41; Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (1929/30), trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995, pp. 5–7.
14. See Peter Osborne, ‘Non-Places and the Spaces of Art’, *The Journal of Architecture* 6, Summer 2001, pp. 183–94.
15. Hegel, ‘Who Thinks Abstractly’ (c.1808), in Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: Texts and Commentary*, Anchor Books, Garden City NY, 1966, pp. 113–8, p. 116.
16. *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, pp. 359–60.
17. *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, p. 824.
18. Adorno’s early essay ‘The Idea of Natural History’ (1932), trans. R. Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* 60, Summer 1984, pp. 111–24, remains one of the few attempts at such a thought.
19. Cf. Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, ch. 1.
20. See Christopher J. Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx’s Capital*, Brill, Leiden/Boston/Cologne, 2002, chs 1–8.
21. Cf. Christopher J. Arthur, ‘The Spectral Ontology of Value’, *Radical Philosophy* 107, May/June 2001, pp. 32–42.
22. The familiar theoretical alternative to appropriation is affirmation. See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962), trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Athlone Press, London, 1983, ch. 5. However, in its principled rejection of mediation this Nietzschean alternative remains, at least as yet, incapable of thinking the ontological distinctiveness of social form.
23. Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the ‘Grundrisse’* (1978), trans. Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan and Maurizio Viano, Automedia/Pluto, New York/London, 1991, ‘Lesson Six: Social Capital and World Market’, pp. 105–26; Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2000, pp. 254–6, 272; Antonio Negri, ‘Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo’ (2000), in *Time for Revolution*, trans. Matteo Mandarinini, Continuum, New York and London, 2003, ‘Living Labour’, pp. 235–48. The exemption of living labour from history is the price Negri’s thought pays for its rejection of all concepts of mediation.
24. Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, chs 1 and 3; ‘Non-Places and the Spaces of Art’. See also David Cunningham, ‘The Phenomenology of Non-Dwelling: Massimo Cacciari, Modernism and the Philosophy of the Metropolis’, *Crossings* 7, 2004.

Karatani's Marxian parallax

Harry Harootunian

One of the rarely noticed historical ironies of the twentieth century was the effort of societies located on the capitalist periphery – outside of Euro-America – to resort to a philosophy which had no place for them in order to explain their entry into and experience of capitalist modernization. Japan led the way in this search for meaning, owing to its good fortune in avoiding outright colonization, but even colonized regions drawn into the capitalist desiring machine invariably turned to philosophy – usually neo-Kantianism, phenomenological existentialism and Marxism – as the privileged optic through which to refract their experience and grasp its ultimate meaning; societies which only yesterday, so to speak, obeyed the rhythms of vastly different social and cultural referents.

It is well known that Edmund Husserl, on the eve of World War II, gave explicit expression to the idea that only the West knew philosophy. This was a lasting cultural conceit inherited and willingly but paradoxically continued by 'Western Marxism' down to the present day. But this reminder of exclusion failed to discourage and inhibit the several attempts by Japanese and other 'latecomers' to utilize a philosophy that could not conceptualize its outside in order to explain to themselves the nature of both the history and society they were made to live under the new regime of capitalist modernization and colonization. With Marxism, thinkers were early induced to rethink it as philosophy. What this repressed history showed was precisely the recognition that since philosophy held no place for their societies, and no accounting of the difference they represented, in spite of its universalizing claims, it was vital to see in this absence philosophy's vulnerable centre, the point at which its universalistic presumptions collapsed like a house of cards. Long before the poststructuralist assault on metaphysics, Japanese thinkers and others outside of Euro-America had already begun the task of identifying the scandal of its claims.

With the publication of Kojin Karatani's *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*,* we are reminded of both the

neglected history of the attempt to recruit the resources of philosophy to explain the experience of modernity and philosophy's unexpected move, embracing a deconstructive impulse before the letter, to save it from itself. Long known as one of contemporary Japan's principal literary and cultural thinkers, Karatani, who now spends part of the year teaching in an American university, has in many ways continued this great tradition, bringing it back from its shadowed exile, to recall for us the importance of all those attempts formulated on the margin to contest the claims of the centre with its own 'weapons', what Chinese in the nineteenth century advised in the formula 'using barbarian tools to manage the barbarians'. But, as Karatani shows, it's not as simple as it sounds and his book is no derivative imitation.

Towards the end of this long, dense, complex and original book, Karatani explains that his goal 'in writing [it] ... is a return to *Capital* once more to read the potential that has been overlooked' (265). With this announcement he is clearly referring to a tradition of misrecognitions bound to an 'ideology of industrial capitalism' sanctioning all those efforts by Marxists to 'renovate its creativity'. The promise of extracting this overlooked potential is to be achieved by reading Kant through Marx and Marx through Kant in order to recover their shared ground of critique. Karatani warns early that his reading has nothing to do with the neo-Kantianism that dominated prewar academic philosophy in Japan, even though there were thinkers like Tosaka Jun, whose Marxism was mediated by Kant rather than Hegel and whose conception of dialectic comes close to Karatani's choice of the notion of parallax. The strategy of pairing reveals two different but mutually complementary positions and allows Karatani to resort to Kant apparently to make up for what he sees missing in Marx's materialism by adding a subjective/ethical dimension. Kant and Marx shared a critical perspective based on 'the pronounced parallax' that took the form of the antinomy. Here Karatani risks recuperating the figure of those very

* Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. Sabu Kohso, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003. 366 pp., £24.95 hb., 0 262 11274 4.

bourgeois antinomies that both Lukács and Sohn-Rethel, in their own ways, held up as instances of idealist contradictions. In Karatani's reckoning there occurs a constant 'transposition' between the two thinkers, as they move to different discursive positions that produce the parallax. This migration between positions is what also characterizes, for Karatani, the oscillations observed when workers change their location from selling labour-power to occupying the place where they consume the goods they have produced. I will return later to this point, which is central to the articulation of a new strategy of association against capital, state and nation. But it should also be noted that the parallax resembles all of those early attempts by thinkers outside Euro-America to envisage an arrangement whereby the polarities representing decisive differences between West and East functioned as antinomies whose transposition was necessary to make each other whole.

According to Karatani, Marxists have failed to recognize this transverse moment, whether it is in Kant, Marx or the worker, where opposite truths – antinomies – intersect to provide a transcritical perspective. What Karatani is pointing to is a transcendental critique capable of leading not to a third position, as such, but to the opening of transversal and transpositional movement. In fact, this theoretical movement enables him to reread *Capital* in such a way as to reveal the silhouette of association which, he believes, manifests a 'possible communism', an ethico-economic form of exchange that owes as much to Proudhon as it does to Marx, a geological shift from the movement of labour to consumption (295). Although this movement involves seeing how Marx grasped the worker occupying both the place of abstract labour and consumption, as if temporal and spatial difference made the transfer negotiable and natural, the resulting transposition resembles more a shift from proletarianization to embourgeoisement. But before I turn to this parallax it is useful to see what transcritique yields for a rereading of *Capital*.

The worker as consumer

Karatani's primary purpose is to contest a productionist or workerist account of *Capital*. This is what he means when he disparagingly calls attention to the ideology of industrial capitalism in order to dismiss it. But this, by no means original, intention is also driven by a desire to discredit the 'cultural turn' in Marxism (and possibly a cultural studies no longer Marxian) and its debilitating dependence on base/superstructure causality and its privileging of representation, as ideological reproduc-

tion. While commendable that Karatani wishes to avoid the entrapments of the base/superstructure dyad that has dogged traditional Marxian hermeneutics, and to move beyond the pervasive culturalism authorized by the turn to consumption, his own programme to politicize or, better yet, to ethicize the worker as consumer risks recuperating the discourses he is seeking to correct, along with their own propensity for locating subjective agency. The decision to orchestrate a confrontation of Kant and Marx in order to restore a parallax perspective, demanding both the recognition of difference and constant relocations from one antinomy to another, without resorting to the resolutions promised by the operation of sublation, enables a reading of Marx's *Capital* for its account of systems of exchange. The result of this 'history' is the inauguration of the commodity exchange that still dominates contemporary society. (Here Sohn-Rethel would have been invaluable to his project but would have altered Karatani's views of Kant.)

Before the installation of commodity exchange there were two prior historical forms: 'exchange within a community – a reciprocity of gift and return', followed by 'plunder' and 'redistribution'. This superimposition of history on the logical order of economic categories opens the way to a future fourth form of exchange, which Karatani calls 'association', that calls for the establishment of mutual aid bound by neither a principle of exclusion nor coercion identified with community. In Karatani's thinking this fourth moment was envisaged first by Kant in his ethics, rather than Proudhon, and requires passing through capitalist market society. The 'trinity' of capital, nation and state are necessarily embedded in these forms of human exchange and fail to conceal their limits of inclusion and reliance on force by fixing a pattern of circular repetition impossible to overcome. But in rereading Marx's *Capital* from the perspective of the 'pronounced parallax', Karatani manages to discern an exit and the possibility of a new modality of exchange. The real thrust of transcritique is to get to this fourth type of human exchange – association – based on mutual aid and assistance realized by the subjective agency of the global worker. In this respect, when Karatani relocates the worker to the place of consumption where, he proposes, surplus value is finally realized and where it can be stopped through boycotts and other strategies, he has joined a swelling chorus of contemporary writers calling for a return to ethics as a more than adequate substitute for politics.

Karatani bases his reading on the crucial separation of the process of production from circulation and thus

consumption. To make this manoeuvre he proposes that the movement of capital in the formula $M-C-M'$ – referring to the realization of surplus value – actually means that the operation ultimately depends upon whether or not products are sold. ‘And surplus value is realized in principle only by workers in totality buying back what they produce’ (20). Acknowledging that in the production process the worker must sell his/her labour-power, he recognizes that the resulting relationship between capitalist and worker will resemble the one between master and slave. Since commodities must be sold in the place of consumption, presumably temporally and spatially distinct from the time and site of production, Karatani reasons that this is the only location wherein the worker possesses buying power and is in a position to purchase, almost as if the chronotopic shift permitted them to shed their identity with abstract labour and slide into the space of a subject when before they were only personifications of capital. Accordingly, Marx recognized that since the worker possesses exchange value and acts as a consumer, owning money, acquiring ‘the form of money’ thrusts him/her into ‘a simple centre of circulation’, ‘one of its infinitely many centres, in which his[her] specificity as a worker is extinguished’ (*Grundrisse*; Karatani, 20). But Marx also saw here the great illusion of every capitalist who wished only that other workers, not his own, confront him as consumers. In *Capital*, then, consumption stands as the place where surplus value is finally realized. For Karatani, this means that understanding what Marx proposed requires we shift our perspective from the production process to the circuit of circulation, as if, in fact, they constituted qualitatively different spheres. It is, of course, within the space between different systems – the line separating the parallaxics of production and circulation, the boundary between communities, that the ‘doubting subject’ appears (134). In Karatani’s explanation, Marx himself looms as the paradigmatic figure of a subject who doubts, whose materialism stands between idealism and empiricism (141).

At the heart of Karatani’s rereading is the conviction that classical economists, unlike Marx, overlooked the ‘magic of money’. For them, money functioned only as a secondary consideration and as barometer of labour time embodied in the commodity or its role in facilitating circulation. If they thus failed to see capital as the self-reproduction of money, the principal motive driving it, they also lost sight of the relationship between wage workers as sellers of labour-power – the primary form of commodification – and capitalists as its buyers. The most crucial instance of blindness was

the inability to perceive that at least on one occasion capital must occupy the position of seller owing to its law of self-production. By making this move Karatani transfers the problematic from production, as such, to the realm of circulation, which he summarizes in the following way: $C-M$ (selling) and $M-C$ (buying) constitute separate spheres in such a measure as to permit exchange’s capacity for infinite expansion. At the same time he manages to recognize the propensity for generating crises in the ‘fatal leap’ (*salto mortale*) implicit in $C-M$. Even though the circulation process is reversed in the circuit $M-C-M'$, Karatani nevertheless sees the formulas as two separate processes rather than simply two sides of the same coin, because the impulse for circulation is prompted by the possessor of money. Hence Marx saw capital as a process of social chrysalis and metamorphosis – from the larval stage to the butterfly – inasmuch as the movement proceeded from production to products and back to money again. But, according to Karatani, the metamorphosis must be completed if capital is to realize its own self-production. Hidden in the circulation of commodities is the movement of money.

What this meant for Marx was the persistence of the figure of the fetish of commodity (as against the ‘commodity fetish’), the guarantor of endless self-production and the reproduction of social relations of production, indeed the social itself. The primacy of the value form as a structuring agent – what Marx called the ‘germinal cell’ – mandates that circulation, far from representing a different value system as Karatani supposes, must be seen as simply one of the moments of production, just as price, which he subsequently attributes to an evolutionary process within the interstices of different value systems, was always one of the forms of appearance of value itself, since the latter had no ‘empirical’ reality. As for the putative power of the worker as consumer, Karatani seems to have overlooked Marx’s own strictures that even though labour capacity is posited at the centre of exchange, it is ‘just as essential to it ... to restrict the worker’s consumption to the amount necessary to reproduce his labour capacity’ (*Grundrisse*).

The crucial question or aporia that Karatani confronts is not merely the relationship between the production process and sphere of circulation but where surplus value is finally realized. Recognizing that Marx threw up mixed signals concerning the capacity and incapacity of circulation to generate surplus value in the last instance, as well as the ambiguities surrounding the role played by production, Karatani clings to the observation that ‘mass commodities’

must be sold in order to replace constant and variable capital. Failing to do so will result in a lessening of exploitation by the capitalist and the diminution of surplus capital or only its ‘partial extraction’. Karatani seizes upon this uncertainty, which Marx put in the form of a contradiction, to propose that ‘regardless of what happens in the process of production, surplus value is finally realized in ... circulation.’ But what Marx was proposing was that the condition of immediate exploitation – production inaugurating the process of realizing surplus value – is not identical with the ‘realization of that exploitation’ (*Capital 3*; Karatani, 224). The former is restricted to the productive forces, the latter by ‘the proportionality between different branches of production and by society’s power of consumption’ (my stress). The import of this passage fails to diminish the power of the production process at the expense of augmenting circulation as the sphere of surplus value. Rather, it calls attention to the structural links that dramatize how the latter (circulation) is both a moment of the former (production) and subordinate to it, as ‘interdependent branches of the collective production of society’ (*Capital 1*; Karatani, 225). What Marx was referring to here was the development of the division of labour arising from



those spheres of exchange and production which were originally distinct and independent from one another, but which in industrial capitalism are converted by exchange into ‘interdependent branches’. Karatani’s own ‘leap of faith’ is to see this global interaction as the site for multiple and different systems capable of setting the stage for the worker’s entry into circulation to become the consumer subject. This leap is propelled by two convictions: that surplus value is invariably produced by and within an arena of different value systems (presumably the globe) and that industrial capitalism actually derives from merchant capital and

is a variation of this authorizing moment, differentiated only by its commitment to ceaseless technological development.

This emphasis on circulation prepares the way for Karatani to propose how the (global) worker becomes the active agent who possesses the capacity to realize a ‘possible communism’. Here he loops back to Kant’s ethics to assert that association must be rooted in ‘an economy that is ethical and an ethics that must be economic’. He is convinced that once the worker occupies the place of consumption – where surplus value is finally realized – circulation is ‘subordinated to the will of the other’, that is, ‘workers qua consumers’ (288). Production is only the place where workers sell their labour-power and seek to improve their conditions of work. Real proletarian subjectivity corresponds to the moment when the worker moves to the position of consumer in the process of circulation (290). In contrast to Antonio Negri, who actively located the possibility of political subjectivity in the production process, Karatani needs to reposition the worker in relation to consumption in order to reach his destination, which is the fourth mode of exchange represented by association. This was what his own, now failed, New Association Movement was supposed to constitute, as a vanguard producers’ and consumers’ cooperative aiming to equip itself with a Local Exchange Trading System, LETS (see Harry Harootunian, ‘Out of Japan: The New Associationist Movement’, *Radical Philosophy* 108, July/August 2001, pp. 2–6). On a global scale, this non-capitalist cooperative association would put the worker in a position of agency outside of the circuits of M–C–M’, and presumably outside the place that they become ‘money en masse that buys commodities’. Here, they are poised to control the circuits of surplus value. But this is to describe nothing more than how the

worker becomes a bourgeois subject who is no more capable of blocking the realization of surplus than the seller of labour-power in the production process.

Karatani’s epic effort to rethink the ground of proletarian subjectivity risks simply hastening the full development of the commodity relation on a global scale. While he plainly overstates the role played by the circulation process by following historical chronology too closely, his preference stems from the fact that historically capital developed in the sphere of circulation and only later passed on to the production process. If capital seemed to have been born in the

sphere of circulation (commercial profit, interest, rent etc.) it was solely a deduction of the profit subsequently realized later in production. In other words, the genesis of the historical categories do not correspond to the actual origins of capital logic. Marx's analysis of the basic categories of capitalism presupposed the historical existence of the relations that had unfolded and which he had already deduced logically. Hence, he could write:

We have not yet dealt with the historic passage of circulation to capital. To the contrary simple circulation is an abstract sphere of the process of bourgeois production, which, by its own determination, presents itself as an element, a simple manifestation of a deeper process situated behind it, at the same time its' result and product. (From a fragment of an early version of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1858), quoted in Anselm Jappe, *Les Aventures de la Marchandise*, Denoel, Paris, 2003, p. 93)

In *Capital* Marx steadfastly maintained that the misunderstanding between production and circulation was the consequence of the 'confusion which identified the social process of production with the surplus process of labour', the operation of a simple metabolism with nature (Jappe, 102). When Marx began with the most simple element – the commodity – he already presupposed the existence of the entire social structure. Abstract labour historically was less a presupposition than a consequence of the capitalist development of the forces of production. But Marx consistently upheld the priority of the logic of economic categories over historical development. In the analysis of social relations, the categories capitalist society has developed cannot be based on their chronology. It would thus be erroneous to arrange economic categories according to the order they have historically developed. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* he acknowledged that he was advancing general and abstract categories that did not necessarily correspond to history. The order of these categories must always be determined by the relations that exist between them in modern bourgeois society and will appear as the inverse of that which seems to be their natural (historical) sequence or conforms to the order of succession of historical evolution. Hence, the succession of categories in the analysis of the mature system, as Marx found it in mid-nineteenth-century England, does not correspond to the historical reality which, in any case, they presuppose. In this connection, it seems that Karatani may have played fast and loose with Marx's method by privileging the historical order

(as exemplified by the paradigmatic role accorded to merchant capital) over the logical succession of economic categories implicated in the analysis of the developed system.

Ethical subject, or subject of capital?

Yet Karatani's account is not only methodologically wobbly. In seeking to rescue the worker's subjectivity by situating it in the place of consumption (circulation) he comes close to recuperating the traditional Marxism he has promised to overcome. What he manages to do is rescue an account that has envisioned capitalist and worker as owners of money who therefore possessed the capacity to act (buy), making them creators rather than creatures. Marx, it might be recalled, once famously remarked that 'money and commodity cannot take themselves to the market; they cannot exchange themselves' (*Capital* 1). Too often, traditional Marxism has reversed the catalogue, so to speak, to find value concealing behind it the veritable essence of capitalism, which was the exploitation of one class by another. For Marx, the classes existed only as 'guardians' and executors of the logic of the organic composition of capital. Hence the capitalist functioned as the 'personification' of capital, its 'bearer', in the same way that the worker personifies labour. The domination of the capitalist over the worker is the domination of the thing over humans, of 'dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour', of the production process over the labour process whereby product becomes a commodity. There is also the category of the fetish as the real inversion wherein the capitalist is transmuted into the place-holder of power as its personification.

In the production process, then, there are only 'masks' and 'personifications' of economic categories. While Marx had few illusions that these place-holders were not simply innocent victims but willing and enthusiastic participants, he also never doubted that they were incapable of controlling a system motored by the internal contradictions of a society founded on the commodity form. In *Capital*, Marx identified value and its capacity for splitting as the 'subject of a process' that assumes the form of money and commodities, but still manages to change its 'magnitude' to valorize itself. 'It differentiates itself', he remarked, 'just as God the father differentiates himself from the son, although both are of the same age and for, in fact one single person' (*Capital* 1). Consistently rejecting a theory of 'delusional' subjectivity that recalled earlier eighteenth-century theories seeking to explain religion as simply an 'imposture' organized by priests, he

rarely described capitalism as an ensemble of personal relationships of domination, directed better to deceive the exploited and dominated, lurking behind an appearance of objective circumstances, such as value, while making their subjective machinations disappear into a natural process (Jappe, 98). For that to have happened, it would have been necessary for men, or groups of them, to constitute themselves as the veritable subject of commodity society and creatively devise the categories of this form of socialization. But that would now mean we could only attribute such categories to reflections of the very inversion that has organized the subject's mind and cognitive capacities. At the same time, he announced that 'value is ... the subject ... that valorizes itself independently'. Sociality and subjectivity become manifest in humans as reflexes of the automatic movement of commodities and the self-valorization of value.

Under these circumstances it is surprising to see Karatani turn to investing Marx with a Kantian 'ethical subject' capable of acting according to the protocols of transcritique, which would mean possessing the faculty of a singular consciousness empowered to dispose itself spontaneously, a subject setting into motion the objects surrounding it. Yet the theory of the fetish permits only a subject that is neither an individual human nor collectivity but their objective social relationships. To be sure, humans, according to Anselm Jappe, are in the final analysis the creators of the commodity but they make it in a way Marx described: 'They don't know it but they do it' (Jappe, 99). Value never expresses other, more essential relations, found lurking behind it, but is itself the fundamental relationship informing capitalism. In this regard the fetish acquires the status of a universality that is not the sum of its parts, acting like Karatani's 'transcendental *x*', an involuntary effect created by the conscious actions of particular subjects. In this sense the value form assumes the appearance of an 'unconscious' of society; indeed it acts as its unconscious, reproducing itself through an automatic self-valorization it has generated without knowing it. 'Individuals are subsumed under social production; social production exists outside them as their fate; but social production is not subsumed under individuals, manageable by them as their common wealth' (*Grundrisse*).

At this point, Karatani could have turned to and utilized an earlier argument that appears to be based on the recognition of partial or formal subsumption and the persistence of unevenness throughout the world. This observation was consistent with the experience of the periphery especially, where it was lived

more intensely than in the self-universalized centre still strangely valorized by the Western Marxism that Karatani seeks to contest. If he had held fast to the recognition that in the future all production will never be completely capitalist (252) and that there will always be 'semi-proletarians' (a venerable term from the lexical treasury of Japanese Marxism), that premodern productive practices will continue to persist and forms of unevenness will be reproduced in new registers, Karatani, like others before him, might have found the site for a subject-position free from the taints of the commodity relation. At the very least he would have been alerted to those persisting regimes of formal subsumption (which Hardt and Negri reject, seeing only real subsumption) and the forms of historical unevenness they continually generate – the difference he aspires to reach – as a condition of attending to how labour-power, both individually and collectively, manages to resist and elude its assigned role as pure commodity proposed by capital's logic. But this insight, like so many in this book, remains one of many unrealized throwaway lines.

If Karatani has departed somewhat from Marx's method in *Capital* it is because he has not been able to shake free from a residual poststructuralism based on the linguistic model. For not only is his conception of capitalism made to serve the accomplishment of surplus value 'attained by the production of difference' (265), his enthusiasm for identifying a subject that will act ethically as consumer (Kant) actually occupies a position already prepared for it by the linguistic model of the subject that speaks (79–80). Years ago I read an earlier book in Japanese by Karatani, 'The Possibility of Marx', which I liked even though it was embedded in a deconstructionist strategy. Not too long ago I mentioned this to him and he replied that his new work was an immensely different undertaking. Yet this is only in so far as *Transcritique* has tried to provide the theoretical grounding for a new form of exchange and the guiding principles for a new practice and movement devoted to realizing its delayed promise.

Finally, it is rare to see a work of such philosophical complexity and sophistication in Japanese so well translated into English. Readers need not fear they are losing something of Karatani's rich exposition of complex ideas by relying on Sabu Kohso's translation. The ideas are, in every respect, rendered clearly and precisely, fulfilling Benjamin's task of the translator to give 'voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*'.

Let's talk about sex

Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-technology and the Mutations of Desire*, Continuum, London/New York, 2004. x + 227 pp., £60.00 hb., £18.99 pb., 0 8264 6989 2 hb., 0 8264 6990 6 pb.

Mario Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic: Philosophies of Desire in the Modern World*, trans. Massimo Verdicchio, Continuum, London/New York, 2004. 147 pp., £55.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 8264 6244 8 hb., 0 8264 6245 6 pb.

'Sex' is an ambiguous word in several respects. Its dual references to sex difference and sexual intercourse often operate indistinctly and in concert with a fuzzy notion of 'sexuality' in a superficially legible but seriously confused semantic field. What, then, is the 'sex' in the title of these two books? Although both Parisi and Perniola, in their very different ways, set out to redefine sex for the twenty-first century, both at least begin with the same unreconstructed object in order to destroy it: sex defined as specifically human sexual coupling or mating, that coming together in the flesh of organic bodies associated with pleasure, orgasm and (an occasional consequence of certain kinds of sex between certain kinds of people) sexual reproduction. Sex in this sense, according to both authors, is *over*.

Luciana Parisi's book, which begins 'In the age of cybernetics...', presents this, initially, as a historical thesis. Bio- and info-technologies have progressively blurred the boundaries between 'artificial' and 'natural' sex, with the possibility of cloning, in particular, problematizing the definitions of male and female and mother and father. In Parisi's 'Introduction', the intellectual-political debate on the interpretation and consequences of the historical novelty of cybersex – a feminist debate in the broadest sense of the term – is represented as a stark opposition between two equally inadequate positions. Is it the realization of the Cartesian dream of disembodiment, the patriarchal dream of the liberation from the flesh coded 'feminine'? Or is it 'the prolongation of sexual pleasures outside the limits of the body', the liberation of desire from biological function, and in particular the liberation of feminine desire from the destiny of reproduction? Under the encompassing concept of 'abstract sex', Parisi proposes – no surprise here – 'a third way' to 'map' the emergence of the new sex.

This is necessary, Parisi implies, because the alternatives to be surpassed do not escape a certain conception of the body tied to the traditional understanding of sex 'where a set of pre-established possibilities determines what a body is and can do'. To the extent

that the aim of Parisi's book, in the name of feminist politics, is the criticism or even destruction of this conception of the body, it is difficult not to sympathize with its motivation. To put it simply (which Parisi never does), the conception of the body as, for example, necessarily either male or female determines what a body can be in such a way that the intersexed child is ontologically, and not just socially, unacceptable, a form of existence that is either not recognized as such – that cannot be recognized as such – or is not allowed *to be*. The criticism of this conception of the body is not, however, based on a claim about the inadequacy of the model to empirical reality, but on the presumption of a more sophisticated relation between 'model' and 'reality' where the former helps to shape (but does not 'create', idealistically) the latter. Given this aim, Parisi is curiously dismissive of Judith Butler, merely repeating the misunderstanding of her work as arch 'discursive constructivism', aligning her with the idea, completely alien to Butler, 'that you can perform your own gender by changing your sexual identity', whatever that means.

However, as a contribution to feminist theory (a category which, by now, should be understood to include a vast field of both objects and influence), Parisi's book is most persuasive in the performance – rather than the explicit statement – of the need for philosophically sophisticated concepts of difference and differentiation. Indeed, it may be that it is currently one of the most important disciplinary tasks of feminist philosophy to provide just this. Parisi assumes – although one would need to argue for – a Bergsonian–Deleuzian concept of differentiation as the actualization of already 'real' virtualities. The processual emergence of difference (for example becoming-woman) displaces the idea that already differentiated (and limited) possibilities – identifiable unities – are actualized in a process of exclusion whereby one is either male or female. If the ontological monism which is part and parcel of this conception of differentiation is one of the main weaknesses of Parisi's book, as explained below, the recognition of

difference as a philosophical problem, rather than an empirical given, is nevertheless extremely important for contemporary feminist theory.

Parisi's aim to 'construct a new metaphysical conception of the body-sex' – that is, a conception of the 'indeterminate potential of the body to mutate across different organizations of sex and reproduction' – is approached through the central concept of 'abstract sex'. Abstract sex is, according to Parisi, a 'machine' (or 'abstract machine') in the sense proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, a machine constituted by the process of endosymbiosis, or the abstract machine of endosymbiosis itself. Endosymbiosis is the process by which reproduction or replication (the production of new 'compositions of bodies') occurs at the molecular or cellular level through contagion, invasion, parasitism, trading and so on. Parisi locates the process of endosymbiosis – the scientific elaboration of which she takes from the work of molecular biologist Lynn Margulis – as it functions across different but connected levels of biological, cultural, social, technological and digital organization. As abstract sex is sometimes simply equated with endosymbiosis, the need for the additional concept of abstract sex, and its often tortuous elaboration, is at times unclear. But the original move from the traditional concept of sex to the theory of endosymbiosis, which generates the notion of abstract sex, is motivated – indeed necessitated – by Parisi's metaphysical commitment to an ontological monism of 'the One', Spinoza's Substance, Nature or God, Deleuze–Guattari's Planomen, or what Parisi also calls 'hypernature' or 'artificial nature'.

Abstract sex, as a theoretical proposition facilitating the analysis of different hypernatural strata (i.e. forms of organization) of sex and reproduction, thus differs from plain endosymbiosis in its ontological indifference of application. As a process located at the molecular or cellular level, endosymbiosis could only function by analogy at the level of the social or the cultural. 'Abstract sex', on the other hand, in the theoretical context of an undifferentiated and ontologically indifferent hypernature, operates in the same way across the hypernatural strata because the body (or the 'body-sex') is not constituted at any one of these levels alone. This is why, according to Parisi, abstract sex is a 'third way': it locates the body neither exclusively at the biological level (the mistake of the 'corporeal' technophobic feminist interpretation of cybersex) nor at the cultural or linguistic level (the mistake of the 'incorporeal' technophilic feminist), but bypasses these dualisms.

Parisi deploys the concept of abstract sex across three of a virtually infinite number of strata of the organization of sex – the biophysical, the biocultural and the biodigital strata – between which, according to her, there is no fundamental difference. The density – oftentimes the sheer unreadability – of the chapters dealing with these strata is bloody. The monistic metaphysics of the hypernatural, in which there is no ontological differentiation of the objects of various discourses, means that there is no differentiation between types of discourse and little real sense that any of them deployed in this 'warfare' might be incompatible with each other or making different kinds of claims. Thus Irigaray – the most strenuous feminist purveyor of a theory of irreducible sexual duality – can sit here quite happily alongside the critique of sexual duality, as a consequence of the 'resources' approach to philosophical theories. One may, however, attempt the following reconstruction of the main line of Parisi's argument.

The chapter on the biophysical strata ('the cellular level of the body-sex') outlines a new conception of sex and reproduction – symbiotic sex – that challenges the traditional view of sex as sexual mating – that is, the conjunction of sexed bodies involving the sexual organs and transmitting sexed chromosomes. In short, the chapter aims to disassimilate the concepts of sex and reproduction from the idea of sexual reproduction. Parisi ties the traditional concept of sex ('meiotic' sex) to Richard Dawkins's neo-Darwinian account of evolution, which, if somewhat misrepresentative of the current state of mainstream evolutionary theory, at least provides a stark background against which to make her point. On this account of evolution, sexual mating functions to preserve the fittest genes, ensuring the inheritance of the (metaphorically) 'immortal' germ plasm at the expense of the mortal soma plasm, the phenotype, identifying the two sexes in terms of the sexed organism's function in reproduction, its sexed character itself being determined through inheritance.

Parisi contrasts this with the idea of symbiotic sex, drawn from the work of Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan. 'During the Archeon Aeon, in the pre-Phanerozoic, 3900 millions of years ago', we are told, bacteria suffering from DNA damage 'repaired' themselves by 'borrowing' genetic material from other, different kinds of bacteria, 'trading microbial DNA across unrelated bacterial cells'. This 'transgenesis or cloning of genetic information' is 'bacterial sex'. Another form of endosymbiosis involves the incorporation or cellular merging of different bacteria: 'hypersex'.



Sexual reproduction, according to this reading, does not just emerge from, but is still dependent on, endosymbiotic processes to the extent that the division of cells known as 'meiosis', which occurs in all sexually reproducing organisms, is symbiotic. At the heart of sexual reproduction, then, is hyper- and bacterial sex, meaning that meiotic or traditional sex 'does not exclusively ensure the reduction and the transfer of genetic material [as the neo-Darwinists would have it], but also the recombination of bacterial genes residing in the cytoplasmic body of the eukaryotic [i.e. possessing a distinct nucleic membrane] cell'.

This extreme condensation of the argument should be enough to give a sense of what seems to be Parisi's main point in this chapter. This is to locate human sexual reproduction within a wider context of sex, redefining sex to include bacterial trading ('human sex and reproduction is neither the first nor the last mode of sex and reproduction') and, she hopes, problematizing the idea that the emergence of sexual difference, or sexual differences, depends on the actualization of limited, inherited, possible identities (male or female), which is the presumption in the traditional concept of sex. In contrast, she favours a conception of 'gender as a process of becoming: a molecular differentiation of bacterial sex, hypersex and meiotic sex'.

In the chapter on the biocultural strata (the organization of the body-sex at the socio-cultural level) Parisi describes an 'overcodification' of sex (as traditionally understood) in the organization of the body-sex in disciplinary society. According to Parisi, this organization of the body, linked to a thermodynamic-entropic

conception of energy, is characterized by the transcoding of the patterns of meiotic sex (the mode of reproduction of human sex, or genetic filiation) onto the conception of desire (especially in Freud's economy of excitation and expenditure) and into the social and economic spheres (especially in Marx's conception of the reproduction of capital). Against the disciplinary organization of sex and reproduction captured in Freud's linking of sex, reproduction and death, Parisi counterposes another 'machine': parthenogenic sex. Parthenogenesis is, classically, the development of a new individual from an unfertilized ovum, or human conception without fertilization by the male. Deleuze's account of masochism as the non-genital, non-climactic intensification of desire is, for Parisi, the 'demonstration' of the logic of this new machine. The disavowal of the principle of filiation (traditional sex-reproduction) in masochism involves a kind of reproducibility – of the masochist's desire and of the masochist as desiring machine – which is 'a rebirth of feminine sex, a second yet initial becoming independent both of the father and of the uterine and Oedipal mother'. Parthenogenic sex, defined as 'the autonomy of reproduction from the logic of filiation', is a 'line of flight' in the micropolitics of becoming-woman, and, as such, a tactic in the warfare for 'a feminism to come' (as Brian Massumi says on the back cover).

The mapping of the third, bio-digital level of strata – the body-sex defined by information science and technologies such as cloning and genetic engineering – reveals, according to Parisi, 'the *real subsumption* of all machines of sex'. As thermodynamic models

of energy economies are supplanted by models of chaos and turbulence, the new 'biodigital machines of information (genetic engineering and cybernetics)' give rise to control (rather than disciplinary) societies in which capital 'no longer wards off but feeds on' the unpredictable and infinite virtualities of bacterial sex – a process of endosymbiosis which is exploited in the engineering of information systems and of the body-sex itself. Parisi calls this a 'virtualization' of bacterial sex, where 'virtualization' is later glossed as 'the acceleration of potential tendencies', which seems to mean an intensification or acceleration of uses, in contradiction to the Bergsonian–Deleuzian concept of the virtual, which one might have expected. Despite its 'real subsumption', biodigital sex (an 'assemblage of genetic, cellular and technical processes that decodes and recombines information') is part of the arsenal of micropolitical warfare to the extent that it disentangles sex and sexual reproduction, privileging infinite virtualities over predetermined possible identities.

In conclusion, Parisi claims that the analysis of abstract sex across these strata encourages 'micro-feminine warfare' arising out of the (presumably endosymbiotic) recombination of the bodies–sexes that do not congeal into sexual identities but are part of the continuous construction of difference in the non-filiative reproduction of bacterial, parthenogenic and biodigital sexes. The message, it seems, is that this is just how it is. The infinite virtualities of the new body–sex emerging from these mutant recombinations are there for either us or capital to exploit.

This reconstruction of Parisi's argument cuts a line through swathes of technical detail and vocabulary in a fantastically overcomplicated discourse. *Abstract Sex* is a hellish read, and those without an extremely well developed tolerance, if not enthusiasm, for the Deleuze and Guattari of *A Thousand Plateaus* and – more importantly – the Deleuzo–Guattarianism of their ardent admirers will not get past the first few pages. The 'philosophy' in Parisi's subtitle consists of the wholesale, uncritical acceptance and non-mutated replication of the vocabulary and claims of Deleuze and Guattari (and, of course, Lucretius, Spinoza and Bergson), and the proliferation of new 'concepts' (like 'turbosex', which appears once in a subheading and is then never explained or used), similar in effect to the overuse of exclamation marks!!! In this respect, the book is utterly typical of one appropriative tendency in cultural theory today.

The presumption of metaphysical monism implicit in this appropriation makes some of the otherwise odd claims in the book comprehensible, if not exactly

plausible. Parisi's use of the concept of 'real subsumption', for example, is from one point of view simply confused. Marx's theory of the real subsumption of production to capital refers to the transformation of a specifically social form and makes no sense when applied to a molecular process such as symbiosis. The fact that 'real subsumption' in Parisi's argument seems to mean, in fact, no more than the total or enhanced recuperation of, for example, the symbiotic process of bacterial sex reveals this. The difficulty is that metaphysical monism makes possible the transcoding of concepts such as 'real subsumption' and 'sex' itself, but also 'endosymbiosis', 'parthenogenesis' and 'reproduction', across a variety of contexts, in such a way that any objection to it on the basis of the specificity of any of the concepts is ruled out in advance. There can be no distinctiveness of ontological reference to these – or indeed any – concepts, according to Parisi's metaphysical presuppositions. I cannot see how this can be anything other than disastrous for feminist theory. A similar inability to recognize the ontological specificity of the human – which means the ontological specificity of the social – and the illegitimacy of certain transcodings is at the heart of the kind of genetic naturalism behind, for example, Randy Thornhill's 'rape-adaptation hypothesis' (see Lynne Segal's review in *RP* 106), in which the interpretation of insect behaviour merges seamlessly into claims about relations between men and women. The insistence on certain ontological distinctions does not preclude the recognition of relations between – or the co-dependency of – the 'biological' and the 'cultural', for example, as the work of feminist biologists like Anne Fausto Sterling attests. Indeed, these relations *constitute* the specificity of the human.

If Parisi's metaphysical monism makes the extension of the concept of sex possible, it also, unfortunately, makes it impossible for her to say anything of any interest about human sex at all. Within such a philosophical context there is nothing that can be said about the politics of human sex: nothing can be said about sex as a social category and nothing can be said about the specifically sexual nature of certain practices (like cunnilingus) in contrast with, say, the decomposition of vegetable matter. There is, in short, nothing sexy about this book.

Mario Perniola's *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, on the other hand, is full of cunts, cocks and arseholes in various combinations. This curious and entertaining little volume takes the form, in part, of a manifesto for a 'neutral', 'artificial' sexuality. The reader's task: to learn how 'to give oneself as a thing that feels

and to take a thing that feels'. In a sustained polemic against all vitalistic, organicist, spiritualistic prejudices concerning sexuality, against the 'orgasmomania' of the instrumental conception of sexuality as 'mountain climbing' and the associations of sexuality with expression, individual, life, the 'sugary and sickly vulgarity' of pleasure, Perniola, an anti-Nietzschean Nietzschean proclaims 'the greatness and dignity of a sexuality without life and soul'. Having exhausted the great historical task of comparing ourselves, on a vertical scale, to God or to the animal, it is now time, according to Perniola, to follow 'a horizontal movement towards the thing', to admit that 'man is an almost thing and the thing is an almost man' and to recognize – following Walter Benjamin – 'the sex appeal of the inorganic' on the basis of our affinity with, not opposition to, it.

To give oneself and to take one's partner's body as a thing that feels is to enter a horizon of sexuality without a subject in which, more properly, 'one' feels. Becoming almost-thing is not, according to Perniola, like the reification and commodification of bodies in prostitution. It differs from sadism in lacking its major premiss: the master as 'a strong, autonomous, independent subject'. In neutral sexuality it is the world of things, not the master, that demands to take or be taken in a certain way. Although masochism and neutral sexuality have in common 'the will to give oneself absolutely as a thing that feels' and the anti-orgasmic 'aspiration to the perennial availability of excitement', masochism, founded on a contract between two interested parties, is ultimately, 'a wile of subjectivity'. To give oneself as a thing that feels is to become extraneous clothing, for bodies to become 'rolls of material that fold and unfold on one another', such that – in a twist on Descartes' remarks on automata – it is not I nor you but the clothes themselves that feel:

When your partner sinks his fingers in your vagina or when the lips of your mistress bare the penis, don't be excited by the old-fashioned idea that your body is reanimating and coming to life again, but by that more actual idea that you are sentient clothing!

Thus spoke Perniola.

But if *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* is a 'call to neutral and impersonal sexuality', it is also an impassioned plea for the necessity of philosophy. Today, both philosophy and neutral sexuality absorb into themselves what was previously opposed to them as opposite and inaccessible: the mode of being of the inorganic. Neutral sexuality, Perniola implies, reveals

the sex appeal of philosophy, as only 'the poor souls' in 'their vitalist stupor' would conceive the abstraction of philosophy (its alleged desiccation and lifelessness) as a block to sexuality. More importantly, however, it is only the discipline of abstraction and analysis in philosophy that is capable of revealing to us the thing as thing. This is a very different kind of abstract sex to Parisi's. Sexuality alone – the empire of the senses – cannot attain the excess proper to it without philosophical abstraction, diverting the rush towards 'the swarming and turbid viscosity of life', 'its tendency to self-annihilation and self-destruction in orgasm and death', into the 'timeless horizon of the thing'.

Perniola insists that neutral sexuality is not sexual anaesthesia. It does not seek to eliminate excitation but to maintain it indefinitely, on a timeless horizon. Nevertheless, as the 'overcoming of oneself and one's own limits', as 'an effort, an enterprise, an exercise, a training', 'a long road where all subjective affections are abolished or at least suspended', it bears a certain resemblance to the mystical and ascetic traditions of Christianity and the sexualist cults of European modernity. It is also not clear that Perniola's claims will convince any but those ready to extend their pre-established anti-vitalism into their sexual practice. The rest might be left wondering what exactly it is that is so wrong with orgasm. To the extent that there is a philosophical answer to this in Perniola's book it seems to be this. Neutral sexuality, as a philosophical practice, is the experience of the limitless accessibility and porosity of bodies. All the smooth and solid parts of the body as almost-thing, the body as clothing, are experienced as openings into which one can insert oneself or into which one invites insertion. (*The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* reminded me, on more than one occasion, of Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*.) This porosity and the mixture of bodies (neither mine nor thine) become clothing 'gives us the experience of reality', a reality which is itself 'tactile and porous ... held together by links, knots, joints'. Philosophy and neutral sexuality are incandescent moments of perceptive illumination, 'a type of superfetation because the world is already at its philosophical and sexual maximum. They are at best an assent to what is already there.' The pitiable delusion of vitalist sexuality is its metaphysics of transcendence (Perniola mentions Levinas, among others). Reaching for an unreachable beyond, vitalist sexuality fails to understand that everything begins and ends in the empire of the thing.

It is not really possible to compare Parisi's and Perniola's books in any useful way, or to say that their

near-contemporaneous publication (Perniola's was first published in Italian in 2000) indicates a significant moment in the philosophy of sex. But that there is something symptomatic about *Abstract Sex* and *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* is suggested by the ease with which the novels of Michel Houellebecq mediate their positions. The plane of equivalence between philosophy, science and fiction in Houellebecq's *Atomised* mirrors – albeit in different proportions – that in Parisi's book. Houellebecq's 'hero', Michel Djerzinski, is located in the same field as Parisi's scientific influences (his first published work: *The Topology of Meiosis*), though Djerzinski's theory of 'perfect reproduction', the elimination of mutation in the reproduction of the genetic code, runs counter to the thrust of Parisi's biodigital machines of sex. The Lieu de Changement campsite in *Atomised* stands as a monument to the vitalist delusions of sexual liberation

identified in *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, and Perniola correctly diagnoses the malaise afflicting Djerzinski's half-brother: orgasmomania. In Houellebecq's *Platform*, Europe, sexually exhausted, chases the illusion of vitalism through disastrous sex tourism in 'exotic' locations.

If Parisi and Perniola suggest that sex is, or could be, the domain of radical philosophy or politics, do Houellebecq's novels mock just this? Or do Parisi and Perniola resist the easy irony and mock-shock tactics of Houellebecq's redundant cynicism, wresting sex from the arms and pseudo-philosophizing of Houellebecq's docile capitalist subjects? We do not need any of these books to confirm the central place of sex in contemporary society. But they shed considerable light on some of the changing stakes in current conflicts over its meanings and forms.

Stella Sandford

Early thought

Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, SUNY Press, New York, 2004. x + 286 pp., £39.25 hb., 0 7914 5947 0.

Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003. xiii + 243 pp., £29.95 pb., 0 674 01180 5.

Early German Romanticism has become increasingly conspicuous in the historical self-consciousness of contemporary philosophy. Interest has intensified over the last fifteen or so years, and there is now a range of publications with ambitious claims for this little epoch, *circa* 1789–1800, and its motley band of thinkers. Indeed, this development seems to have achieved a kind of critical mass, with a field of primary, expository and advocatory texts available. A new Romanticism! (Is it a coincidence that Spandau Ballet have been getting more radio time?) The often naive new historicism that has inverted analytical philosophy's old ahistoricism renders such developments suspicious. But in any case, a critical consideration of whether early German Romanticism has the significance currently claimed for it is certainly due, and there is plenty of material to work with.

Among the most forceful claims for its significance is that it is pivotal for understanding what happened in the development of so-called 'classical German philosophy', from Kant through to Hegel and Marx. Moreover, it is claimed that it produced philosophical positions that are not reducible to the landmark figures of this period, promising a resolution or rethinking

of the standard problems and antinomies – 'Kant or Hegel?', 'Hegel or Marx?', and the rest. The promise is that early German Romanticism is the secret of classical German philosophy, and therefore of our present. In so far as contemporary disputes over naturalism and idealism, myth and enlightenment, modernity and postmodernity, are understood according to these debates, the promise is that early German Romanticism holds the key to their diagnosis and resolution, and that it anticipates, often critically, the apparently novel projects of contemporary philosophy.

Thus the contention is that Romanticism is the repressed truth of the present. Such contentions have become less shocking than soporific. The exposure of a repressed truth has become a seemingly irresistible strategy or discourse of contemporary historiography. So much so that, according to a syndrome that has become only a little less familiar, this strategy often reveals itself to be the ultimate motivation, the ultimate desire. However gratifying this may be to the historiographer, the historiography is short-circuited. So we need to establish whether there has in fact been a process, or agents, of repression in order to understand and assess how and why this might have

changed; or whether what we are seeing today is not just the restatement of an old case, louder, as if we didn't hear it the first time.

In general, early German Romanticism has remained branded by the criticisms of late-nineteenth-century positivism and materialism, which propagated its enduring stereotypes: namely, that it was a mystificatory and obscurantist brand of metaphysics, that it was anti-scientific, that it was either politically conservative or a naive form of enthusiasm, and that it was best confined to the fictions of the literary world. It is for these reasons that various anti-positivist lineages, which have become more influential since the late twentieth century, have lent a more sympathetic ear to its charms, particularly its opposition to mechanistic conceptions of enlightenment and their cultural effects. This shift has revealed a new configuration of early German Romanticism's status and meaning, and it is this reconfiguration that is at stake in the new publications.

As the positivist suppression of early German Romanticism suggests, the persistence of its literary significance is consistent with its philosophical insignificance. Its literary claims have been largely ensured by the Romantics' contribution to the historical canon of literary criticism (such as Friedrich Schlegel's opposition of classical genres to romantic, or modern, forms) as well as their literary productions (such as their development of the fragment or Hölderlin's poetry). That early German Romanticism is now acquiring a philosophical status is probably due less to this persistence – which has in any case been embattled – than to the weakening in the strictly disciplinary definition of philosophy instituted by analytical philosophy and the 'scientific' or 'non-literary' conception of the analysis of language that underpinned it. This has generated an audience for early German Romanticism within post-analytical philosophy (Cavell is the conspicuous example here) and given it philosophical respectability within the Anglo-American academy. It has been bolstered by the simultaneous influence of philosophical traditions without these inhibitions, which have often identified the Romantics as precedents, such as deconstruction and the Frankfurt School. This exposure of philosophy to literature has made early German Romanticism all the more interesting in so far as its conception of literature was far more metaphysically ambitious than has been conventionally allowed by the academic specialization of literary studies. Thus there is the promise that it offers not the reduction of philosophy to literature, or vice versa, but a transformation of their relation into an altogether new practice.

This shift in the relation of philosophy to literature has been accompanied by the renewal of specifically philosophical research into early German Romanticism. At its heart has been the so-called 'Jena Project', a group research project, directed by Dieter Henrich, into the philosophical initiatives at and around the University of Jena in 1789–95. Pursuing a historiographic method of 'constellational research' – in which the analysis of theoretical texts is set within the broad ensemble of conditions that effect their production – this project has generated an intimate portrait of the period and its figures. This has revolutionized research into early German Romanticism, revealing the decisive but often inadvertent and counter-intuitive influence of historically marginal figures. Henrich's principal text from this project, *Konstellationen: Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789–1795)*, has yet to be translated, but some of his subsequent work on Hölderlin has. Manfred Frank's *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* is an exemplary export from this scene. As well as bringing to life a series of archival resources and instigating a series of publications and translations, this research has been informed by key texts that were not available until the 1960s, which saw the discovery of Hölderlin's fragment 'Judgement and Being' and the first reliable critical edition of Novalis' *Fichte-Studies*. In general, then, this research has revealed a new historical consciousness of this period. Indeed, the assemblage of letters and notes that were only partially known at the time reveals a present that is only present now.

This research resonates with another feature of the decline of analytical philosophy, namely the problematization of its separation from 'continental' philosophy and the renewal of attention to classical German philosophy that this has generated. The revived scrutiny of this period – particularly the nature of the transition from Kant to Hegel – has disclosed the Romantics as offering intermediate positions that promise to mediate the separation. This has been bolstered by the genealogical significance of early German Romanticism in understanding figures who have traversed contemporary philosophy. Heidegger is the obvious example. Andrew Bowie's work has been perhaps most conspicuous, certainly in English, in drawing out the genealogical and critical significance of early German Romanticism for contemporary philosophy.

The other familiar reason for the suppression of interest in early German Romanticism has been its association with conservative politics, in particular its link to the politics of Nazism. This association was

first made in the criticisms of romantic conservatism in the 1840s by the young republicans Heinrich Heine, Arnold Ruge and Karl Marx. Latterly, Lukács was highly influential in sustaining and extending this position through texts like his epic *The Destruction of Reason* (1955), which constructs a direct lineage from Romanticism to Nazism. This critique is given added force when set against the young Lukács's own romantic sympathies, especially in *Soul and Form* and *Theory of the Novel*. And yet the popular image of romantic liberation is not restricted to the English variants of Byron and Shelley. The early German Romantics were enthusiastic supporters of the French Revolution and, in the first instance at least, critics of the Enlightenment only in so far as it seemed to contradict the project of secular emancipation. This contradiction has been condensed into the fall of Friedrich Schlegel from fierce republican to conservative Catholic. The response of the new research has been largely to separate early from late Romanticism; hence the political, as well as historical and philosophical, significance of its awkward denomination.

This ambivalence permeates one of the decisive genealogical claims for early German Romanticism: that it is the first avant-garde, providing a model for twentieth-century groups. The reception of Romanti-



cism into French aestheticism in the mid-nineteenth century became the object of ridicule by realists and subsequent avant-gardes. But it has also sustained a revolutionary aura. Maurice Blanchot's seminal essay from the 1960s, 'The Athenaeum', draws a direct link between surrealism and Romanticism via the poetico-political form of the manifesto. Walter Benjamin, whose work was in many ways constituted by these political ambivalences and ambiguities, articulated this tension well in his proposition – more chiasmic than speculative – that the aestheticization of politics must be countered by the politicization of aesthetics.

The books under review here are noteworthy for different reasons and in different ways. Manfred Frank's *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* is a highly scholarly and erudite series of lectures, saturated with archival research and the minutiae of its topic. Frederick Beiser's *The Romantic Imperative* serves as probably the most inviting philosophical introduction available in English. It is more encompassing and places early German Romanticism within a broader historical context. It is more schematic as a result of this breadth, but the endnotes do a good job of underpinning the text with reference to further, often obscure, research. In combination, then, these two books complement each other well, especially since they also reveal fundamental disputes over the interpretation and legacy of early German Romanticism.

Frank was among a new generation of doctoral students to work on the Romantics in the late 1960s and early 1970s and he has been prolific ever since. This translation is from the third and final part of his major survey of the period, *Unendliche Annäherung. Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Infinite Approximation: The Beginnings of Philosophical Early Romanticism), published in 1997. This sets out from the mixed reception of Kant's thought – from

sceptics like Jacobi and Schultz, to advocates like Reinhold and Fichte – and then explores how they established problems and tasks for the generation of students who largely compose the ranks and marginal figures of the early German Romantics, most of whom were taught by Reinhold and then Fichte, who held the chair in philosophy at Jena consecutively. These include famous figures like Schelling, Hölderlin, Novalis

and Friedrich Schlegel, and historically obscure but contemporaneously influential figures like Niethammer and Erhard. The twelve lectures translated here cover the central figures in this constellation, with particular attention to Novalis. The translator and introducer, Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, justifies the selective translation on the basis of that it covers the figures least obscure to anglophone readers. This is in many ways a shame, since it is one of the unavoidable features and virtues of the book that it introduces the obscure. The lectures on Isaac Sinclair and Jacob Zwilling are the only remnants of this.

The book is exemplary of the constellational research developed around the Jena Project. It involves intimate analyses of the theoretical and biographical developments of the period, establishing originality and precedent with extreme precision, and working out detailed networks of influence. The mix of philosophy and life is at times gripping and sometimes pedantic. At one point Frank remarks: 'It would be tempting to reconstruct the conversations which the housemates, Herbart and [Friedrich] Schlegel, shared as they made their way to or from Fichte's lectures.' Tempted?

The main theoretical focus of the book is the development of what Frank considers the essential philosophical argument of early German Romanticism: the move from a philosophy of first principles to a philosophy of infinite approximation, which Frank elaborates as a fallibilistic form of realism, with a coherence theory of truth. This position develops out of the critique of the attempts of Reinhold and, particularly, Fichte to develop a systematic justification of Kant's transcendental idealism, taking his conception of the unity of apperception as the clue that self-consciousness provides the foundation or first principle. This project reveals itself to be deeply problematic in so far as self-consciousness proves to be an inherently contradictory first principle. The main problem here is in demonstrating that self-consciousness is absolutely self-grounding. In so far as self-consciousness necessarily involves a determination of one's self, it contradicts the sense in which it could be absolute. Indeed, it contradicts the sense of identity or auto-affection that enables self-consciousness, and makes any attempt to describe it in the language of objectification inadequate. This problem suggests that self-consciousness presupposes a ground or relation that remains obscure and irreducible to it, and that self-consciousness is therefore not self-grounding. This throws Reinhold's and Fichte's project of philosophy as a systematic science derived from first principles into crisis. The figures that have come to constitute early German Romanticism were the students of this project who diagnosed this crisis. Frank is insistent on distinguishing early German Romanticism from German Idealism; making a strict separation between those like Novalis and Schlegel who gave up the project of a systematic idealism, and those who pursued it after Fichte by different means, such as the early Schelling and Hegel.

Novalis is at the centre of Frank's account, since his contention is that Novalis' *Fichte-Studies* are as early as Hölderlin's 'Judgement and Being' in developing a critical alternative to Fichte's project. Here Frank

enters into a dispute with Henrich, each waving freshly revealed documents from 1795. We're talking about a matter of months and even days here! Hölderlin's criticism is oriented towards 'Being' as that which is presupposed and irreducible to consciousness. In a very similar move, Novalis' critique of self-consciousness concludes that there could be no first principle and that the task of absolute self-grounding must orient itself instead towards a ground that can only be approached as an ultimate goal, which will nonetheless never be exhausted in consciousness. Frank understands this according to Kant's model of the regulative idea:

Novalis shows that the reflexive nature of our self-consciousness (Fichte's 'highest point') is incompatible with the thought of an absolute (that which Novalis, along with Jacobi, calls 'original being' [*Urseyn*]). Thus, reflexive self-consciousness, as an I, cannot be taken as the first principle of philosophy. Rather, the foundation for this I is transformed from a piece of evidence immanent in consciousness (which is felt in an intellectual intuition) into a 'principle of approximation', that is, into a Kantian idea, which we are supposed to approach in an infinite progression. The thought of conferring reality to this idea leads, says Novalis, 'into the realm of nonsense'.... Or also: 'Everywhere we *seek* the unconditioned, but *find* only things.'

Thus Frank understands early German Romanticism as a return to Kant in 1795, before German Idealism even got into full stride. However, this remains an unelaborated horizon that tends to collapse the whole import and novelty of the period.

According to Beiser's introduction to *The Romantic Imperative*, the book is intended as an immanent account of early German Romanticism – he proposes importing the temptingly brief *Frühromantik* – defending it on its own terms rather than through a more comparative account. But this belies his mapping of historical disputes that have formed its reception, as well as his own dispute with these and more contemporary research, including that of Frank. Indeed, Beiser's approach is to introduce the Romantics through the confrontation of a series of misconceptions. Much of its readability and value as an introduction is derived from this, rather than through detailed archival, textual or conceptual analysis. Beiser does not preoccupy himself much with who was and who wasn't a Romantic, or what the network of influence was. Nonetheless, he has a considerable grasp of this period of philosophical history, of which he has become a well-established historian. (His early books *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (1992) and

German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781–1800 (2002) cover the period.)

Beiser's resonant point of departure is a consideration of the meaning of 'romantic poetry', confronting its literal-minded misinterpretation as a source of the overdetermination of early German Romanticism as a literary movement. In contrast, he draws out its ambitious metaphysical and political meanings in a way that makes its relation to the twentieth-century avant-gardes explicit:

First ... [*romantische Poesie*] refers to not only literature, but also to all the arts and sciences; there is indeed no reason to limit its meaning to literary works, since it also applies to sculpture, music and painting. Second, it designates not only the arts and sciences but also human beings, nature and the state. The aim of the early romantic aesthetic was indeed to romanticize the world itself, so that human beings, society and the state could become works of art as well.

This passage indicates the course of the book as a whole, as it moves from the specifically artistic concerns of Romanticism to its relation to philosophical and political debates of the age: the critique of the Enlightenment, the preoccupation with the concept of *Bildung*, and the organic conception of natural philosophy.

While many of these topics are familiar, Beiser's treatment of them is contentious and revealing. Its heart lies in his insistence on the Platonism of early German Romanticism, in opposition to the recent scholarship, which he accuses of a postmodern repetition of the traditional misconception that Romanticism is an aesthetic reaction to the Enlightenment. (Beiser includes Frank and Henrich in the company of De Man, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, evidently conscious of the slander he proposes: 'All the way from the banks of the Neckar to Lake Onondaga I can hear a howl of protest from Manfred Frank for being placed in such company.') Beiser's argument is that the Romantics' interest in art was not as a limitation but as a realization of reason:

For [the Romantics], aesthetic experience is not *superrational*, still less *antirational*; rather, it is *hyperrational*, consisting in the act of intellectual intuition of reason. It was through the intellectual intuition of aesthetic experience, they believed, that reason could perceive the infinite in the finite.... Such a perception was intellectual or rational chiefly because of its object: the idea, principle, or *arche* underlying all the particulars of sense experience.

There is certainly a sense in which the Romantics saw art as achieving what philosophy could not, namely the presentation of the absolute. It is also true that

insistently 'postmodernist' thinkers like Nancy have sought to develop a critique of the Romantics' aesthetic orientation towards the absolute. But it seems equally apparent that the Romantics conceived of art as a presentation of the *unpresentability* of the absolute. Thus Novalis writes: 'the highest works of art are simply disobliging – they are ideals, which can – and should – only appear to us *approximando* – as aesthetic imperatives.' Indeed, what seems to be at stake here, especially through Schlegel, is the emergence of a specifically modernist conception of art.

In any case, these deliberations are largely cut short by Beiser's refusal to distinguish early German Romanticism from German Idealism, confirming the traditional conception of Hegel as its realization, albeit according to the nickname he apparently acquired from his more precocious contemporaries: *der alter Mann*, 'winning the race for posthumous fame only because he was a more sure-footed plodder'. This Platonic account of the Romantics sits awkwardly with Beiser's diagnosis of their 'vitalist pantheism'. Moreover, his admission that this remains subject to Kant's critiques of an absolute organicism of nature suggests that little has been won by this more idealist account. Ironically, it seems that Frank and Beiser ultimately agree that these roads finally lead back to Kant.

The juxtaposition of archival minutiae and blustery polemic offered by Frank and Beiser is indicative of the lively state of recent research on early German Romanticism. They are welcome contributions to the dissemination and assessment of this period. They are also indicative of the generally advocatory ethos that has characterized this work. Perhaps we can now look forward to the creative application of this research. The ground is prepared for a contemporary refusal of early German Romanticism.

Stewart Martin

Techies

David M. Kaplan, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD, 2004. xvi + 512 pp., £65.00 hb., £37.95 pb., 0 7425 1488 9 hb., 0 7425 1489 7 pb.

Judith Wajcman, *Technofeminism*, Polity, Cambridge, 2004. viii + 148 pp., £45.00 hb., £13.99 pb., 0 7456 3043 X hb., 0 7456 3044 8 pb.

At the dawn of the twentieth century Henry Adams imagined the future as a place driven by a mysterious, immensely powerful force, comparable to that of the

Virgin Mary, which according to Adams had been responsible for raising the great cathedrals of Europe in the middle ages. This new force was *electricity*, the latest, most powerful manifestation of technological innovation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century it is difficult to question the accuracy of Adams's prediction about the centrality of technology to twentieth-century cultures and lives, but the breadth of critical writing on the subject makes it difficult to present an overview of the contemporary meaning and function of technology. These two books, however, go some way towards introducing and consolidating this field: one in the form of an anthology of philosophical writings; the other an account of the development of feminist responses to technology over the last thirty years and the possibilities for the future development of 'technofeminism'.

Kaplan's anthology is divided into six sections. The first introduces essays by writers such as Heidegger, Marcuse, Jonas and Habermas, written during the 1950s and 1960s, which functioned as critical starting points for many subsequent philosophical approaches to technology. The second section, including essays by Langdon Winner, Don Ihde, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Andrew Feenberg is designed to demonstrate the ways in which more recent thinkers have developed and expanded the field. The next three sections focus on how technology has impacted upon the traditional philosophical concerns of ethics, politics and human nature. In these sections philosophical approaches introduced in the first two sections are developed in relation to specific aspects of technology, including ecology, information technologies, medical technologies and architecture, and to specific political and ethical issues, such as the concept of rights and the culture of democracy. The final section engages with the thorny question of how technology relates to science and, by extension, how abstract discourse relates to material practice.

The volume lends itself to undergraduate teaching as well as providing a good introduction to some key thinkers in the field. However, the range of approaches covered is restricted. Most of the essays do not stray far from the traditions of Western philosophy, and the kinds of ethics, politics and human nature that are at stake in sections 3–5 are of a specifically Euro-American variety. Notably, in his introduction to Foucault's analysis of panopticism, with which he begins the 'Human Nature' section, Kaplan plays down the latter's critical engagement with the ways in which modern subjectivity is produced through processes of discipline and observation. Rather, he emphasizes

Foucault's assessment of power as constructive, and hence positive. Kaplan writes:

There is nothing necessarily insidious about disciplinary practices.... The disciplinary society described by Foucault evolved alongside capitalism and the Enlightenment. Even democracies depend on disciplinary mechanisms that classify and order people according to a norm or scale. Power and knowledge reinforce one another to form the foundations of social life. More power creates more categories of knowledge; more knowledge refines and extends the scope of power. This is how the liberatory Enlightenment project is at the very same time a process of increased discipline: we achieve greater freedom as power and knowledge become more detached and controlling.

Kaplan, unlike Foucault, does not seem to find the Enlightenment concept of freedom problematic, and so he tends to read panopticism as a necessary process for the maintenance of modern liberal democracy, a political system the value of which he does not question.

This lack of critical reflection is also suggested by the sparsity of essays that look outside of the traditional scope of Western philosophy. The few essays that address technology from feminist perspectives – for example, Haraway's ubiquitous 'Cyborg Manifesto' and Diane Michelfelder's 'Technological Ethics in a Different Voice' – are isolated examples which run against the grain of the volume. Consequently there is little sense of how to approach such writing. In a volume that privileges certain philosophical traditions over others, notably phenomenology, it is difficult to engage with the odd essay that falls outside of these parameters. If the anthology had been divided according to philosophical positions, Haraway, for example, might have been read alongside Sandra Harding, who appears in the final section, sharing Haraway's interest in situating science and technology. But Kaplan fails to situate his chosen essays according to the historical and cultural circumstances of their production. Phenomenology is taken for granted, as a universally valid way of reading technology, while the situated approach seems at best tangential to this process.

If feminism is poorly represented, non-Western responses to and engagements with technology fare even less well. The second section includes an essay by Arnold Pacey, 'The Culture of Technology', which illustrates the case for reading technology as part of social networks, with examples of technological practices in societies that lie outside or on the borders of Western cultural norms. But, again, Pacey's analysis is not presented in terms of a debate concerning the cultural situatedness of technology, and nowhere does

Kaplan question the assumption that technology is primarily a Western phenomenon. The sixth section does criticize the longstanding assumption that technology is essentially secondary to (Western) science, but the fact that this does not happen until the end of the book reflects the broader failure of the anthology to consider how a revised understanding of the relationship between science and technology might affect approaches to non-Western technological practices. There has been some interesting work recently on Japan, which experienced a technological revolution during the late nineteenth century without investing in Western ideals about the Enlightenment project or the scientific revolution. Steve Fuller's essay in Andrew Ross's *Science Wars* collection (Duke University Press, 1996) and Kitaro Nishida's and Andrew Feenberg's essays in Robert Figuerou and Sandra Harding's *Science and Other Cultures* (Routledge, 2003) are examples of this kind of work; Kaplan might usefully have included something similar in his anthology.

Kaplan's anthology arrives a year after the publication of a similar collection, Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek's *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition* (Blackwell, 2003). The volumes inevitably cover some of the same ground, including Heidegger's 'Question Concerning Technology', Foucault on panopticism, Habermas's 'Technical Progress and the Social Life World', Feenberg's 'Democratic Rationalization' and, annoyingly, Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (it would be good to see another Haraway essay anthologized for a change). Scharff and Dusek's is a far heftier volume and so plugs some of the gaps left open by Kaplan, including work by Arendt, Mumford and Caroline Merchant, as well as a valuable section on pre-twentieth-century philosophy. But it is the organization of material in Scharff and Dusek's book that gives it the edge, in my opinion, over Kaplan's.

Judith Wajcman's *Technofeminism* addresses one of the significant gaps left by Kaplan's anthology: feminist responses to technology. In this small, extremely readable, student-friendly volume she sets out to provide a historical overview of these responses from the 1970s to the present, identifying two dominant strands: a 'materialist' constructivist approach that focuses on how technologies are structured within (largely patriarchal) social networks and how they in turn help to structure these networks; and a 'metaphoric' cyborgian approach that is concerned with the ways in which recent technological concepts such as virtual reality and the cyborg have provided an imaginative space in which women are able to rethink and liberate themselves. In the final chapter of the book Wajcman situates herself between these two critical traditions,

attempting to avoid the pitfalls whilst drawing on the strengths of both.

Constructivist theory, she argues, tends to be too deterministic and dystopian, seeing technology as inextricably tied to its patriarchal roots and driving society forward unstoppably in a particular direction. Women, within this context, are ultimately subject to forces beyond their control. Cyberfeminism and cyborg theory, however, are too utopian, according to Wajcman. Placing rather too much emphasis on fiction, virtuality and the possibilities of linguistic play, these more recent approaches to technology are insufficiently aware of material constraints on real women and the impact that technology has upon their lives. Ironically, given their emphasis on the fluidity and fragmentation of identity, Wajcman also argues that they tend to essentialize gender. After all, women are traditionally identified as irrational, fluid and disorganized, so when Sadie Plant identifies cyberspace as a peculiarly female space capable of realizing and releasing women's subjectivity, she is calling upon a very conventional notion of female subjectivity.

Drawing on the material rootedness of constructivism and the possibilities of redefining agency opened out by cyborg theory, Wajcman argues for a reading of technology indebted to Foucault's analysis of power as a dynamic constructive network through which agency is produced and not simply controlled. She sees technology as a key aspect of the social networks that define and control women, whilst insisting that these same women play a crucial role in redefining technology. In other words, women are subject to technological power, but, as agents actively involved with technology, they are able to redefine it according to their own needs. This means that, in spite of the material constraints placed upon them by technologies, they are also sometimes able to redefine and empower themselves via a renegotiation of their relationship to these same technologies.

The primary strength of Wajcman's book lies in the clarity with which it reviews the field of technofeminism. The first two chapters provide a useful overview of the broad trends in technological and feminist studies from the 1970s and of how they converged and developed into an appreciation of the mutually constitutive, historically variable relationship between technology and gender.

In Chapter 4, 'The Cyborg Solution', Wajcman gives a valuable assessment of Donna Haraway's significant, but problematic, contribution to technology and gender studies. Critical responses to Haraway all too often fall into one of two positions: total dismissal or idolization. The strangeness of her style, born out

of her desire to resist the dogmatic rationalism and dualistic logic which have traditionally bound critical responses to science and technology, means that as many readers are alienated by Haraway as are drawn towards her. Wajcman provides an accessible overview, rather than simply focusing on her most famous essay, as Kaplan, Scharff and Dusek do. She does justice to the development of Haraway's thought from the arguably utopian 'Manifesto' to her more carefully worked through *Modest Witness* and she acknowledges Haraway's sensitivity to the historical development of the technologies with which she is concerned. The main criticisms that she levies at Haraway – her failure to identify material (as opposed to fictional) examples of how cyborg identity generates liberating possibilities for women and the disparity between her 'piercing analysis of the interconnections between capitalism, patriarchy and techno-science' on the one hand, and 'her belief in a radical discourse of discontinuity and the emancipatory potential of advanced technologies' on the other – are carefully expressed and supported. Her treatment of Haraway is a rare one.

If Wajcman reads Haraway as too metaphorical and insufficiently materialist in her reading of technology, Wajcman herself errs in the opposite direction. Although she locates herself between the material and the metaphoric, the constructivist and the cyborgian, there is little sense of what Haraway's method has contributed to her position, other than providing a focus on new communications technologies. By her second chapter Wajcman has already arrived at an explanation of how gender and technology produce one another and of how women, who rarely play a visible role in the initial design and representation of new technologies, influence the subsequent meaning and value of these technologies via their consumption and use of them. Her discussion of technofeminism in Chapter 5 does not substantially move from that position. Here she argues for a reading of new technologies informed by a specific awareness of their historical and cultural location. She illustrates her position with examples of how new media have radically different implications for women living in the developed world (who consume them) and women living in the developing world (who produce them). The possibilities opened up for the female consumers of new media, she points out, must be weighed against the economic constraints placed upon their counterparts in the developing world.

Wajcman's lack of interest in metaphor is most apparent in her chapter on 'Virtual Gender'. Beginning with a discussion of the ways in which outer space was gendered during the 1960s and 1970s she goes on to consider how gender has been redefined in the context of virtual space. A brief discussion of the fictional birth of virtual reality in the writing of William Gibson is followed by a lengthy analysis of cyberfeminism with a specific focus on Sadie Plant's *Zeros + Ones*. Plant, Wajcman argues, is carried away by her own metaphors, reading cyberspace as a zone of liberation and endless possibility without any regard for the material and economic circumstances in which women encounter cyberspace, ironically reproducing an essentialist notion of femininity with the claim



that cyberspace is female. While this critique is well argued, I would dispute Wajcman's assumption that Plant can simply be read as representative of cyberfeminism. Wajcman creates a straw target, an obvious example of the dangers of losing track of the material world. She also fails to engage with the large body of feminist writing that provides a far more complex and ambivalent analysis of the ways in which materiality and virtuality, embodiment and gender, are negotiated in encounters with cyberspace. Catherine Waldby's *Visible Human Project* (Routledge, 2000) comes to mind, as does N. Katherine Hayles's discussion of the politics of gender, embodiment and cybernetics in *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago University Press, 1999).

One of the primary concerns of both Waldby and Hayles is the way in which assumptions about embodiment, gender and sex are reproduced within the sphere of virtuality. Moreover, many fictional accounts of cyberspace are also concerned with the impossibility and undesirability of separating mind and body. William Gibson, I would argue, is such a writer and I find it hard to recognize his profoundly ambivalent

representation of cyberspace in Wajcman's description of it as 'an almost biblical Heavenly City ... [a] vision of immortality, transcendence and omniscience ... [in which] the tyranny of the flesh and of distance is overcome, as the old divisions of class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality are dissolved'. Perhaps this reading of Gibson stems from Wajcman's own lack of interest in fictional, or metaphorical, representations of technology. This might also explain why she begins this chapter with a discussion of the (masculine) gendering of space exploration, without mentioning Constance Penley's *NASA/Trek* (Verso, 1997), a book which is not only concerned with the relationship between gender, technology and space, but which also explores the rich cross-fertilization between the fictional world of *Star Trek* and the material world of NASA. Penley's book navigates the channel between the metaphoric and material far more explicitly than does Wajcman's.

Megan Stern

Communism without communism

Lars Iyer, *Blanchot's Communism: Art, Philosophy and the Political*, Palgrave, London and New York, 2004. xviii + 190 pp., £45.00 hb., 1 4039 2168 7.

In the relatively late essay 'Our Clandestine Companion', Maurice Blanchot presents his friendship with Levinas, which first began at Strasbourg in 1924, as one uniquely forged in and through philosophy. Philosophy 'would be the clandestine friend we always respect, loved, which meant we were not bound to it ... all the while giving us to believe that there was nothing awakened in us, vigilant unto sleep, not due to our difficult friendship'. What does it mean, Blanchot asks repeatedly, to be a *philosophical* friend? Is such a friend the one with whom one always agrees, or, rather, is a 'true state of friendship' one which necessarily harbours forms of 'difficulty' and divergence? Already more than a matter of mere autobiography and anecdote, for Blanchot this question also, famously, attains a properly political significance in so far as it is linked to a certain thought of 'community'. Interrupting fusional fantasies of total identification, and their philosophical correlates, the 'workless' (or 'inoperative') community – a 'community without community', in that characteristic phrasing – is that which, like

friendship, attests to 'the differentiation at the heart of our being together'.

Such ideas are by now fairly familiar, if probably more usually from the work of philosophical 'friends' like Nancy and Derrida than that of Blanchot himself. The merits of *Blanchot's Communism*, such as they are, reside not so much in any novel re-presentation of these philosophical motifs – for all of its talk of the 'unexpected' and the 'unanticipated' there is no moment of defamiliarization to be found here which would cause us to see Blanchot anew – but in its elegant working through of them in relation to the specificities of Blanchot's distinctive oeuvre. And in this respect one would have to say that there is little for the reviewer to dispute as regards the accuracy of Iyer's commentaries. The key philosophical engagements with Hegel and Heidegger are present and correct, and well explicated, as are the crucial differences between Levinas's and Blanchot's respective presentations of the opening to the Other, relating to the latter's often unacknowledged *refusal* of an 'ethical' vocabulary of 'God' and the 'good'.

Yet the motif of friendship also raises the question of to what extent Iyer's own treatment of this 'profoundly obscure writer' – as Roger Laporte describes him – is itself a 'true' act of philosophical friendship, or if, in the end, a rather different relationship between author and subject emerges here. A 'true state of friendship', Bataille writes in a passage quoted by Iyer, 'requires being abandoned by friends, since a free friendship isn't hampered by confining ties'. However, this is a book which, in its refusal to go beyond or even to extend Blanchot's own terms confines itself from the very beginning. It is characterized by both an absence of risk and a certain persistent evasiveness with regard to a series of critical questions that might legitimately be raised. As ever, the would-be academic acolyte is not necessarily the philosopher's best friend. For, opening with a restriction of the book's focus to an account of Blanchot's 'negotiation of the work of his friends Bataille and Levinas', *Blanchot's Communism* never really looks beyond the familiar, sectarian concerns of an already circumscribed 'community' of readers.

Nowhere is this clearer than with regard to the book's central 'hook': Blanchot's claim to the word 'communism' and 'the memory of actual working class movements' that it inscribes. If the provocation of Iyer's title is presumably aimed at what Derrida calls 'proprietary Marxism', jealously guarding its property rights – a provocation which is certainly welcome – it is still somewhat surprising to find only

two references to Marx himself, both involving the same quotation. (Bizarrely, there is no mention of Blanchot's essay 'Marx's Three Voices', which plays a pivotal role in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, and which is cited approvingly in Daniel Bensaid's recently translated *Marx for Our Times*). Whilst self-appointed protectors of the revolutionary flame may have no exclusive claim upon the word, it seems perverse, as well as something of a missed opportunity, not to have engaged Blanchot's readings of Marx, when it is the 'meaning' of communism that is at stake. By failing to do so, the task of communicating the singularity and significance of Blanchot's intervention in critical relation to other legacies of communist thought is effectively passed over, taken for granted rather than put to the test.

Admittedly, what Blanchot, in his preface to *The Infinite Conversation*, calls the 'advent of communism' cannot, as Iyer notes, 'become the object of a new political theory' of the type familiar within much of the Marxist tradition, and cannot be critically 'assessed' in such terms. Rather, it 'challenges particular determinations of the political field', affirming, against any foreclosure of the future – a 'communism being still always beyond communism' – the 'indeterminacy of what is always "to come" in any social space'. We are a long way here, as Blanchot knew, from what Marx understood, under the name of communism, as 'the *real* movement that abolishes the present state of things'. In fact, like Derrida's more famous (and itself Blanchotian) notion of a 'messianicity without messianism', it is conceived as a universal, quasi-transcendental structure of existence, which, if it must always be 'negotiated' in a 'singular, practical situation', is nonetheless deliberately and explicitly abstracted from any particular moment of political history or culture.

Unlike many of those I might regard as my own philosophical friends, I have no 'philosophical' problem with this: I have yet to see any convincing refutation of its underlying 'logical' argument. I even think, politically, that its emphasis on an *essential* openness of the future contains considerable critical force in a historical conjuncture in which the narrative horizons that have hitherto sustained the Left have come to seem untenable. As regards the attempt to think through the possibilities and conditions of what Susan Buck-Morss has termed an 'ungoverned revolution' – which, contra the revolutionary time of the Leninist party form, anticipates the future without sacrificing the present – there is much to be gained from an engagement with Blanchot's obscure 'political thought'. Similarly to so

many French intellectuals of a certain generation, this is connected to Blanchot's experience and understanding of the events of May 1968. (Iyer summarizes this well.) For Blanchot, what was so distinctive and inspiring about the events was their apparent revelation of 'a communism of a kind never experienced before and which no ideology was able to recuperate or reclaim': that is, the lack of a unifying 'determinate project' or a desire to constitute a 'political group' revealed an 'idea of a revolution that does not need to *succeed* or to achieve a fixed goal'. If this 'responds' to a Marxist exigency, it is not a strictly prophetic one, but one that speaks in a 'brief and direct' voice – the second of Marx's 'three voices' – calling for a 'decision of rupture' as an '*ever-present* demand'.

Whether or not one finds this compelling, it raises a number of critical issues in relation to our usual understandings of what is designated by the terms 'communism' and 'revolution'. These are issues which Iyer evades, even as he implicitly acknowledges their presence. How much more interesting might it have been if, for example, he had ever wondered whether Blanchot might – beyond his established connections to Levinas or Bataille (with which we are all familiar) – actually have an unexpected philosophical friend in the Marxism of someone like Lefebvre. Or, how about an unlikely friendship with Benjamin, given a similar insistence on the open-endedness of the future and a certain shared intellectual inheritance incorporating Schlegel, Kafka, Proust and surrealism; not to mention his own still mysterious friendship with Bataille? What is so unsatisfying about this book, and indeed about so many 'continental philosophy' books of this type, is that nobody who isn't already convinced about the significance of Blanchot's interventions is going to be swayed by it, in any way. This is not a book that is going to make Blanchot any new philosophical friends. This raises the question of who exactly this book is *for*. Or is it a new type of book that, in a UK context dominated by the Research Assessment Exercise, is not really designed to be read by anybody? Neither an academic monograph of the traditional kind, which could claim a contribution to scholarly knowledge, nor an introductory text governed by genuine pedagogical principles, this is a *library book* in what would seem to be a new, specialized historical sense.

We are told that, now we English-speaking late arrivals have incorporated continental philosophy into our canon, the time for exegesis is past and the time to engage has arrived. *Blanchot's Communism* attests that such a time is still, apparently, to come.

David Cunningham

Looking after ourselves

Hugh P. McDonald, *John Dewey and Environmental Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2004. 227 pp., £49.00 hb., £16.50 pb., 0 7914 5873 3 hb., 0 7914 5874 1 pb.

Recently environmental philosophers have debated the nature and possibility of an 'environmental pragmatism', in part by examining the areas of intersection between environmental thought and classical American pragmatism. McDonald's book contributes to this debate, defending John Dewey's pragmatist theory of value on the grounds that it provides a better basis for environmental ethics than currently popular theories of nature's intrinsic value. McDonald's defence of Dewey is not entirely convincing, however, as emerges when we survey the interpretation of Dewey's ethics which occupies the core chapters of the book.

McDonald first outlines Dewey's naturalist conception of humans as organisms. Human organisms emerge from less developed types of organism and, as organisms, they depend upon, and must interact with, the natural environment. McDonald claims that this conception of humans, which relocates them firmly 'in and of' nature, already gives Dewey an incipient environmental ethic. Moreover, Dewey thinks that all organisms value those activities and things that further their growth, a fact which introduces value into nature in two ways. First, all organisms – not only humans – have their own goods or values. Second, when we (as organisms) experience certain natural things as valuable, our experiences are revealing values that are objectively present in those things. As McDonald explains Dewey's point with respect to animals: 'If animal life is experienced as valuable, then this value is a real trait of nature, not a mere projection.' Here Dewey seems to endorse a form of direct realism about perceptions of value (although it is uncertain – and McDonald does not discuss – how this position could accommodate cultural diversity in values).

Having through these points suggested that Dewey believes nature to have value intrinsically (that is, objectively – independently of human valuations), McDonald considers the objection that Dewey is an avowed instrumentalist, who believes that only instrumental value exists. To overcome this objection, McDonald reinterprets Dewey as someone who retains a transformed conception of intrinsic value within a broadly instrumentalist theory of human action. Dewey rejects the idea of a highest good or single, all-important, end (such as pleasure), on the grounds that

all ends of action are subject to continual reassessment by agents. Ends, once achieved, become means to new ends: 'Ends may later be means.... They are part of an ongoing process in which they are now ends and later means to further consequences.' However, McDonald argues, some ends may still have intrinsic value temporarily, relative to a given stage in the agent's ongoing process of enacting and appraising her values. The problem is that such 'intrinsic value' as arises here is the value which an agent finds in something for its own sake (not as a means to something else). This non-instrumental value is not necessarily the same as the objective value that Dewey also attributes to nature, according to McDonald. McDonald needs to show how these kinds of intrinsic value are connected; he fails to do so because, following much contemporary environmental philosophy, he does not maintain a clear distinction between the different senses of intrinsic value.

The environmental implications of Dewey's value theory become clearer as McDonald goes on to elucidate Dewey's 'experimental' understanding of moral theory. According to this understanding, moral theory enables us to determine how to improve the quality of human life in specific, problematic, situations. Moral theory therefore involves close analysis of these problematic situations, of the viability of possible solutions, and of the acceptability of both the relevant human desires and the means available to achieve proposed solutions. McDonald argues that Dewey takes a holistic view of moral justification, on which ends can only be justified with reference to all these various situational factors. McDonald favourably contrasts this holistic, contextualist, model of justification to the more common, arguably 'foundationalist', environmentalist approach which seeks to identify intrinsic value in nature and, upon that basis, to infer that humans have obligations to nature. McDonald is unduly brief as to the reasons why Dewey's holistic model is preferable. (Although McDonald spends a long time critically reviewing popular theories of nature's intrinsic value in Chapter 1, he never fully links his reading of Dewey back to this review.) McDonald does suggest that intrinsic-value theories generate an impossibly demanding range of obligations to nature and have



problems in accepting that species need to predate on one another – although these are criticisms that do not straightforwardly apply to the relatively complex intrinsic value theories of Callicott and Rolston, which McDonald considers in Chapter 1. More generally, McDonald suggests that Dewey's holistic approach to moral justification allows that humans have moral obligations to the environment as a whole, as well as obligations to preserve species and biodiversity and to protect scenic landscapes. On Dewey's approach, these obligations do not follow directly from the intrinsic value of these items, but arise from moral reasoning which is situated in a context of worsening environmental problems and which takes diverse, interrelated, elements of this situation into account.

There are reasons to be cautious of Dewey's 'environmental ethic' as McDonald reconstructs it. On this ethic, we are obliged to protect the environment because 'the environment is required for humans', required as the physical component of our social environment, on which we depend. This seems to imply that the environment has only instrumental value as a means to human well-being, but then, for Dewey/McDonald, intrinsic and instrumental value are not firmly separable. Our environmentally problematic situation means that caring for the environment is required of us, and is therefore obligatory and – at least temporarily – an end in itself which can override

other purposes. Yet Dewey's ethics still seems to imply (for McDonald) that humans are obliged to protect the environment only in so far as this protection is necessary to resolve environmental problems which adversely affect humans themselves. Arguably, though, environmental protection requires more robust obligations to nature, of the sort which theories of nature's intrinsic value can generate. Whether Dewey's ethical theory is really preferable to theories of intrinsic value, as McDonald claims, therefore remains moot, especially since McDonald does not integrate into his defence of Dewey's theory his stronger arguments that landscapes and species have the (objective) value that we perceive in them and that non-human organisms have (objective) value qua living, growing, beings.

In addition to these difficulties with McDonald's central thesis, his book has off-putting features: his expositions of Dewey and of contemporary environmental philosophers are sometimes unnecessarily convoluted and technical, and McDonald has a tendency to detail these thinkers' claims without explaining the arguments that motivate them. Nonetheless, McDonald's core claims regarding the environmental relevance of Dewey's ethics are interesting and original, and they deserve attention in so far as they help to flesh out one possible form that an environmental pragmatism might take.

Alison Stone

It could have been worse

Walter Benjamin as opera

Brian Ferneyhough/Charles Bernstein, *Shadowtime*, Prinzregententheater, Munich, 25 May 2004.

Something about Walter Benjamin – the life, his theory – makes him an obvious candidate for representation or fictionalization. He has been the subject of one novel and has played a walk-on part in a couple more. There are art films that take his Pyrenees flight as thematic, and he is intimated as a presence in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*. Paintings and collages using his face crop up now and again, echoes of the book covers that inevitably sport his phizog. There is even a building – Libeskind's Jewish museum in Berlin – constructed according to themes derived from his writings. Now Benjamin has had an opera written about him, premièred in Munich's Prinzregententheater at the Munich Biennale on 25 May 2004. The composer is Brian Ferneyhough, a professor at Stanford and well known as a composer of complex and uncompromising late modernist music, who emerged at a time when the banal simplicities of minimalism were conquering concert halls with a promise of a populist revival in 'classical' music. The librettist is Charles Bernstein, professor of English Literature at University of Pennsylvania and a main force of 'language poetry', an experimental US strain of poetics.

Ferneyhough and Bernstein insist that *Shadowtime* is not about Benjamin's life but about ideas, Benjamin's ideas and the ideas of others, sundry others. Indeed the opera opens with some Heideggeriana penned by Ferneyhough: 'Understanding of Being reveals itself as the innermost ground of our finitude. Ontology is an index of finitude. Once grasped, the finitude of existence brings *Dasein* into the simplicity of its fate.' The opera's libretto swirls with gestures towards Western philosophy, metaphysics and theology, especially in relation to time. But as much as it wants to argue that it is about ideas, the opera still needs to hang itself off the hook of a life, or more accurately a death.

It begins biographically, in the hour of Benjamin's death in the Hotel Fonda de Francia in Port Bou, on the border between France and Spain. Walter Benjamin and his travelling companion Henny Gurland are told that their further journey to Lisbon (and thence to the USA) is impossible because they lack the requisite visa. They must return to France. A doctor advises Benjamin to rest as his health is impaired. That night Benjamin takes his own life. Many writers have made Benjamin's suicide emblematic of other things: the greater tragedy of the fate of the Jews, the dashing of political utopias, the end of European culture. Preparing to flee Europe, his life in danger as a Jew and as a Marxist, he spoke about himself as 'the last intellectual'; he feared a culturally impoverished existence in the USA or Palestine. And so he represents for some the model of arcane intellectualism, an inept character at home only among his books, embedded in a European culture that is literally being bombed and dismantled around him. In the first scene of the opera, as Benjamin slips towards death, scenes from his life flit by. Here the libretto attempts to condense the essence of his philosophy in staccato lines. In a scene set in Berlin in 1917 with his future wife, he has the words:

Only for the sake of the hopeless
have we been given hope....

It is not just women
who prostitute themselves....

We all are
for we are all
objects and subjects
of culture.

Each line can be traced back to a comment of Benjamin's, and yet here in the context of the libretto all meaning evaporates from them and they seem to mark positions without any meaningful articulation. These are the types of things said by Benjamin. These words mark the spot of his thought, but fail to make it articulate, for they are empty slogans that take no account of their existence in a post-modernist libretto, in an opera by a notoriously 'complex' composer, in a theatre happening now. The words remain just words. Later Benjamin chats with Gershom Scholem:

If we can't convict God
Then let's indict the bourgeoisie
For they promise a utopia
That never comes, exploiting
Each according to their ability
To be exploited, making commodities
Of all that could have been
Sparks of hope.

Here we see addressed the 'rift' in Benjamin's thought between 'metaphysics and materialism', named by the libretto's Scholem as 'the peas' in the 'shell game' of the 'Adventurer King of Ambiguity and Obscurity'. It is, inevitably, this very lack of commitment to one or the other side, this straddling in the middle, between religion and Marxism, between comfort and the cause, that is said to bring about Benjamin's death. This line has been often peddled in the 'critical' literature. There must be something consoling in it.

WB: I know my vacillations
Janus faced
Make strange connections
I go full throttle in one direction
Then arc my thought
Against itself, a bow forever
Waiting for an arrow.

Scholem: Self-deception can lead only to suicide.

WB: Better
a bad revolutionary
Than a good bourgeois.

The third section of the opera is titled 'Doctrine of Similarity'. Thirteen short pieces for a 48-piece choir with various instruments are designed to 'reflect the nature of history, time and the process of translation and transformation' (Bernstein). Set in play are various formal games on both lyrical and musical levels. Musically, Ferneyhough notes that each of the thirteen pieces is concerned with *Nachbildung*, imitation in some form, whether using repetition, recombination or the mimicry of canonic musical structures. The texts of the libretto are derived also from experiments with *Nachbildung*. There are anagrams of the name Walter Benjamin. 'I'm a lent barn Jew/A mint bran jewel/A barn Jew melt in', and so on. There are variations on the last line of a Mallarmé poem. There are homophonic transpositions (or translations), such that the line 'There's no solution to the question if the question becomes the solution' is repeated

homophonically as 'Tears sole dilution chews the winsome imp's affection's freedom's sheer incursion'. The texts are structured according to relationships between prime numbers. All these parameters draw the text away from engagement with Benjamin's mode and means of thinking, and *Nachbildung* opens the way to repetition, rather than the more characteristically Benjaminian motif of reproduction. The composer and librettist cite Benjaminian notions such as mimesis and reproduction, but, in effect, they evoke different notions, listed by Ferneyhough elsewhere as repetition, variation, refraction and similation. Are these not rather the terms of an idea-voided minimalism?

Repetition becomes pastiche as, in the next scene, a romantically accented piano dominates. Benjamin has entered the underworld, which is also a Las Vegas piano bar. Las Vegas, the programme notes state, 'is the paradise of the culture industry with an open channel to its hell'. With this observation Ferneyhough's immersion in Adornian musical aesthetics comes to the fore. Ferneyhough led the summer programme at Adorno's old stomping ground Darmstadt between 1984 and 1994. The pianist tinkles and twitters at his piano in staccato lines of monosyllables and contextless prepositions. In this place Benjamin will be assailed by a phantasmagoria of figures, subjecting him to eleven interrogations, just as in the myth of the Sphinx who demanded the same of those who were to enter the realm of the dead. As eight hundred years of musical history in the West from 1000 to 1825 is recapitulated rapidly, Benjamin meets a three-headed Cerberus, two of whose heads are Karl and Groucho Marx. He encounters Hitler, Pope Pius XII, Joan of Arc, the Golem, Baal Shem Tov dressed as a vampire, and Einstein. Two-dimensional cut-out figures are wheeled on to ask questions about past and future, memory and forgetting. They are as inert as are the words that they utter via the choir. They sing lines that seemingly bear no meaningful relation to the singer. For example, Hitler sings:

Can you go nowhere?
 Be no place?
 Come into nothing?
 Can you hold air?
 Can you be transfixed by transitions alone?

Bernstein and Ferneyhough want to resist realism and representation, but is there not some responsibility to historical detail to be observed? In this evocative swirl it would seem that anyone can say anything. Unsurprisingly Benjamin disappears from the opera at this point. The libretto in the penultimate scene plays more word games using permutation and homophony from Heine's German into an English unrelated in terms of meaning. The final scene fizzles out into melancholy.

For now time is lost
 now time is gained
 now time is empty
 now time is full
 now time is lived
 now time is hollow
 now time is made
 now time is stone.





At one point in the libretto the words estrangement and engagement are mentioned, as part of a list of questions: Is aversion better than engagement? Is engagement better than detachment? Is assimilation better than estrangement? Is estrangement better than allegory? These terms derive from Brecht, and they make sense in a Brechtian dramaturgical and political universe. Here, though, they are just odd words from arguments once had, filigree from the surface texture of European politicized culture. Although absent in the opera, Brecht was a crucial influence on Benjamin, in particular in relation to questions of staging and poetry. Significantly, Ferneyhough refuses the term 'opera' and prefers to call *Shadowtime* 'music theatre'. Music theatre has, like opera, a European pedigree, born in the 1960s in Germany and Italy and associated with experimentalism, for example the work of Hans Werner Henze, Györgi Ligeti, Sylvano Bussotti. Music theatre was an attempt to reinvent an exhausted operatic tradition. Music theatre also harks back to Brecht/Weill and Brecht/Eisler collaborations in the 1920s and 1930s and indicates the possibility of introducing politics, or reintroducing politics, into the operatic form. It is therefore all the more perplexing that Brecht leaves his traces only in a couple of words in the libretto and that his musical collaborators, Weill, Eisler and Dessau, offer no musical suggestions. If the name music theatre signals an ambition to experiment formally and to have some sort of political impact, both these aspects have been, in the event, severely compromised. There is no irony, no political spleen, and most of all there is no fun or enjoyment – only the alienating absurdity of trying to carry mock-philosophical arguments in atonal singing. However, on the night of the performance few of the words could be discerned. And the swirl of inaudible words, together with the scamperings of a choir of ginger-haired angels and the cardboard cut-outs, distracted from the music. The musicians were sunk into an orchestra pit, making all of their gymnastic exertions on their instruments invisible and, thereby, denying the audience one of the main pleasures of a Ferneyhough performance.

It could have been worse. It could have been sentimental. It could have anchored itself to the romance and tragedy of the death. But here the error of sentiment was replaced by an ideologically driven commitment to experimentation. The dense musical score, the layered and playful libretto, add up to no more than a muddle of parts that do no more than allude to Benjamin. Benjamin becomes an impulse, a motive, but is not found again in the opera. Is it possible to turn his, or anyone's, philosophical ideas into musical form? In Benjamin's case, at the very least, one would need to think more consequentially about the critical and theoretical issues that he dealt with, instead of the predictable motifs of angels, melancholics, suicide, which all become an external matter of representation. Integrated not simply in a thematic sense but also in a practical sense could be the Benjaminian themes of reproduction, aura, commodification of culture, the relationship of aesthetics and politics, the political implications of the construction and handing on of tradition, and the Brechtian theses on technology, authorship, reception and the demands of the moment.

Shadowtime has four further runs over the next eighteen months: in Paris, the Ruhr, London and New York.

Esther Leslie

CONFERENCE REPORT

Il profeta?

Politics, Subjectivity, Event: A Workshop with Antonio Negri on his book *Time for Revolution*, Birkbeck College, University of London, 25 June.

Antonio Negri in Conversation, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 26 June.

Antonio Negri visited London this summer for the first time since 1978. His recent release from prison and the restitution of his right to travel have enabled him to embark on a worldwide lecture tour, riding on the huge popularity of *Empire* (2000) and its emblematic significance for certain strands of the anti-capitalist movement. These two conferences – the first an invitation-only workshop organized by the Centre for the Study of Invention and Social Process, Goldsmiths, in collaboration with the School of Politics and Sociology, Birkbeck; the second at the ICA in association with Continuum Books – focused on his most recent book to be translated into English, *Time for Revolution* (2003). This brings together two texts that bridge *Empire*: ‘The Constitution of Time’ (1981), and ‘Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo’ (first published in 2000, after Negri had finished work on *Empire*). Both events were packed, whether through scholarly interest in his latest publication, or just to hear what the man has to say about the effects and questions generated by *Empire*. At a time when many leading intellectuals on the Left have a cosy relationship with the state, even if only cynically, Negri is a spectacular exception.

Negri was first arrested in April 1979 as part of a drive to imprison leading figures from the political organization Autonomia, accused it of being the political front of the terrorist activity associated with the Red Brigades in the 1970s, culminating in the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro in 1978. In June 1983 Negri stood for election as a candidate for the Radical Party and was duly elected Deputy for Milan, Rome and Naples. As a result, he was able to leave prison under protection of parliamentary immunity. But the Italian parliament immediately instigated procedures to withdraw this. Negri left for France on 19 September, escaping the ruling by a day. In his absence he was sentenced to thirty years’ imprisonment. In June 1997 Negri returned to Italy voluntarily to face a sentence of thirteen years, with the promise of release for his comrades – a promise that was not kept. (See Mark

Neocleous, ‘Negri in Prison’, *Radical Philosophy* 92, November/December 1998.)

Both events took a similar form. First (via a translator), Negri gave an account of aspects of his work in general and *Time for Revolution* in particular. There followed comments by respondents and questions from the audience. Negri described the emergence of his theoretical and political practice from his diagnosis of, and response to, a crisis of Marxism. This crisis is understood by him as emerging immanently from the realization of Marx’s thesis that the capitalist mode of production comes into its own when there is a move from ‘formal’ to ‘real’ subsumption of production by capital: that is, from an economy in which the reproduction of capital is an external or partial determination of production, to an economy in which the reproduction of capital constitutes production completely. This is also understood as the dissolution of the independence of use value from exchange value. The crisis is that, in so far as this takes place, capital absorbs all alternative or revolutionary forces into its internal metabolism. Hence, the classical Marxist conception of the working class is undermined, according to Negri, in so far as it posits an exogenous force of resistance to capital. This generates what he goes on to describe as the theoretical and political aporia of postmodernism. He identifies two predominant postmodern responses: the appeal to a residual or marginal exogenous force of resistance, which, as a result, tends to be politically weak and ineffectual (e.g. the Frankfurt School); or the celebration of capital as an encompassing totality (e.g. uncritical forms of cultural studies).

Negri understands his political involvement in Italian workerism and Autonomia and his theoretical work as resulting from an alternative response to this aporia: namely, to develop an endogenous form of resistance to the totalization of capital. This has revolved around the elaboration of living labour as the creative, productive and constitutive force that capital feeds off like a vampire. This critique of Marxism is the source of Negri’s (and Hardt’s) now well-known



theses that: today (1) we face a new form of capitalism without borders or an outside, namely 'empire'; and (2) resistance to empire must therefore take place immanently, by a force that is constituted on this new terrain but irreducible to it – namely, not the traditionally conceived working class, but 'the multitude'. The texts published in *Time for Revolution* elaborate different aspects of this project. The thesis of 'The Constitution of Time' is: if real subsumption takes place, then Marx's account of labour time collapses, since there is no external criterion of measurement. This reveals labour as a self-constituting time that is thereby resistant to capital, and thereby a 'revolutionary time'. 'Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo' is an attempt to elaborate the ontology at stake in this project.

The questions and problems with Negri's position have become almost as well known as the theses. Is 'empire' a correct, or even coherent, conception of contemporary capitalism? How is the multitude distinct from traditional forms of resistance? In particular, is its distinction from class won only at the expense of a Christian romanticism of love and poverty? If the multitude is endogenous to capitalism or empire, in what precise sense is it resistant? How can it be resistant without a claim to transcend capital? Is it not a new formation – or perhaps even just a new terminology for – of real subsumption, and therefore just another statement of the aporia of postmodern theory and politics? These sorts of questions were not always pursued as forcefully as they might have been by the broadly sympathetic audiences that greeted Negri at these events, but he did face some criticism.

Judith Revel and Éric Alliez both objected to the close and apparently derivative relation of the multitude to class. Both insisted that class should be dropped as a conservative relic of classical Marxism, and that the emancipatory philosophical and political force of the multitude depended on this. Negri's response tended towards a scholarly apology that Marx's account of class had been a theoretical and political preparation for the conception of multitude, and he was critical of Deleuze and Foucault in so far as they had not learnt this lesson. Alliez, who responded at both events, also asked why Negri had conceptualized the multitude in terms of love and not desire. Negri's answer was that desire was born of the need for militancy, whereas love was born of the act of militancy. Peter Osborne reiterated the question in relation to commodification: is the relative absence of Negri's analysis of commodification due to his indifference to desire, with the consequence that the analysis of labour as a commodity is effaced? Negri responded by emphasizing the resistance of living labour to commodification.

The issue of Negri's relation to Christianity was raised in the light of his allusions to the Bible and the example of certain saints, as well as his curious emphasis on love and poverty. Some questions seemed to reveal a Christian contingent in the ICA audience. Negri pleaded scholarly atheism, but admitted sympathy with liberation theology. Julian Read asked about the form of war that would be induced in the epoch of Empire, as did Jon Beasley-Murray, via the disarmingly direct questions: Will there be a revolution? And do we want one? His reasoning was: if revolution is impossible, then there will just be eternal war; but if a revolution takes place, then the result will be an eternal, dead time in which (quoting David Byrne on heaven) nothing ever happens. So which is preferable? An antinomy of multitudinous thought! Negri assured everyone that while he, following Spinoza, loved capitalism, a revolution was already inscribed in the body of the multitude.

At one point during the workshop at Birkbeck Judith Revel recounted a short tale about the reception of Negri's thought by the anti-capitalism movement. She was asked to talk at an event brandishing a banner that read 'Welcome to Counter-Empire'. She pointed out to the organizers that this slogan was misleading, since the multitude is an immanent force of resistance and empire has no outside. So they changed it to 'Welcome to Empire'. Everyone laughed, but not for the same reason.

Stewart Martin

Where does meaning get its fix?

A response to Rachel Malik's 'Fixing meaning'

The questions of pragmatic and intertextual accounts of communication raised in Malik's 'Fixing meaning' (*RP* 124) are not answered by suggesting a kind of complementarity between them or their complexification via the 'horizon of publishing'. This is arguably because, as the writer seems sometimes to acknowledge, the answers are not on the plane of interpretation but rather in the space of what *precedes* the individual interpreter.

Malik sees interpretation as the process through which the meaning of texts and utterances is fixed. She identifies two overlapping perspectives on how meaning is fixed, both of which depend on reading the context of communication. These are the inferential/pragmatic, agential approach and a (structural) semiotics of the text which locates the conditions of possibility – the framework – of inference. Malik argues that these perspectives or moments are compounded by another layer of reception, the intertextual work of editing and publishing which interposes itself between texts and the reading public, fixing and conventionalizing meaning through institutional power, a move which seems problematically to *decontextualize* reading.

The suggestion that interpretation, pure and simple, does all this work blocks the possibility that there may be different tropes of meaning in play which in Malik's discussion are not wholly disambiguated – for example, Dummett's distinction between a contextual gist or sense of communication and its identifying reference. The reference to how Bakhtin deals with otherness is a case in point here. If we concentrate on interpretation, then we lose a key moment of dialogics, which is that in which speakers or readers share a common meaning (sense) in the act of communication with the text or listener. In other words, the latter's meaning is *already internal* to the speaker/reader in some performative way prior to reflexive awareness. Obviously, it is not simply that interpretation is internal, as with the fixed stance of semiotic modes of decoding in intertextual accounts of communication. Rather, as Bakhtin, Merleau-Ponty, Dummett and others have argued in various ways, there is something intersubjective which precedes interpretation, a generic, indexical moment of culture through which the sense (not interpretation) of the spoken or written material is conveyed. It is, as Malik suggests at one point, a condition of communication. We can read because of what we already share with the speaker/text.

This, then, is to effect a reversal of a kind: the question becomes not 'how do we fix meaning?', but rather 'how do we unfix it?' Interpretation can be seen as a process of producing meanings, a way of individuating meaning as a property of self-reflexive individual readers, rather than a trope of meaning which is *constitutive* of the individual reader. Given that reading does proliferate, we must also see it as anchored or fixed by the constitutive context, the *generic* of the reader/reading. Hence in this view there is a trope of meaning which precedes interpretation. Consequently, Bakhtin's heteroglossia, for example, produces contradictions in dialogue which are not at this constitutive level problematic, as here they are the generic (ontic) categories of the dialogue itself. In other words, contradiction and ambiguity are a routine, familiar part of the structure of communication itself.

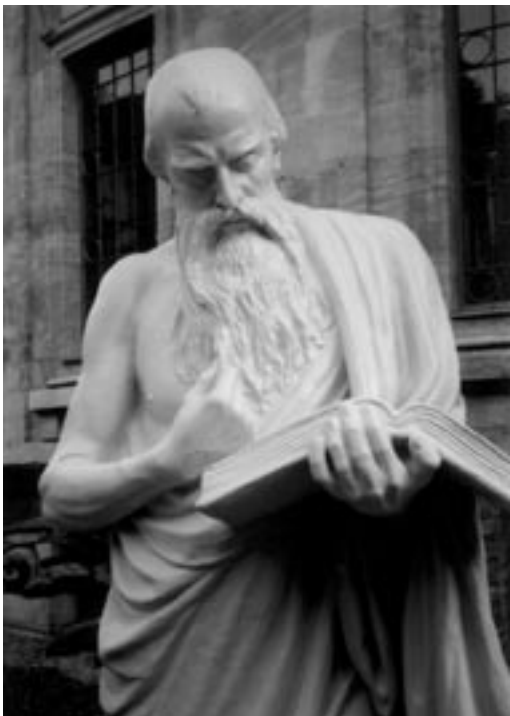
Therefore, although as Grossberg says (cited in Malik, p. 19) 'it is almost impossible to know what constitutes the boundary of a text', the question of textual boundaries at this contextual level is beside the point. The materials that enable us to make sense of the text are outside interpretation. These can be found *in* the text but also echo wider cultural

concerns; that is, the boundaries are not decisive because the writer's activity is coextensive with the wider environment of cultural process – the routine, everyday nature of cultural processes and identifications.

We can see this, for example, in Stuart Hall's account of diasporic identities. Jamaicans discovered their 'Africanness' in the 1970s through the Rastafarian texts that enabled them to recognize 'Africa' in their own biographies. Essentially, this excess meaning was something performed rather than identified. It had been displaced and made strange by the colonial experience. In translating this semantic excess into text the writing constitutes a feature of the practices it describes: 'Africanness' is a performative feature of the writing.

So the question of whether in order to fix meaning we have to know the circumstances of the production of text, the relation between one writer's work and another, is not here of primary importance; the routine, everyday context of production of meaning is as present in the text as it is beyond it. We don't need to look elsewhere for mediations, in the first instance, as these are accumulated within the work itself. The interpretive practices that are going on all around us are *themselves* the mediation process, the activity on which interpretation depends.

Malik argues that intertextuality blurs the boundaries between text and context and this makes it 'increasingly difficult to identify the text that is read either as concept and/or empirical object' (p. 19). It is argued that in Gordon Gecko's 'greed is good' statement a cultural context acts as implicature in order to get across its illicit, transgressive flavour. However, Malik suggests that this context is better read as a text. 'The reader constructs an intertextual relation between two or more utterances' here. This begs the question of what the reader is doing when he/she construct the intertextual relation, where he/she stands in order to do this. Arguably this point is the situating of the reader as the vehicle of interpretation, as a kind of culturally generic being. Clearly the utterances and the cultural context are not texts/utterances in the same way. One offers a conventional meaning whilst the



other informs it with the open-ended content of the cultural horizon. If contexts were to be treated as texts this would merely defer the question of how the reader-text relationship is constituted, and therefore of how meaning is fixed, to another context.

Presumably, following Grossberg, the intertextual relation here has to do with the excess of meaning offered by the context (fields of connotations). We need to know what this excess is and how this works as a specific ontological moment rather than something that gets elided with text. This moment is neither that of reading nor that of text but their contextual relation. Here we are perhaps concerned with that part of culture that gets pushed to the margins – the indexical features of communication, the residual, as Lefebvre styles it, which nevertheless invisibly enlivens and informs what *does* get said. These everyday linguistic routines are at once objectified in what gets said and also the open indexical structure which acts as potentially disruptive counterpoint to petrified language. Whilst Malik sees the moment of displacement in communication in her reference to class power relations (p.

21) as one of naturalization of the dominant account, nothing is said about how this fits into the ontology of communication, how the suppressed excess of meaning functions in relation to its codified, naturalized expression, how it draws on this, gets its fix, so to speak.

At the level of theory, the question of (intertextual) excess of meaning is seen by a cultural critic like David Morley as a threat to its social rooting, but it is celebrated by Grossberg as an antidote to textual determinism. In either case referential indeterminacy is

the point. Malik's description of the inferential and textual complexities of reading doesn't offer a way out of these intellectual polarities – that is, a way of stabilizing meaning. However, despite complexity, the interpretive process does come to a resting point, but clearly not one that can be described in versions of reader/text/utterance positions. Hence although there is here a vast array of procedures for reading, there's nothing *processual* to suggest *why* the dissemination of meaning is not endless.

In the real world readers can and do manage texts, intertextuality, an interchange of genres, and so forth, in the face of great complexity. This point cannot be overemphasized. So how do they do this? A phenomenological response would be that whatever complexity readers are faced with is 'simplified' by the conjunction between the generic cultural experience and the text which is read performatively through this. That is, the complex is always 'reduced' to the familiar in our structures of reception, to the categories of typical familiarity, in order to be slotted into our pre-existing routine ways of reading. Although this looks like a process of homogenization, the conjunction between text, situation and biography differentiates the experience of reception and produces a sense of 'the new'. This is a fairly commonplace observation, but its implication tends to be neglected. In this mode of reception, reading is a feature of the socially organized conditions in which it is done. This means that textual categories are 'dissolved' into the individual's cultural generic, as routinely classified items and so present no obstacle to the production of some kind of anchored reading because everything is assimilated to 'what it is like' in what Schutz called an 'open horizon of typical familiarity'. Hence we can appreciate complex artefacts, we get a sense (gist) of what they are about even if we have difficulty in articulating that sense via identification of text or genre.

In this view, interpretation *on its own* is a form of unfixing, as I think the drift of Malik's discussion shows. It is only when reading is seen in terms of the underlying shared cultural horizon that the possibility of interpretation becomes real.

Howard Feather

Reply

Howard Feather's response to my article and his own account of the interpretative process seem to rest on incompatible notions of both context and interpretation. Two issues are of relevance here.

First, the horizon of the publishable is not to be confused with the notion of a reader's circumstantial knowledge of the text's production history. It is what it is thinkable to publish in a given historical situation, and includes within it a diverse set of institutions and processes (commercial, educational, legal, etc.). As such, the horizon of the publishable is a condition of 'communication' and precedes both writing and reading. It therefore constitutes a set of strong and relatively stable contexts for both reading and writing. Context is not only, or most importantly, as Feather in part seems to suggest, the ephemeral, highly 'local' and unrepeatable dynamic within the interpretative process.

Second, Feather constructs an unnecessary polarization between 'conventional' or shared meaning and the non-conventional senses that constitute an excess or surplus of interpretative possibilities. Intertextuality, developed to include discursively governed patterns of inference, offers a way out of this too commonly posed opposition. There are not two orders of meaning, but a single intertextual continuum which encompasses the interpretation of both. There is therefore no excess to account for as Feather suggests, and the character of the shared meaning that he presumes remains a question. 'Conventional' or, as I would prefer, dominant interpretations are simply the most highly probable within what always remain an open-ended set of interpretative possibilities.

Rachel Malik

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