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# You let her into the house?

## Reflections on the politics of aid in Africa

**Lara Pawson**

There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect. How do we extricate ourselves?

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952

A treasure hunt was held in a West African capital city last summer. It was a small affair. A young, female aid worker from North America was celebrating her birthday. Barbara (not her real name) invited a group of friends to take part in the hunt, which was followed in the evening by a party, involving lots of dancing and drinking. The treasure hunt had a slight twist: it wasn't strictly a hunt for treasure. Barbara thought it would be more fun to hold a photograph hunt, so, instead of clue-solving, the participants would take snaps of particular subjects. The list of pictures Barbara proposed included: a photograph of a local person urinating in public, a local man drinking beer, a local woman sitting on the back of a moped with something really large balancing on her head, and a local man watching a woman working.

The treasure hunt was held on a Saturday at the height of the hot season. Daytime temperatures were reaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit, sometimes higher. To avoid the heat, teams carried out the hunt in air-conditioned cars. Barbara nevertheless insisted that speed was not important because the competition would be judged on the quality and originality of each shot. The larger the object on top of the woman's head, for instance, the better the shot. Barbara's friends responded to the challenge with varying degrees of ingenuity.

One team decided to pay their African subjects cash to help induce them to perform for the camera. This carload included a very senior US diplomat and an American Peace Corps volunteer turned businesswoman. From the comfort of their large car – possibly a D-plated vehicle – the team persuaded various people to pose. A young boy willingly peed at the side of the road and a man agreed to be photographed drinking a bottle of beer. Neither shot, however, was taken without problems. In the case of the urinating child, angry onlookers shouted at the group of expatriates to stop photographing the child. But the team still managed to get the shot they needed, pay the child and speed off, ignoring the complaints. Undeterred, they tracked down a roadside boutique where a woman was selling bottled beer. They called to a young man nearby and explained that they would pay cash if he would let them take a picture of him drinking a beer. He agreed. He went over to the boutique, took a bottle, plucked

off the lid and began to drink. Once the bottle was dry, he asked his audience for the agreed payment. The hunters handed over the money, giving the young man enough cash to pay the boutique-owner for the beer as well. But their willing subject proved wilier than they had bargained for: he scarpered with all the money, leaving the woman out of pocket.

At this point, a row broke out between the treasure hunt team and the woman from the boutique. She insisted that they pay her for the bottle of beer. After all, it wasn't her fault that the man had stolen it. But the team refused to pay up, also claiming it was not their fault that the young beer drinker had run off with all the cash. The volume of their dispute increased and within minutes a crowd had gathered to observe the confusion. The woman from the boutique became increasingly distressed and started shouting for the police. Before long, the cops appeared. The row continued but eventually the foreigners were persuaded to pay the woman for her beer, which cost about 50 pence. The crowds melted and the hunters drove off.

Meanwhile, across town, another team had devised a more relaxing way to get their photographs: they would persuade a single African to enact each scenario. The easiest way to do this was to use a security guard from the home of, a young North American man, one of the team members. Thus it was that a local man, employed by a foreign aid agency as a security guard, found himself performing for photographs that his youthful white boss needed for a bit of birthday fun.

Later, at the party, there was great hilarity as various participants in the treasure hunt recounted the events of the day. The party was held at the house of the senior US diplomat who had been involved in the beer contretemps earlier that day. This was in a wealthy suburb close to the banks of a wide river. It came with a large garden, a swimming pool and a terrace the size of a dance floor. A drinks trolley, loaded with every spirit or liqueur, wine or beer you might wish, was parked like a pram in the garden. There was a lot of discussion about whether or not the team that had used the guard should be disqualified for cheating. It was all very amusing.

### **NGO mischief**

Many of the treasure hunters were aid workers; others were diplomats or officials representing foreign donors. Barbara was a senior member of staff at a leading North American non-governmental organization that promotes condoms for safe sex, particularly among 'low-income and other vulnerable people'. Her young friend (a recent graduate), the one who deployed his security guard as a model, was running another NGO, which uses sport to teach 'the world's most disadvantaged children... optimism, respect, compassion, courage, leadership, inspiration and joy'. This was his first job in Africa and he was considered capable enough to lead an entire organization in a foreign country. Other treasure hunters included staff working for the US government's aid department, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID prides itself on 'a long history of extending a helping hand to those people overseas struggling to make a better life, recover from a disaster or striving to live in a free and democratic country'. It is, claims USAID, 'this caring that stands as a hallmark of the United States around the world'.<sup>1</sup>

There is nothing straightforward, however, about this apparent benevolence. According to the USAID website, 'U.S. foreign assistance has always had the twofold purpose of furthering America's foreign policy interests in expanding democracy and free markets while improving the lives of the citizens of the developing world.' In 2002, US aid to Africa totalled US\$3.2 billion (around 0.13 per cent of the total federal budget). The vast majority of aid is subject to strict conditions, most of which serve to promote the donor's interest: as much as 80 per cent of USAID's grants and contracts go directly to US companies and NGOs.<sup>2</sup> American aid is used, among other things, to

promote the use of genetically modified crops. In the poor cotton-producing countries of West Africa, Monsanto, Syngenta and Dow AgroSciences, supported by USAID, are pushing GM cotton varieties into use, a move that is being resisted by local farmers. Like other donors, the Americans are masters at using aid as a stick to try to force recipient countries to support controversial aspects of foreign policy. For example, in 2003 the US suspended military aid to South Africa following a decision by the South African government not to grant Americans immunity from prosecution by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. There is little doubt that Africa would be better off if it sacrificed foreign aid (and subsequent debt) for fairer terms of trade with the rest of the world.<sup>3</sup> This is not simply an economic question, it is also a cultural-psychological one. Aid keeps Africa in a never-ending cycle of victimization, forever subservient to the rich countries and their handouts.

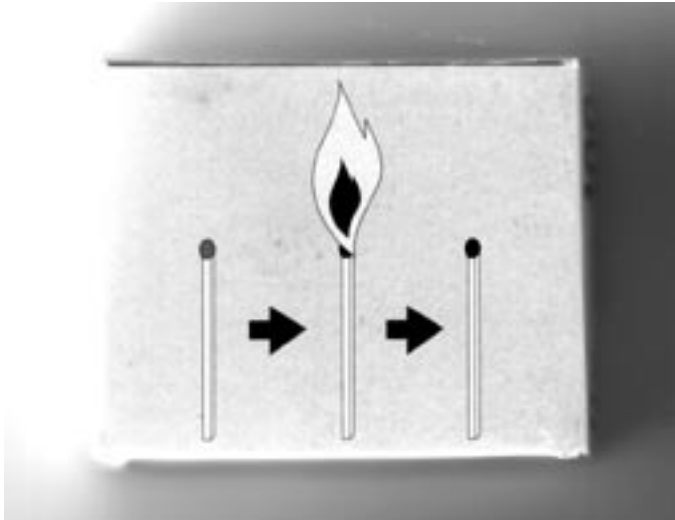
The aid worker is the friendly face of this imperial foreign policy; charitable and humanitarian NGOs are the mechanism through which it is carried out. Many of these NGOs certainly provide useful and sometimes essential services. Their political impact, however, is compatible with several of the causes of the very problems they are meant to confront. As Arundhati Roy notes, NGOs often act as the frontline promoters of the neoliberal project, 'accountable to their funders, not to the people they work among... It's almost as though the greater the devastation caused by neoliberalism, the greater the outbreak of NGOs.' Worse still, they turn the receivers of aid into 'dependent victims and blunt the edges of political resistance'.<sup>4</sup> In some cases foreign aid agencies act as a surrogate state, replacing and thus fragmenting the work of a nation's own government. When aid agencies like the UN's World Food Programme move in, African administrations tend to be let off the hook. But who can object? They're only there to help. The aid worker goes to Africa to care for the African, to make the African healthier and more democratic. Perhaps this explains why many expatriates – even a large number of those who are in Africa to 'do good' – so often resort to behaviour and attitudes that reveal a superiority complex reminiscent of colonialism.

It is very rare in Africa to see white people treating Africans as equals, even in apparently trivial ways. These people are not the sort who join the British National Party. It's unlikely that they would even call themselves conservatives, let alone vote Tory or Republican. They are not the people in Europe or the United States who support a tightening of immigration laws or who remove their kids from a school that has 'too many black kids'. These are the very people who – according to their profession – want to help the developing world, who want to reduce poverty and believe, at least in principle, in equality. So, what is it that turns these apparently thoughtful and humane people into buffoons who find it easy to humiliate Africans and treat them as inferior beings? And what is it that allows African people to accept this?

### **A charitable apartheid**

From the moment a Western aid worker arrives in Africa, he or she joins the upper echelons of the social and economic hierarchy. His or her living standards are on a par with the local elite – a far cry from the average African household. For example, aid workers have their own transport: usually a large, white four-wheel drive. Many aid agencies seem to renew their vehicles with unnecessary frequency, so their four-by-fours are always shiny and clean. There is usually a local who is hired to clean the cars. That the vehicles are four-by-fours is not irrelevant: they are very large, powerful cars which guzzle fuel and cost a lot to keep on the road. Their size allows passengers a good view of the road and surrounding areas. If you have ever stood next to someone sitting in a four-wheel drive, you will also be aware that you have to look up at them; unlike a car, when you have to look down. So the large Land-Rover, Cherokee, Land Cruiser, or whatever it may be, gives the passenger an advantage of power – literally

and metaphorically. Given that most Africans walk or take public transport, they are forever looking up at the fortunate foreigner, sealed into his large, air-conditioned, people-carrying unit. Another benefit of the four-by-four is that you can avoid the stare of the beggar far more easily than you would if you were walking, on public transport or in a smaller car which is lower to the ground. Foreigners can hide behind the thick glass quite easily, and may not have to confront their consciences as much as they would were they closer to the ground, closer to the outstretched hand of the beggar. Expatriates tend to be driven by a local driver: an aid worker is ferried about town by an African, often the same person who is in charge of cleaning the car.



There is an image in the West that Africa is the one place where four-by-fours are actually necessary. African roads are notoriously bad. And it is true that there are some areas to which you cannot travel if you don't have a four-wheel drive. However, it is amazing how many aid workers, UN staff, diplomats and some, though fewer, well-paid journalists, drive around urban areas in these enormous vehicles. You don't need a four-wheel drive in Bamako, for example, or in Ghana's capital, Accra. Even in the run-down Angolan capital Luanda, a city spilling over with people due to the recently ended civil war, a car is quite adequate.

Plenty of people do well in a second- or third- or even fourth-hand saloon car. But in capital cities and towns throughout Africa you can be sure of seeing a myriad shiny, often white, Land Cruisers and Land-Rovers buzzing about from staff residential areas to offices and back again. Why? Safety is one argument I have heard bandied about. But you are more likely to attract attention in a large car than if you drive about in a vehicle nobody would wish to steal. Apart from Johannesburg – where carjacking is a real threat to your daily safety – most African cities are safer than London. There's something else, too: most NGOs are strictly prohibited from providing lifts to locals.

However, let's move on – to housing. Most expatriates in Africa tend to live in the best houses available. Compounds are fairly common. They range from a few houses arranged around a cul-de-sac to thirty or forty houses sandwiched between several streets. Whatever the size, the compound is characterized by high walls or fencing (sometimes electric) and guards (sometimes armed). Residents tend to be all-expatriate peppered with members of the local elite. Compounds offer security, convenience and exclusivity. At the top end of the scale, residents often have access to a shared swimming pool, tennis courts, ample parking space and other facilities. Not everyone lives in a compound. They may choose, instead, to live in separate accommodation, individual houses or apartments, usually found in the wealthy neighbourhoods or 'blocks'. It's not an accident that during the recent unrest in the Ivory Coast, much of the anger of President Laurent Gbagbo's young supporters was aimed at the exclusive neighbourhoods of the foreign elite.

Of course, there are exceptions. Some aid agencies – Médecins Sans Frontières springs to mind – put their foreign staff into one house and sometimes individuals share a room. Their facilities may include a generator plus a pretty yard – but hardly what, in Britain, would be described as luxury. Nevertheless, it is precisely on this point that the complexity of the foreigner's life in Africa begins. Most aid workers, UN staff, diplomats and reporters who go to work in Africa are viewed back home as plucky, hardy types who are roughing it under African skies to help carry the dark continent

towards the light. However, from the vantage point of the locals, it is a different story. Expatriates – be they MSF ‘volunteers’ or otherwise – enjoy a lifestyle which is beyond the wildest dreams of most Africans.

This sense of superiority has some very strange effects on people. Not so long ago, in Ivory Coast’s commercial capital, Abidjan, I was derided by my colleagues for allowing a Ghanaian housemaid to stay inside the house. I was the acting West Africa correspondent for the BBC at the time and therefore was living in the BBC residence, a spacious bungalow with three bedrooms (each with en suite shower/bath facilities), a large dining room and even a swimming pool. At the back of the bungalow was a narrow outhouse, which included a small bedroom for the maid. Unlike the bungalow, the maid’s room lacked air-conditioning. However, during my three-month stay in Abidjan, I was only using two of the bedrooms in the main house. It seemed obvious to offer the spare room to the maid.

‘You let her into the house?’ That was the reaction I received from a young North American woman who was also staying in the BBC house, with her partner. They were guests who had nowhere to live at the time because they were looking for their own luxury bungalow. But they were not at all happy with the arrangement with the maid. How could I trust her? Had I given her keys to the house? Didn’t I feel that my privacy was being invaded by the maid? Wasn’t I aware that given an inch, the maid would take a mile? Didn’t I know that ‘they’ prefer to live in the shed out the back, that the maid was probably accepting my offer in order to avoid offending me?

Another argument often put forward goes like this: most Africans prefer to work for expatriates than the local elite for the simple reason that they will benefit from better working conditions. It follows that many expats take it for granted that one should not be ‘too soft’ with staff. ‘You have to keep them in check’ is the unspoken strategy. It is important to maintain the barriers and reinforce that strong sense of otherness – even among colleagues. Local staff who work for a foreign organization will carry on living in their own homes, far from the expats’ part of town. The distance and social disparity between the two neighbourhoods often lays bare any hope of mixing or intertwining the lives of the staff. At home, local staff might be without electricity and running water. The two groups only share space when they are at work, where teams have access to computers, the Internet, telephones, walkie-talkies and mobile phones. The two-tier system runs across virtually every aspect of life, including holidays, for example. Many foreign organizations – including the UN and the BBC – have a two-tier salary system as well: local staff are paid ‘local wages’. They watch foreigners come to their country, receive very high salaries, take long holidays, drive around in four-by-fours with chauffeurs... while they carry on living off low salaries, which ‘compared to most jobs’ are really quite good.

Some people argue today that what aid agencies are good at is emergency work. There’s clearly a good case to be made in defence of food distribution programmes, for instance in the circumstances created by the current conflict in Sudan’s western region of Darfur. But even in emergency situations not all aid workers work by the same rules. Most agencies pull their staff out of an area if their lives are threatened, and in Darfur certain aid agencies have done just that. What we hear about less is that often – not always – when NGOs pull out staff, they are referring only to foreign staff. Meanwhile, local staff remain on base because the area in which they are working is often the area where they live, where they were born and where they have spent much of their life.

For example, towards the end of the Angolan war, the city of Malange in the centre of the country became the target of fairly consistent shelling by rebels from the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). Many displaced people had already fled to the city from unprotected villages which had been targeted by rebel and government soldiers. Consequently there were also a lot of aid agencies in Malange,



providing aid to the displaced groups. However, when the UNITA shelling began in earnest, the NGOs pulled out. In other words, they removed all foreign staff working in the city. Most agencies completely closed down operations, leaving local staff without a job or salary. Others left a skeletal office in operation, run by local staff, who carried on working throughout the bombing campaigns. Some Angolans carried out the most heroic acts, working day in, day out to provide aid to people who had lost practically everything. Meanwhile, their expatriate colleagues were safe back in Luanda or out of the country entirely. Double standards? It would seem so: a sort of apartheid policy in liberal clothes.

Given the institutionalized discrimination practised by many foreign organizations working in Africa and elsewhere, it is no wonder that some staff – such as our party-goers on their treasure hunt – exploit local people for their own entertainment. Some aid workers are just as likely to exercise their superiority complex as the British and North American soldiers working in Iraq. Those who were hunting for photographic treasures in that West African capital might not have noticed, however, that they played their game just days after pictures of the Abu Ghraib abuse were published in the local newspapers.

## Notes

1. [www.usaid.gov/about\\_usaid/](http://www.usaid.gov/about_usaid/).
2. Italy's record is even worse: about 90 per cent of Italian aid ends up benefiting Italian 'experts' and businesses.
3. Net aid to Africa in 2002 was US\$22,296 million, including US\$1,048 million from Britain and \$2,063 million from France. See the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, [www.oecd.org/home/0,2605,en\\_2649\\_201185\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/home/0,2605,en_2649_201185_1_1_1_1_1,00.html).
4. Arundhati Roy, 'Public Power in the Age of Empire', *Socialist Worker* Online, 3 September 2004, [www.socialistworker.org/2004-2/510/510\\_06\\_Roy.shtml](http://www.socialistworker.org/2004-2/510/510_06_Roy.shtml).

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect those of the BBC.

<h1>Adieu Derrida</h1>	
<p><b>Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities</b></p>	
<p><b>Adieu Derrida</b> A Series of Lectures in Commemoration of Jacques Derrida</p>	
<p><b>Programme</b></p>	
<p><b>Date</b></p> <p>Friday, 6 May</p> <p>Wednesday, 11 May</p> <p>Wednesday, 18 May</p> <p>Friday, 20 May</p> <p>Friday, 27 May</p> <p>Friday, June 3rd</p> <p>Friday, 10 June</p> <p>Friday, 17 June</p> <p>Saturday, 18 June</p>	<p><b>Speaker and title</b></p> <p><b>Jean-Luc Nancy</b> <i>Mad Derrida</i></p> <p><b>Hillis Miller</b> <i>The Late Derrida</i> Brunei Gallery SOAS 6.30pm</p> <p><b>Jacques Rancière</b> <i>Does 'Democracy' mean Something?</i> La Lumière Cinéma, French Institute 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Gayatri Spivak</b> <i>Responsibility and Remembering</i> Birkbeck, Clore B01 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Slavoj Žizek</b> <i>Respect for Otherness? No Thanks</i> Birkbeck, Clore B01 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Film Derrida</b> Directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman La Lumière Cinéma, French Institute 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Etienne Balibar</b> <i>Constructions and Deconstructions of the Universal</i> La Lumière Cinéma, French Institute 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Alain Badiou</b> <i>The Passion for Inexistence</i> Birkbeck, Clore B01 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Drucilla Cornell</b> <i>Who Bears the Right to Die</i> Birkbeck, Clore B01 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Film GhostDance</b> Directed by Kenneth McMullen La Lumière Cinéma, French Institute 4.00pm</p>
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Immanuel Kant, 1781

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**Slavoj Žižek**, Institute for Social Studies, Ljubljana/  
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#### 9 June

Creation and Eternity in Politics and the Arts  
**Alain Badiou**, École Normale Supérieure, Paris

Enquiries to Ray Brassier, [r.brassier@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:r.brassier@mdx.ac.uk)

## Conference

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**Peter Weibel**, artist and media theorist, Director of the Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe; author of *Fast Forward: Media Art* (2004) and *The Open Work, 1964–1979* (2005).

**Boris Groys**, art historian and theorist, professor at the School of Fine Arts, Karlsruhe; author of *Stalin's Total Work of Art* (1988), *Ilya Kabakov* (1998) and *Über das Neue!* (1999).

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# On Bergson's metaphysics of time

Max Horkheimer

**T**he separation of the individual sciences from philosophy as the standard model of knowledge in general had already begun in antiquity. Towards the end of the bourgeois age this process, in connection with the spread of industry, assumes such a rapid tempo that no task appears to remain for philosophy itself. If this development has witnessed all of the important theoretical interests of society entering into the ruling establishment of the sciences, so philosophy today would have to bother itself only with some scientifically specialized questions which have not been taken over by other disciplines. However, the same is valid for science as for the other branches of production in contemporary society. On the basis of the anarchic and irrational form in which the social life-process takes place, the modern division of labour has brought with it, for the individual industries and business branches just as for the spheres of culture, not merely their liberation from feudal fetters, but also, to an increasing degree, their separation from the interests of the whole society. The scope and content, methods and goals of the scientific establishment, don't have any controllable relation to the needs of humans any more. It appears as a matter of chance whether and to what extent the results of labour possess any social value at all. In the face of this fact there exists no good reason to accept the external and internal structure which science has assumed, especially in the last one hundred years, as the correct form of contemporary, necessary and attainable knowledge, and to make do in philosophy with logically justifying, classifying and apologizing for the disciplines and their ways of proceeding. Through this limitation, which in Germany has been announced since the last third of the nineteenth century from neo-Kantianism to modern scientific logic, not only was the absolutization of the individual scientific methods legitimated as the only possible theoretical behaviour, but the narrowing of horizon, the impoverishment regarding content, the reactionary tendency corresponding to the ethos of official science was also accelerated.

In opposition to this epistemological philosophy that concealed the estrangement between great social interests and the sciences, new metaphysical schools were able to make the fertilization of the sciences their concern, by positive critique just as much as by work on problems

*The last two decades have seen a revival of interest in the work of Henri Bergson (1859–1941), in large part because of its role in the writings of Gilles Deleuze. However, it has been a noteworthy characteristic of the new Bergsonism (or Deleuze-Bergsonism) that it has proceeded more or less as if earlier criticisms of Bergson's philosophy did not exist. Occasionally, reference is made to Merleau-Ponty's 1959 paper 'Bergson in the Making', which points towards the writings of Péguy as the ground of a possible Bergsonian view of history. But there has been little engagement with established criticisms. At the same time, Walter Benjamin's Bergson-inflected writings on Baudelaire are increasingly taken to provide the basis for a general account of modernism. Yet Benjamin rejected Bergson's metaphysics, citing approvingly from the 1934 essay by Max Horkheimer, 'Zu Bergsons Metaphysik der Zeit', from the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, vol. 3, no. 3, Paris, 1934. Oddly, this essay has never previously appeared in English. We publish it here in the hope that it might contribute to a broadening of the debate about the philosophical and political significance of Bergson's writings and their relevance today. Horkheimer's essay was reprinted in Max Horkheimer, Kritische Theorie: Eine Dokumentation, ed. Alfred Schmidt, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1968, from which this translation is made, Vol. I, pp. 175–99, with the permission of S. Fischer Verlag GmbH.*

which science had neglected. The fact that, for example, ontology and material value-ethics in the postwar period were able to exercise such a great influence lies, among other things, in the unsatisfying development the reigning scientific establishment has taken. Individual disciplines, such as, for example, some branches of political economy, run the risk of ending up in a formalistic problematic and of forgetting the way back from the most extreme abstractions to reality; others, like a part of sociology, don't cross over from the collection of materials to theoretical thought and debase science to the mindless piling up of facts. In the face of the flight of contemporary science, and the philosophy linked to it, to the opposed poles of research into all-embracing statistics and completely empty abstraction, metaphysics spoke out against this defect and kept a relationship, even if a problematic one, to the questions which science left behind. Like the situation in contemporary history, where the fascist opponents of liberalism took advantage of the fact that liberalism overlooked the estrangement between the uninhibited development of the capitalist economy and the real needs of humans, contemporary metaphysics grew stronger in the face of the failings of positivistic science and philosophy; it is their true heir, just as fascism is the legitimate heir of liberalism.<sup>1</sup>

Bergson developed his metaphysics at the same time as a positivistic theory of science. The extent to which both support and condition each other in his work is testimony to their close relationship. Not only is it thus characteristic of the contemporary situation in terms of the history of ideas; Bergson's philosophy has fulfilled, to a particularly high degree, the task of advancing both methodological and content-related problems neglected by the contemporary scientific establishment. Psychology and biology owe to him important contributions and have struck out on new paths under his influence. His foundational theme, real time, is a central category of any thinking of history, indeed of any comprehensive formation of theories at all. Bergson has differentiated lived time from the abstract time of the natural sciences, and made it into the object of his research. This has often led him to the threshold of dialectics. In following such approaches, he has of course been hindered by the function of metaphysics, also characteristic of his work, which seeks to bring reality into connection with an eternal or divine principle.

On the occasion of his new book, *The Creative Mind*,<sup>2</sup> some of the relationships to dialectics should be noted. That his whole thought is subordinated to the final aim of metaphysics has been falsified by the fertile

parts of his work. Instead of placing his psychological analyses in the service of a more differentiated knowledge of the historical context, always more conscious of its own preconditions, for Bergson himself they are directed to the goal of establishing and of guaranteeing his myth of 'creative evolution'. However, the contradiction which disrupts this philosophy in its totality – which is the matter under discussion here – consists between the, in principle, unhistorical thought of the entire tradition upon which Bergson is dependent, and his undertaking to comprehend the role of time. Since every metaphysics necessarily includes the idea that its form and its sense of events are not themselves again subordinated to time, the intention of Bergson's thought annuls its own content. It denies time in that it elevates it to a metaphysical principle. Bergson's whole work towers above most philosophical phenomena of the present. It deserves to be taken seriously and not merely refused without understanding or to be recognized in a conventional sense. The following critique, whose author owes decisive elements to this philosopher, is conscious of highlighting only a few traits.

The new volume's collection of essays and speeches offers an overview of Bergson's philosophy. The majority of the articles were dispersed in different journals and difficult to access, among them the 'Introduction to Metaphysics', the magnificent and concise formulation of his standpoint. Only the first two essays were written especially for this volume, where, in the form of a report on the development of his views, Bergson gives an account of his fundamental ideas.

Bergson began with Spencer's doctrine. The intention of providing a philosophical theory of development also appeared to him as the contemporary task of philosophy. However, he recognized that the philosophers of development had failed to carry this out. According to Bergson, it was correct that the essence of the world, 'substance', is development; any philosophy that describes being as resting in itself, persisting in all changes and eternally remaining the same essence, misses the truth. Change is not merely the external, but rather the very core of being; it is impossible to explain the world with the schema of a fixed thing that only changes its modes of appearance. The concept of the thing that persists in its changing circumstances is merely formed in order to cope with the practical tasks of life; it doesn't signify living reality. Rather, it belongs to the picture of the world, embedded deep in consciousness by linguistic convention, sketched out by the understanding [*Der Verstand*] for practical goals.

Certainly, Spencer and the tendencies related to him also falsify the essence of time. Although Spencer indeed recognizes that this belongs to actual being, he nevertheless takes over its customary intellectual concept. In the sciences there are valid reasons for comprehending time as a series of punctuated instants, for that is the precondition for goal-directed action: the beginning and end of results are determined by attribution to such points, repetitions are determined, regularities are observed. Since the individual sciences are in the service of praxis, it is appropriate that they work with this concept of time derived from spatial relations. Metaphysics, on the other hand, has to do with the inner essence of reality. In order to comprehend this essence one cannot use representations that are appropriate to space. Metaphysics, according to Bergson, has not developed with the social reproduction of life like mechanical natural science; it has nothing at all to do with the satisfaction of needs. Rather, it is based upon the unconditioned act of intuition, free from all setting of goals, and gives the truth immediately.

A continuation of themes known from previous works is contained in the essay 'The Possible and the Real'. In this essay Bergson seeks to demonstrate that the category of the possible is a mere artifice of the understanding. Inasmuch as the understanding singles out a section from the indivisible course of events, the illusion arises that this part of being had already previously led a shadowy existence and was then subsequently 'realized'. In truth, however, there are certainly not these shadowy ideas, these pure possibilities, some of which step into reality. Rather, the life of the world is a continually new and unforeseeable creation. The understanding cuts out individual pictures and projects them back into the past in each case as almost pre-existing possibilities. By letting these pictures precede the present – from which they are nevertheless extracted – the understanding turns that which is conditioned into that which conditions. 'The possible is ... the mirage of the present in the past.'<sup>3</sup> It almost appears that, in the concept of the possible, Bergson thinks of the Platonic ideas and uncovers the reason for their hypostatization. With their rejection he simultaneously proposes that all happening is absolutely new and unpredictable. Asked about the future of a drama, he answers a visitor: 'If I knew what the great dramatic work of tomorrow was to be, I would produce it.'<sup>4</sup> How it will be cannot be known precisely by anyone before it is real. And don't nature and, even more, human history resemble a great artwork that is always still to be created? Bergson doesn't think

about historical forces and tendencies, those actual fulfillments of the concept of the possible. His philosophical attitude to the world is contemplative. Only for the onlooker is future history to be compared to an unborn artwork; humans must accomplish it, and indeed in a struggle with opposing forces. There are aspirations that still want to reach their goal, drives and capacities that are inhibited in their effects. In short, there exist forces and tendencies before they have been realized. These 'possibilities' belong to reality. It is not true that the idea of the possibility of an event only appears somewhere when it is there. On the contrary, the idea of the possibility of an event can be decisive for its realization. But ideas can also become forces [*Gewalten*]. The contemporary struggle about determinate social transformations assumes not only that, in general, these forces are not completely impossible, but that the whole social development drives towards them, and that only an organization of life that has gone wrong, albeit tenaciously, stands in the way.

Despite its deficiency, this study, like many earlier analyses, illuminates a part of the unconscious mechanisms of the psychic apparatus that is involved in the formation of natural world-views and academic philosophy. Bergson's work is rich in contributions for uncovering conventional mentality in its emergence and thus for comprehending and sublating the reified pictures of thought in their dependence on human praxis. He criticizes dogmatic philosophy and does not tire of demonstrating that individual abstract concepts which humans have won as theoretical tools in their practical work have been detached and absolutized from this foundation by dogmatic philosophy's different schools. Just as in his previous book,<sup>5</sup> he explains the existence of 'closed' morality and religion from the need for maintaining an existing society and thus undertakes the attempt – of course, since Marx, an attempt already conducted much more sophisticatedly – of comprehending historically these absolutized products of human activity, so, in the remaining works, he has set forth natural science as a function related to praxis and criticized the philosophical hypostatization of its foundational categories and methods. Through this intention, Bergson is much closer to Kant than he himself suspects. In the attempt to save metaphysics, both have limited natural science and related it to the situation of the finite human. Nevertheless, the inclusion of knowledge in the historical context breaks off immediately for Bergson when it is no longer science that is being discussed, but metaphysics. He has not recognized that this is also dependent on historical

conditions and exerts social functions. Rather, he has hypostatized and romanticized the findings of intuition, named self-observation, just as much as the other metaphysicians did to the conceptual products of the natural sciences. In relation to his own absolutization of an isolated moment of knowledge, he remains naive. In the struggle with absolutism and in connection with industrial development, bourgeois thought has developed ever more subtle means for the sublation of fetishized concepts and intuitions. From the beginning, it took the direction of critique and enlightenment, and has pursued it decisively for a long time. Its other function, the ideological justification of the ruling state of affairs on the basis of eternal principles, has not become more superfluous; on the contrary, with the increasing irrationality of the existing state of affairs, it has become more urgent. Thus, it resulted in new philosophy in which each subsequently emerging system criticized and rejected the foundational doctrines of previous systems with always more refined means, while simultaneously creating a dogma itself, which lay behind the level of development of its own methods, and already forfeited to its successor from the outset. As Hegel said, the word of the apostle could therefore be applied to each of these systems: behold, the feet of them that shall carry thee out are at the door. 'Behold, the philosophy by which thine own will be refuted and displaced shall not tarry long as it has not tarried before.'<sup>6</sup> By demonstrating, in some ways magnificently, the connection of the earlier philosophical foundational concepts like representation, idea, will and substance, with human production – thus stripping these categories of their absolutization – Bergson establishes at the same time a new metaphysical myth, thanks to which he falls far behind the insights that can be attained today.

This myth is repeated in the new book. He says that our own stream of experience, which we comprehend through 'intuitive' immersion in our own interior, is identical with the creative, spiritual life that flows through the entire world. Material forms or bodies represent only the congealed products of this universal movement. Our own essence is *durée* – that is, a constant duration continually taking on new qualities, lived time [*gelebte Zeit*]. This concrete, 'fulfilled' time that the philosopher comprehends as our own essence is also regarded by him, in an act of sympathy, as the interior of the whole world. True reality is an indivisible, continuous flow, which, in all the novelty of the instant, and in each individual just as in the whole world, always includes the whole past and carries it with it. This oppositional determination of the real as

identity that is at the same time transformation, and as continuation that is at the same time conservation, applies only to conscious life. While Bergson seeks to interpret this, so to speak, from below, in terms of dark biological powers, German philosophy has comprehended it in terms of its most highly developed form, the subject that is conscious of itself. Even German philosophy understood – of course, in a much more pregnant sense – the world as a spiritual [*geistig*] process. With the materialist discovery that all events, right down to their 'spiritual' bifurcation, have been co-determined in a preceding history from blind, natural necessity, the interpretation of the course of the world by the philosophy of spirit was liquidated, although of course not for opposed determinations of the living. Bergson fails to connect up with this philosophical development, and therefore remains on a level overtaken by it.

Even if we buy into the assurances that indivisible change (*changement*) is not, like the principles of dogmatic philosophy, an abstract concept but rather concrete reality itself, and that concepts have here only the technical function of the guidance of one's viewpoint, the Bergsonian philosophy nevertheless still agrees with earlier metaphysical systems in decisive respects. It reduces the whole world to a single, eternal essence, claims a spiritual meaning for events and refers humans' suffering under real relations to unification with that essence – that is, to spiritual elevation. Like earlier metaphysicians, Bergson romanticizes the existing state of affairs – indeed, he asserts its divinity. There are of course great differences. His achievement is subject to the special conditions of his epoch and determinate social tendencies; the optimistic and activist trait, the irrational character of all descriptions of *durée* certainly reflects that which Bergson observes. But that he gets to see this and nothing else is well founded in the history of the social situation determinant for his thought. A more extensive report on the Bergsonian metaphysics could, among other things, show how, similar to the impressionist and expressionist currents in art with which it shows numerous affinities, it expresses a protest against the fixed forms of life of bourgeois society. The same historical dynamic which constrained the originally progressive parts of the bourgeoisie before and during the war to following the economically authoritative groups also changed the meaning of the activist *Lebensphilosophie* and transformed it, often against the intentions of its initiator, from a progressive power of social critique into an element of contemporary nationalist ideology. This transformation of the

meaning of principles escapes the author. Under the title *The Creative Mind (La pensée et le mouvant)* he treats only the relation of thought to the eternal creative power; historical powers, which actually 'move' the meaning and content of thoughts, do not fall in the field of positive metaphysics, which, for the sake of its eternalizing function, must do without knowledge. Bergson doesn't merely mistake the historical relativity of his own thought; he also denies that of earlier metaphysics. He says about Berkeley:

In a different age, he would doubtless have produced different theses. But, as movement is the same, these theses would have been similarly situated with respect to one another. They would have had the same relations with one another, like new words of a new sentence, between which an old meaning continues to circulate. And this would have been the same philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

As if interaction didn't reign between expression and meaning, form and content of thought, just as much as between thought as a totality and reality!

Naivety in relation to history prevents Bergson from positing his concrete researches in a fruitful theoretical context. While for Bergson himself the analyses of the activity of understanding, especially the spatial function of the intellect, only serve to declare the products of this activity, concepts, to be metaphysically futile, these results must be included as corrections of the given state of knowledge, as determinate negation in a Hegelian sense – as a moment of self-critique, conscious of the process of the labour of social knowledge, in order to unfold their genuine fertility. Bergson only goes half way. He has X-rayed one of the most important factors which mediate the dependency of ideas on social praxis through his research into the concept-forming activity of the understanding. Correctly, he explains the absolutization of categories into a world-view to be illegitimate, and due to the integration of all categories in the labour process. However, instead of then deploying these categories, which society has acquired in connection with the production of its life, in a way that is philosophically correct – that is, with a consciousness of this heritage – he eliminates them from philosophical truth and relegates them to the 'merely' material field, to the science of dead objects. But retraction of a fetishized excess of concepts, the annulment of ossified views, by no means belittles their usefulness in terms of knowledge. It doesn't mean, as Bergson suggests, their limitation to the field of fixed bodies. The activity of sublating dogmatic content through an analysis of

their provenance forms, rather, a necessary element of thought, in whose context those concepts, stripped of their dogmatic character, can then play a fruitful role in the future. Even water and air were once, in the Ionic philosophy, metaphysical essences. Not only the condition that they form factors of the seafaring upon which the existence of the Greeks depended, but also many other, highly varied conditions of that hypostatization have in the meantime been noticed, and the illusion has vanished. The concepts, however, have lost nothing of their real validity. Equally, Spinoza, Hume and Fichte have without doubt hypostatized isolated contents when they elevate persistent substance, sensuous representations, or the 'I' to a universal world principle. However, these concepts must appear in our theoretical image of the world, in the structure of the truth, if this should not be abstract and barren. Since Bergson relegates all concepts of the understanding, entrapped in praxis, to natural science, his analyses obtain a negative significance. They clear the ground for his myth of the creative spirit. While knowledge of real history is not only concerned with the 'interior' and the spiritual, but just as much with spaces and things, and seeks to grasp the interaction between both with the help, in each case, of the entire developed scientific conceptual apparatus, it is outside of history that Bergson composes his myth of the unbroken, divine, creative power, which is supposed to elude the concepts of humans and only be open to metaphysical immersion.

The attempt to produce a philosophy of concrete time that is to comprehend reality not as something fixed in itself, only in time, extending to the 'fourth dimension of space', but rather as itself development, transformation and change, while at the same time to abandon human history: this undertaking had to fail. By claiming, according to an analogy with the interior lived time of the individual, a so-called spiritual interior of the world – that is, by making up a story about a divine current of experience as absolute being – Bergson must also deny time. His long outmoded pantheistic metaphysics contradicts his insight into the temporality of reality and sublates it. This contradiction, which also finds expression in the distance between the magnificent language and mode of thinking of Bergson and the naive mythology of its content, has given his work from the outset its ambivalent character. There is no metaphysics of time: this is rather a beginning full of contradictions in itself. The concept of an eternal time is also in Bergson's conception nothing other than a bad formulation for the dimension of time as it plays a role in physical

observation. In the outline of natural science to which Bergson's conception corresponds in this respect no less than that of Spencer, time is certainly not eternal, but unlimited. Human time, on the other hand, is limited. Lived duration has in itself the fact of having an end, in opposition to the divine creative power to which Bergson inflates it. Among the many insights about time that appear in the history of philosophical thought – many of which are united in the Bergsonian conception of *durée* – those which were not closely linked with the new mathematical natural science have emphasized, precisely, finiteness. While in Bergson's sense the expression *sub specie durationis*<sup>8</sup> certainly means the point of view of transformation, but at the same time of infinite transformation, of eternity, talk of existence as temporal means instead that this doesn't endure, but is finite and transient. The exertion of time on each being means that it ages and passes away – not merely that it changes. To comprehend passing away as mere change might be managed by a contemplative historian of the past. In himself, even he must experience that time, which appears to the observer as mere change, has an end for the human who experiences it. It is, however, even more the specific illusion of the metaphysician than that of the contemplative historian to elevate oneself above the limits of one's own existence to an overview of the entire world and to place oneself in the position of an omniscient God. This transcendent and therefore skewed line of vision leads to the effacement of the end of lived time by the idea of change, while humans nevertheless must draw from the irrevocability, the unconditioned finality of one's own death and the death of others, the desperate powers which they require in their historical activity. By setting the concept of *durée* in the place of that of development, Bergson has, without wishing it, nevertheless abstracted from 'real' time and negated it.

The myth of the life current stands in contradiction to the truth. Through his idea of immediate, unitary movement as the substance of the universe, Bergson is convinced he has not only overcome a whole series of philosophical difficulties and pseudo-problems, and has led European thinking out of ensnarement in Zeno's paradoxes which are founded upon the false concept of time, but has also defeated the metaphysical *horror vacui*, the fear of nothingness: "Nothing" is a word of ordinary language that can have meaning only if one remains on the ground, characteristic of man, of action and fabrication.<sup>9</sup> Nothingness, of which we are horrified in the fear of death, is only a misunderstood conception of the understanding sequestered in praxis,

whose transfer from the sphere of production into metaphysics Bergson criticizes in a similarly sharp fashion to that to which he subjects the dogmatic concept of possibility. However, the analysis of nothingness, whose idea according to Bergson emerges from the aimless abandonment of determinate objects, is from the outset determined to direct attention away from this mirage of the understanding, to the fulfilled unity of the stream of reality that never runs dry. Through internal unification with it, we comprehend ourselves as eternal.

Indeed, the more we acquire the habit of conceiving and perceiving all things *sub specie durationis*, the deeper we sink into real duration. And the deeper we sink into it, the more we orientate ourselves towards the principle, though it be transcendent, in which we participate, and which is not an eternity of immutability but an eternity of life: how could we live and move in it otherwise? *In ea vivimus et movemur et sumus*.<sup>10</sup>

*Et morimur!* The metaphysician Bergson suppresses death. Like every theologian who promises humans eternal life, Bergson wants to conjure away the fact of death by means of cant about an eternal reality with which we could unite ourselves, and thus proves that his work exerts the same function as religion and, after and next to it, modern philosophy: to console humans about that which befalls them on earth with make-believe stories about their own eternity. The innumerable types of this deception in contemporary society that are effective alongside each other have not been investigated for a long time. From the simple and straightforward belief in the individual persistence of the soul to the certainty of continuing to exist in the 'Völkisch community', to the sublime self-deception of the idealist for whom the idea of possessing some thoughts valid for all time, however ludicrous and poor in terms of content, suffices for the feeling of his own eternity, there is a rich spectrum of this human delusion. But if in earlier epochs, due to the low degree of development of human capabilities, the real and the ephemeral effect of the fear of death, rational praxis and superstition, might have been entwined with one another, today an explicit divorce is necessary. The rational work of combating death, the productive attitude that results from the *horror vacui*, is the conscious labour of solidarity for the improvement of human relations, for the development of all good human arrangements, which are atrophying today, for the always more effective offensive against need and disease. The pacification of this fear through spiritual indulgence in an eternal principle as it is practised in

metaphysics has no foundation. Because such pacification can today merely euthanize the driving forces for real help, the resistance of materialist philosophy is necessary. Even the future society will require a development of thought not tied to social goals alone in order to meet the illusions that stem from that fear.

Reality is neither unitary nor eternal. Humans suffer and die for themselves alone and in different circumstances. The claim that reality is essentially indivisible contradicts the fact distinguishing history, at least in its form until now, that humanity is divided into the happy and the unhappy, the ruling and the ruled, the healthy and the sick. The concepts with which we comprehend this division, its causes and concatenation, are certainly formed with the involvement of the spatial-ordering understanding; they have founded their historical conditions – that is, their structure



– just as much upon the physical and psychic situation of knowing subjects as upon previous objects. All the same, they belong to the truth as it is given to us in the present. The fact that they are formed in connection with the social life struggle is also the case for the world-view to which they subscribe. This nevertheless makes it neither false nor useless, but merely prohibits its being split apart to form an apparently fixed totality of knowledge. Untrue, on the other hand, is the Bergsonian myth of a unity that does not exist. It is not from the alleged immersion in the absolute, which according to Bergson should be mediated by philosophy, that the illusionless composure of the real fighter emerges in opposition to the *élan* lauded by Bergson. Rather, such a composure arises from the consciousness of overcoming the existing unjust divisions and catastrophic contradictions in favour of a, still to be worked out, happier state of humanity. In this the clear knowledge of oppositions is just as decisive a moment as knowledge of the tendencies that strive towards unity, the judgement of the opposing interests just as important as connection with the

correct forces. Not to view the unity of the interior, but to realize it externally is the historical task.

Hegel has already criticized in detail the metaphysical disdain for analytical concepts of the understanding, which was diffused long before Bergson in the earlier period of reaction against the Enlightenment in German Romanticism, and had defended the truth of the transitory products of abstraction against the harmonizing doctrines of the earlier *Naturphilosophen*. Analysis

only arrives at *thoughts* which are themselves familiar elements, fixed and inert determinations. But what is thus *separated*, and non-actual, is an essential moment; for it is only because the concrete does divide itself, and make itself into something non-actual, that it is self-moving. The activity of dissolution is the power and work of the Understanding, the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power.... Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength. Lacking strength, Beauty hates the Understanding for asking of her what it cannot do.<sup>11</sup>

The Hegelian system forms an idealist metaphysics also, and it certainly contains dogmatic traits, but it has accepted the negative, the necessity of individuals, and has at least not ejected differences from metaphysics as merely pragmatic constructions by romanticizing them. Therefore Hegelian idealism is closer to reality than the biological realism of Bergson.

The opposition of real history to the hymn of *élan vital* isn't even expressed in the new volume. In contrast, Bergson adheres to the caveat of exact science. A philosophical disparagement of the intellect can be read off from the assertion that only intuition illumines the inner essence of being, while scientific understanding, on the other hand, deforms reality. Conciliatorily, Bergson declares this to be a misunderstanding. Metaphysics is not to be placed above the sciences; it consists neither in their synthesis nor in their critique. Rather, both relate to different objects: metaphysics to spirit, science to matter. The different modes of observation also arise from the objects: spirit demands intuition, matter demands the ordering understanding. Thus the two great theoretical endeavours split into the two halves of the world. And it is not accepted that science shouldn't also be founded on 'an absolute'. Instead of dialectically including metaphysics in history, in this last work Bergson also allows, almost out of true liberty, the absolutization of the sciences.

The difficulties that accrue to his philosophy due to this concession shouldn't be discussed extensively here. It originally appeared to be built upon the opposition between intuition giving truth and the merely practical import of the understanding. The habits of the understanding deform reality according to Bergson's earlier insight, and the philosopher had to make this deformation retrogressive if he wanted to gain contact with it. Now positive science, if it only advances far enough, is also supposed to constitute the entrance to 'an' absolute. This difficulty adds a new obscurity to this great work. Bergson's mechanistic conception of knowledge, the claim that the spiritual exertion of humans is related to two different parts of the real – which of course are connected with each other in determinate fields of being – corresponds more to the dividing thought of natural science than to philosophical intuition, as Bergson describes it.

By pursuing this problem Bergson nevertheless brings a thought forward whose consequences should lead to the overcoming of metaphysics and to dialectical thinking. That is, he justifies his concession that matter doesn't represent merely a fiction of the understanding but rather a reality, with the consideration, among others, that a word that lacks delimiting determination loses its sense. All systems that place any concept in a fundamental position as a single principle that is supposed to contain all reality within itself had to fail as a result, because the determinate meaning of a concept is founded not through itself alone, but, just as much, by the principle that limits it.

As we said earlier: one can give whatever name one likes to the 'thing in itself', one can make it Spinoza's Substance, Fichte's Ego, Schelling's Absolute, Hegel's Idea, or Schopenhauer's Will; the word can present itself with a well-defined meaning all it likes; it will lose all meaning, empty itself of all meaning, as soon as one applies it to the totality of things .... It doesn't much matter to me whether one says 'Everything is a mechanism' or 'Everything is will'. In both cases, 'mechanism' and 'will' become synonyms of 'being', and, consequently, synonyms of one another. There lies the initial vice of philosophical systems.<sup>12</sup>

Pushing this thought further, Bergson would have arrived at the true insight of thought. For what is valid for one concept is just as valid for a pair of concepts. Two general principles can, comprehended undialectically, just as little comprehend the whole world together as a single one. The will is not only no will any more if it has no antagonistic matter against it, but just as little, if it is not detached from the mere idea, with which nonetheless it is connected.

Furthermore, however, neither will nor idea nor representation nor physical mechanism can be understood as that which they are without the consciousness that, and how, they have been notionally removed from the living psychological events in which they form, in turn, a particular unity. The thesis that the three principles in their sum could misrepresent or correspond to that which is signalled in concrete concepts – for example, that of drive – assumed that absolutely nothing is lost in abstraction, that the activity of division changes nothing. The most vivid pages of Bergson's work nevertheless make clear that abstracted traits of events are never identical with real parts, and that their mere setting together therefore never reflects the original life of the object.<sup>13</sup>

If that is so, then that which Bergson now emphasizes in terms of the highest individual concepts of the philosophical systems is also valid for the usual concepts and complexes of concepts: all of them require for their understanding the other concepts from which they distinguish themselves. However, an arbitrary knowledge of these concepts does not suffice in order to establish the correct relation of each individual concept to reality. Rather, consciousness is required of the entire circumstances in which the subject of the confrontation with his world – which always occurs in the context of a determinate social development – has come to those abstract concepts with their definitions. Since the formation of concepts is not merely a process of exclusion, but has in each instance a tendency determined by social and individual impulses and interests, in turn, the reversal from concept to reality doesn't represent only an addition of peculiarities. The correct deployment of a concept involves reflection on the process by which the theoretical structure has come about that includes this concept, and, furthermore, reflection on the intellectual movement that leads to this concept from each part of this structure. The more progressive and true thought becomes, so the more consciousness of the material and theoretical activity of society enters into its concepts and judgement, in short into all of its acts. The foundational categories of dialectical materialism intentionally reflect not only contemporary social praxis but also the embittered will for its transformation. But, then, even the relationship of concepts to their object does not remain the same once and for all. Any theoretical image only has real validity in so far as it is adapted to the continually transforming reality and the new claims that arise from the situation of the subject.

The dialectical insight that each determinate characteristic of a concrete reality is one-sided and calls for

contradiction arises from the fundamental difference between each representation grasped and the moving reality. Bergson has noted this trait of any theory very well, this feature that necessarily adheres to any theorem in so far as it is related to reality. Due to this consciousness alone, he supersedes the majority of contemporary philosophers.

Concepts ... ordinarily come in pairs and represent the two opposites. There is virtually no concrete reality with respect to which one cannot simultaneously adopt the two opposed points of view, which are not, consequently, subsumed under the two antagonistic conceptions. Whence a thesis and an antithesis that one seeks in vain to reconcile logically, for the simple reason that one will never make a thing out of concepts or points of view.<sup>14</sup>

It is correct that one cannot reconstitute a real process through mere addition of conceptual attributes. It is precisely for this reason that theoretical ability is necessary in order to animate concepts in a representation that stays close to the object. The dialectical method is nothing else.<sup>15</sup> But for Bergson, every difference between concept and reality is only an argument to abolish conceptual thinking completely and to abandon oneself solely to intuition. 'Thereby (that is, in intuition), we see thesis and antithesis emerge from reality; we grasp, at one and the same time, how this thesis and antithesis are counterposed and how they are reconciled.'<sup>16</sup> The fact that intuition shows how opposed nominal determinations in knowledge become necessary and are sublated into more comprehensive insights must not in any way lead to the rejection of the understanding in philosophy, but rather, initially, to the discovery of the problematic relation between abstract logic and the process of coming to terms intellectually with reality. The content and function of thought change in the course of history; they are never one and the same in the different classes of a society. The conservation of acquired knowledge doesn't consist in ossified fixation on theoretical forms, but in how well available knowledge functions in solving historically posed problems. While doing so, it doesn't remain unaffected. Fidelity to an idea can therefore be just as remote from its unchanged affirmation as from its characterless deformation on the basis of the contradictory momentary appearance. At any rate, the universal interpretation of the world from two isolated concepts is no less inadequate than the interpretation from one, and Bergson's principles of *durée* and spirit do not become better by being limited to merely one half of the world and conceding the other half to dead matter.

All of Bergson's views about the concept correspond to the pre-Hegelian state of logic, otherwise he would not have been able to regard and to dismiss thought as merely the construction of fixed conceptual containers and a purely mechanical operation. This idea of thought corresponds badly even to mathematical natural science. Nevertheless, the social interests on this terrain and the type of simple processes which are discussed there change so slowly that only a few observers note the structural transformation and functional change of theories, and the scientific process may appear to most specialists and lay people as mere ordering and differentiation. Thus the fixed correlation of concepts to each other, and of the whole system to reality, is regarded as an ideal of knowledge. Bergson shares this definition of science with the traditional view. Nevertheless, neither reality nor the sense of order remains the same, and therefore both the correlation and the conceptual construction must not simply be cancelled, but recognized in connection with praxis and overcome in their merely transitory and limited significance. Without thereby giving away the knowledge contained in them, all theories are always to be adapted again to reality by means of reflection on their own preconditions and on the developing moments of the object; definitions are to be reconfigured following later insights, otherwise they lose their real validity. This entire intellectual, social activity connected to practical tasks and struggles is called thought; ordering is in reality only an aspect of this, and the products of ordering – concepts and judgements fixed on symbols – are only frozen forms of this living act. Nevertheless, knowledge trapped in words naturally participates in its own reconfiguration and is not only philosophically restricted as 'socially conditioned'. By equating, in accordance with the worse parts of traditional logic and epistemology, conceptual thinking with the establishment of closed systems and leaving out of consideration its real function in the historical process, Bergson misconceives its truth and arrives at the erroneous belief that there is a capacity for truth existing besides thought and a myth which is to be formulated besides conceptual knowledge.

If the view of thought is acquired, not as in Bergson from natural science, but from historical knowledge, then its character as an exertion of the most varied psychological powers towards the constitution of the most just theory of changing interests and tasks becomes clear. What Bergson calls intuition and sympathy plays just as much a role in thought as establishing and ordering. Nevertheless, as soon as these moments do not reflect themselves in their real function, changing according

to the social situation, and instead are split up into a single and absolute method, their results become just so many phantasies and ideologies. In psychology, for example, Bergsonian self-observation and ‘sympathy’ has greater weight than in pure economy. Nevertheless, apart from the fact that in psychology the value of this act changes according to the level of development of the problem, this takes on the most highly differentiated meaning and form in the total structure of knowledge, according to the tasks of the historical moment. If it is a case, for example, of winning social groups for a thought and of educating them, it requires psychological knowledge to a greater degree than the construction of a new political economy. Psychology plays a role like economics in influencing the masses, and the more developed both theoretical branches are, then so much the better are tasks solved. However, psychology has an alternative face in both arenas and, moreover, its object develops. Bergson’s metaphysics is founded upon the over-evaluation of the intuitive side of intellectual activity, which of course had been strongly disregarded, and indeed ignored, by the rationalists. The result of his view is nevertheless just as ahistorical and abstract as the system of any dogmatist. Abstractness is not abolished by claiming that reality is moved within itself, that it is continual change – the isolated and eternalized idea of change is just as static and abstract as any hypostatized concept – but, rather, by incorporating in each case every concept and every isolated point of view into the total structure of the progressively changing state of knowledge, on the basis of the penetrating investigation – which of course is itself never able to be completed – of thought as a changeable human function. Naturally, in this the possibility of the fetishized use of intellectual capabilities disappears; they lose their function as guarantees.

The methodological principles through which the metaphysical function of thinking is overcome had already been classically formulated in Spencer’s time by Hegel: the interaction of psychic powers in knowledge; thought as activity which is in no way merely opposed to outlook and feeling, but, rather, takes up the immediately given conditions only in true contexts; the task of showing in the thought process itself conditionality, limits and lack of its own forms. Assessed according to these principles, Bergson’s project appears to be antiquated. Philosophy must abandon the *qualitates occultae* of the soul, just as physics dispensed with those of matter. To credit the abstract thinking of the understanding or intuition or another psychic capacity with the power to unite itself with a unitary

absolute is only a special case of the superstition that ascribes secret miraculous powers to things. Not the thought which prescind from history, but the thought conscious of its connection with history, organizing all intellectual capacities, is able to manage that knowledge which ‘establishes itself in movement and adopts the very life of things’.<sup>17</sup>

By imagining himself to be independent from time, the metaphysician must also misjudge those who strive theoretically towards it. The task and honesty of the writer of history have no place in Bergson’s work. The fact that, in the analysis of the possible, he indeed comes to speak about academic philosophy’s misuse of the concept in the sense of pre-existing ideas, but does not speak of its productive use in the sense of historical tendencies, belongs to his limited natural scientific way of thinking. The function of science in technology and industry doesn’t escape him, but the meaning of theory for the historical struggle does. But one shouldn’t speak here of this immediately evident lack so much as of another, less momentous, failing. The superstition that everything which is past also exists in the present without the consciously managed activity of remembrance, and will be ‘advanced’ in the future, precisely because real change is indivisible, suppresses not only the role of the historian in the struggle for new forms of life of society but also its assignment to preserve that which has been lost in memory. ‘Memory ... has no need of explanation. Or, rather, there exists no special faculty whose role would be to retain the past in order to pour it into the present. The past preserves itself by itself, automatically.’<sup>18</sup> The exercise of this capacity, especially denied by Bergson, is the business of the historian. There is no doubt that the historian requires the instinctive power to which Bergson refers from his first writings, in opposition to the compartment theory of memory. There is interaction between the unconscious forming of each social and individual unity through the past and their ordering in memory which formulates earlier experiences and places them in the service of conscious work in the future. Through the deliberate ordering and preservation, banished by Bergson from metaphysics, history makes itself not merely into a tool for better social relations, but also into a mirror of past injustice. No future heals any more that which has happened to humans who have passed away. They will never be called upon to be blessed in eternity. Nature and society have done their work to them, and the idea of the last judgement formed from the eternal longing of the oppressed and mortal constitutes only a residue of primitive thinking, which mistakes the futile role

of humans in natural history and anthropomorphizes the universe. In the middle of this immeasurable indifference, only human consciousness can be the place in which suffered injustice is sublated, the only instance which isn't satisfied. The almighty good that was supposed to erase suffering in eternity was from the beginning merely the projection of human participation in the dull universe. The art and religion in which this dream has found expression are just as immediate witnesses to this dissatisfaction, as they have been a pure means of domination in many places in history. Now, where trust in the eternal must collapse, history constitutes the only ear to which contemporary humanity, and even past humanity, can still present the complaints of the past. Even if this appeal could not become a productive power for a better society, the function of memory alone already places the profession of the writer of history over that of metaphysics.

The following sentence appears in Bergson: 'The rule of science is the one that Bacon posed: obey in order to command. The philosopher neither obeys nor commands; he seeks to sympathize.'<sup>19</sup> This formulation contains unintentionally a precise formulation of the social situation into which philosophy in the contemporary world has fallen. It appears to us that humanity is allowed to expect from this increasingly weakened intellectual endeavour not so much undifferentiated sympathy with reality as knowledge of its contradictions. Sympathy with the whole is just as empty as those global concepts correctly criticized by Bergson.

**Translation by Peter Thomas,  
revised by Stewart Martin**

*The 1968 publication of Horkheimer's essay includes, as an opening footnote, an extract of a letter (in French) from Henri Bergson to Charles Bouglé of 24 January 1935, responding to Horkheimer's essay.*

The *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* has done me a great honour in dedicating an entire article to me, the one by M. Horkheimer.... Unfortunately, I can't discuss in full the fine study, 'On Bergson's Metaphysics of Time'. It shows a serious fathoming of my works and at the same time a very penetrating philosophical sense. Naturally, I would have a lot of trouble accepting the objections M. Horkheimer raises about a certain number of points. For instance the objections coming from the author's reading of the *élan vital* as a hypothesis, whereas in fact it is an empirical summary obtained from our knowledge

and our ignorance (as I have demonstrated in pages 115–20 of my book before last, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*); other objections do not take sufficient account of the method that I have tried to introduce into metaphysics and which consists of (1) dividing [*découper*] problems according to their *natural* lines; and (2) studying each problem *as if it was isolated*, with the idea that if, in each case, one finds oneself heading in the direction of the truth, the solutions will be joined together again, or pretty nearly so. Obviously, the junction will no longer be able to be perfect, as if it was a traditional, essentially systematic metaphysics.

But, I am not able to elaborate on all that, due to the little time my sickness allows me, and also on account of some neuralgia, probably due to insomnia, which for some time now makes all my efforts so painful. Will you therefore simply pass on my thanks to M. Horkheimer.'

**Translated by Frances Stracey**

## Notes

1. Cf. *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, III, 1934, pp. 164–75.
2. Henri Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, Alcan, Paris, 1934; translated by M.L. Andison as *The Creative Mind* (1946), Citadel Press, New York, 2002.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 128; trans. p. 101.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 127; trans. p. 100 (modified).
5. Henri Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, Alcan, Paris, 1932; translated by R. Ashley Audra and C. Brereton (with the assistance of C. Horsfall Carter) as *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Henry Holt, New York, 1935.
6. G.W.F. Hegel, 'Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie', in *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 17, Glockner, Stuttgart, 1928, p. 45; translated by E.S. Haldane as *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1995, p. 17.
7. Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, p. 152; *The Creative Mind*, pp. 120–21 (translation modified).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 199; trans. p. 158.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 123; trans. p. 97 (modified).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 199; trans. pp. 157–8 (modified).
11. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 2, Glockner, Stuttgart, 1928, p. 33; translated by A.V. Miller, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977, pp. 18–19.
12. Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, pp. 59–60; *The Creative Mind*, pp. 48–9 (translation modified).
13. See, for instance, *La pensée et le mouvant*, pp. 210–18. (Horkheimer is referring to the first part of the chapter 'Introduction to Metaphysics' – *trans.*)
14. *Ibid.*, p. 224; trans. pp. 176–7 (modified).
15. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 139.
16. Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, p. 224; *The Creative Mind*, p. 177 (translation modified).
17. *Ibid.*, p. 244; trans. p. 192.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 193; trans. p. 153 (modified).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 158; trans. p. 126 (modified).

# 'Joining tracks with the world'

## The impossibility of politics in China

**Rebecca E. Karl**

Shortly before the October Revolution, Lenin challenged his comrades: 'I don't know how radical you are or how radical I am. I am certainly not radical enough; that is, one must always try to be as radical as reality itself.'<sup>1</sup> A large part of Lenin's challenge was to defamiliarize reality so as to find the possibility of transforming it. Indeed, in the 1920s, Lukács identified Lenin's particular genius as his explicit focus on revolution as 'an everyday issue',<sup>2</sup> the recalling of radical philosophy to its ostensible vocation of finding a possibility for politics. This possibility entailed, as Lukács put it, 'that the recognition of a fact or tendency as actually existing by no means implies that it must be accepted *as a reality constituting a norm for our own actions.*' For, he added, 'there is always a reality more real and therefore more important than *isolated* facts and tendencies – namely, *the reality of the total process*, the totality of social development.'<sup>3</sup> In this light, today one could well ask how to be as radical as reality, when contemporary analysis becomes ever more resistant to radical totalization, as leftist radicalisms slip into endless particularisms or into quotidian totalisms that appeal more to nominalism than to historicity, while rightist radicalism roots itself ever more firmly in some version of theocracy. Indeed, it seems that analyses of contemporary life increasingly can only configure our current moment through that totalization identified by Hegel's *eternal present*, or that symptom of history that presented itself as a defining moment of the historical itself and that was thence the occasion for an immanent philosophy of a global unfolding and a return. As in Hegel's moment, today eternity has become enshrined as the end of politics.

This is quite clear from the vantage of contemporary China, where the Hegelian *eternal present* that renarrated global contingency and historical disjuncture in the early nineteenth century into historicist inevitability has been adduced, perhaps paradoxically,

to the *endless standstill* of Hegel's enabling Oriental nightmare. Recall here Hegel's India: the dreaming beauty of 'enervation in which all that is rough, rigid and contradictory is dissolved', where what remains is 'only the soul in a state of emotion'.<sup>4</sup> Combine this dream state with the despotic servility figured by Hegel's version of the Chinese state, a 'prosaic Empire, because the antithesis of form', where the political is impossible even to think due to the turpitude of generalized slavery.<sup>5</sup> Strangely, this negative Oriental standstill, where subjectivity is either absent or is but a general subjection to an identity of all in a regime of the same, appears to have been transformed in today's China into a positive dreamed-for culturalist anti-political supplement to the post-political eternal present of a common global post-revolutionary moment. Despite this culturalist reversal, it is, nevertheless, easy enough to recognize today's eternity as nothing other than that conceit long ago identified by Walter Benjamin as the whore of history, antithetical to any logic other than that of accumulation.<sup>6</sup> Thus it is, as Jacques Rancière noted not long ago, that 'the state today legitimizes itself by declaring that politics is impossible.... To evacuate the demos, post-democracy has to evacuate politics, using the pincers of economic necessity and juridical rule.'<sup>7</sup>

That the state as such, in the economic and juridical terms indicated by Rancière, along with the cultural terms suggested by Hegel, is proclaimed the transcendent subject of the revenant hauntings of an updated eternity is, perhaps, no coincidence. Nevertheless, the conflation of eternalities is still puzzling. On the one hand, in the world at large, there is a current fantasy of a formless global Empire powered by a multitude working either servilely for, or in shifting identities against, juridical and economic necessity in separate but equal culture gardens. On the other hand, from the Chinese perspective, theirs is a culturally defined historical Empire, now a powerful nation-state finally

converging with global capital. How, then, can history be both an immanent eternal present and an eternal standstill simultaneously? Or, perhaps, a more radically situated question might be: how is it possible to think these eternalities simultaneously and what does it mean for the possibility of politics in our present moment? In what follows, I want to suggest that however we answer this question, or even howsoever we pose it, the analysis will have integrally to include how the impossibility of politics has been culturally and politically produced in China today, where the conflation of eternalities seems all but completed as an ideological task.

To be sure, the pessimism evoked by ‘impossibility’ in the case of China could be heard as a repetition of the lament, in that old McCarthyite accusatory mode, about why China has been lost and who lost it, now to capitalism rather than to socialism. Yet the false and misplaced nostalgia for a radical China as an alternative to global capitalism does not capture the impossibility to which I refer: that is, the apparent impossibility in China for the elemental constitution at the level of intellectual or cultural practice of an antagonistic politics of *alienation*, in the Leninist or, more immediately, in the Brechtian sense of that term.<sup>8</sup> This type of politics strives ‘to look at things from an *alien* standpoint’,<sup>9</sup> a standpoint that resides in ‘the strangeness of the everyday, pointing up that contradiction with the familiar ... that protest[s] against ... technocratic interpretation’.<sup>10</sup> It is thus not a sociological conceit, through which economic rationalization and freedom from tradition produce an occasion for the rerouting of potential pathologies into complicit social identities through the atomistic identification of social problems. It points, rather, to a historical process that, in Fredric Jameson’s words, ‘reveal[s] what has been taken to be eternal or natural’. In short, an elemental component of politics is to look at and act on the conditions of life so as to turn the purportedly eternal into the historical.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely this view that most intellectuals/technocrats and cultural producers in China today resist with great vigour in their quest to become self-identically one with what is often called normality.

Facilitating and shaping this view in the 1980s and 1990s, there emerged in China the ascendance of an equation drawn by intellectuals/technocrats and cultural producers between personal historical experience and political reality. This equation posits an unmediated transparency to *their* particular historical experience as the singular reality of politics, to which the past, the present and the future must answer. While

I am mindful that much China scholarship today celebrates these last two decades as the moment when personal historical experience was actually liberated from politics (with the death of the revolutionary narrative), nonetheless the displacement of contemporary social antagonism and conflict to the unmediated claims of intellectuals/technocrats and cultural producers to *their* experiences of the Maoist past has resulted in the denial of a claim on experience and politics to any but themselves. This presents not an erasure of politics but rather a powerful reinscription of the political, albeit now in the guise of technocratic normality and culturalist assertion. Such a figuration of a singular historical experience as the reality of politics not only displaces politics to the repudiated past while disallowing and disavowing the possibility of politics in the present, it also becomes a necessary support for the wild socio-economic restructuring of Chinese society that helps produce and reinforce the profoundly revanchist conflation of anti- and post-political eternalities.

In China today, the ideological naturalization of this conflation is most often presented as the normalization of everyday life. This normalization is underpinned by an endless pursuit of the commodification of labour-power and primitive accumulation of capital in support of the economic and juridical necessity of the state and its new class referents. Indeed, normality is most often promoted as the urgent pursuit of the convergence between China and the world summed up in the phrase ‘joining tracks with the world’. This is but the articulation of a naturalized economism of the social and political history of backwardness catching up with the capitalist West/Japan and China’s own purported proto-capitalist past.<sup>12</sup> ‘Joining tracks with the world’ has become one of the most powerful desires to emerge from China’s 1980s and 1990s, and it is no coincidence that it was during this very period that the Mao-era experiences of many intellectuals and technocrats were ineluctably transformed into the universalized negative definition of politics in general.

### **Global convergence**

Initially proposed in the early 1980s as a policy of ‘opening China to the world’ that simultaneously promoted the domestic imperative ‘to get rich is glorious’, the all-encompassing injunction to join tracks with the world, which was a combination of these two slogans, was seen in the 1990s as an ostensibly less crass, more potent, and apparently more benign call for the depoliticization – or normalization – of Chinese society after Mao and the more recent disruptions

of the 1989 social movement. Joining tracks with the world has hence become the way to conjoin the domestic repudiation of politics and an affirmation of China's unbroken statist-cultural past with global immanence. It is in this sense a powerful indicator of the definitive turn to capitalist-style modernization, encoding within it all the suppressions that such a turn suggests. These suppressions are efficiently encapsulated by that other bit of mystification: the appeal to transition as an economic and juridical necessity mandated by historicist inevitability (unlike in Mao's time, when the equally obfuscatory claim to transition from socialism to communism was understood as a continuously revolutionary act of collective human will). Here, the relationship between socio-economic crisis and historical transition is not only shorn of socially antagonistic and conflictual historicity, but the concept of mass lived history is displaced to the sphere of historical remnants, reappearing as a lamented vacuum in belief requiring technocratic management (most often, repression of so-called 'feudal' remnants/survivals).

Much of this turn is obvious from media accounts of China, even if these accounts, in the United States at least, oscillate between applauding the supposed apolitical pragmatism of China's current development policy and suggesting some veiled sinister content to it. In fact, this latter sinister reading remains quite prevalent, as the USA continues to attempt to displace

its self-inflicted economic woes onto the purportedly unfair robustness of the Chinese economy, supported by supposedly unfair currency controls, among other factors.<sup>13</sup> More recently, the special issue of the Business Day section in the *New York Times* entitled 'Outlook: Economy & Business' (6 December 2004), was almost entirely devoted to the Chinese economy: its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities for investment, and its global dangers. The lead article is entitled: 'The Two Faces of China: Giant Global Producer is Expanding its Role as a Consumer, Creating Threats and Opportunities'. It is also often exemplified in impeccable Cold War terms (speaking of remnants!), such as in an opinion piece published in the *New York Times*, written by a graduate student at Oxford, who cautioned that China's 2003 launch of a manned spacecraft was merely a continuation of the Communist obsession with centralized control and global domination familiar from the Soviet era.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in China, joining tracks with the world has become a normative ideology both of the state-led and intellectual/technocratic desire for economic global convergence and privatization of domestic resources at any social cost, and, consequently, of a policy of intensified commodification of domestic labour-power and capital accumulation on a local and global scale. By the same token, China's joining tracks with the world has become just as celebrated as it is feared among non-Chinese commentators: celebrated for its modernizationist

promise of bringing democracy to China as an inevitable by-product of the sovereignty of the market (that old conceit, now refurbished), and feared for its auguring of the rise of a control-obsessed and essentially uncontrollable China intent on taking its supposed culturally and historically indicated rightful place in the world.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it may be well to recall here the document 'Rebuilding America's Defenses', written by the now-notorious Project for the New American Century in September 2000, which states quite clearly that 'the new strategic center of concern appears to be shifting to East Asia', specified further on as the necessity for the USA to 'constrain a Chinese challenge to American ... leadership'.

The desire for global convergence and everyday normality has



Zhao Bandi, Zhao Bandi and Panda, 1999

found voice not only in the media, or among Chinese intellectuals and technocrats; it has also reverberated widely in China scholarship in the United States, which, in any case, was always more impervious than other academies to taking seriously China's historical revolutionary realities. In broad strokes, indicative of these reverberations is the new boom in *longue durée* economic histories of China that posit Chinese modernity *avant la lettre*. This is done most often by pushing modernity back to the monetarization of the Song dynasty economy (twelfth century), an uncanny echo of 1920s' imperialist Japanese scholarship,<sup>16</sup> as well as a haunting recapitulation of Max Weber's analysis of China in his *Sociology of Religion*. Also prevalent are economic-culturalist studies positing an 'alternative modernity' reaching back to the commercialization and urbanization of the mid- and late Ming dynasty (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) that postulate a unique Chinese temporality and template of modernity as historiographical antidote and salve to a supposed Eurocentric History ruled by the repudiated grand narrative of the modernity–capitalism nexus.<sup>17</sup> The reverberations can also be seen in the seemingly effortless return in the 1980s to pure culturalist analyses of China that emphasize the cultural continuity of China's past with its present – that is, those that posit the eternity that is culturalist China – and that focus on those so-called traditional values that survived through five thousand years to adapt to the contemporary needs of global capital the age-old civilizational stability defined by a petty commodity economy ruled by a civilizing elite.<sup>18</sup> Or, finally, they are present, in a different idiom, in the vengeful resuscitation of political histories (these actually never disappeared) that posit the persistence of despotism as China's essential and unchanging state form from the dawn at least of unified imperial time to the present. This is most recently exemplified in the blockbuster films by Zhang Yimou, *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*, whose representations of early dynastic politics resonate powerfully with the eternal despotism of Chinese rulership.

These ghostly echoes have taken on a life of their own, even as the more than half-century-old Weberian bias in China scholarship in the USA continues to direct historiographical focus on statism (now sometimes articulated in the fashionable Foucauldian terms of governmentality and disciplinarity), and on enduring cultural values and the petty commodity economy as the natural state of Chinese social (now often fashionably called subaltern) equilibrium and micro-resistance. The importation into China of these perspectives on

Chinese history, along with the enthusiastic reception accorded this scholarship among Chinese scholars, who began their historical revisionisms in the 1980s when freed from the Maoist straitjacket, have helped fuel the popularization in Chinese intellectual circles of Weber as guide to the correct ethos of modernity. (As always, Weber is an obvious social-scientific antidote to Marx.) It has also assisted in the re-instantiation of a historicist positivism that wishes to rejoin contemporary Chinese history to the supposed noncapitalist modernity of China's unique past, while simultaneously connecting the contemporary moment to the capitalist modernity of the global present. This combination has effectively foreclosed possibilities for that *alien* view through which to specify a politics in China, other than through the potent pseudo-politics of culturalist anti-Eurocentric *difference*.

The convergence of these trends can be succinctly indicated through a brief consideration of a recent rewriting of a Brecht play, which was the subject of a workshop and several performances in October 2003 at Bard College in upstate New York. The play had been performed previously in Shanghai and other locations in China. Entitled *Brecht in China*, the day-long event revolved around Shanghai dramatist William Sun's play *Gods and the Good Person of Sichuan*, which was based on Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1940–41).<sup>19</sup>

### ***Gods and the Good Person of Sichuan***

According to Sun's presentation preceding the performance, the intention of the new drama was to reflect upon and criticize Brecht, primarily from the perspective of what Sun named as Brecht's sexist Orientalism in choosing a Chinese prostitute as the protagonist of his play. Thus Sun's purpose, as he stated it, was to *politicize* Brecht, by correcting for Brecht's sexist Orientalist deficiencies, so as to adapt Brecht for Chinese urban and Western audiences, for whom, apparently, facile charges of sexism and Orientalism define the horizons of the political. What Sun did not mention was how he turned Brecht's critique of modern capitalism's inroads into everyday life at the initial stage of its consolidation into a celebration of the eternity and universality of the capitalist market and culturalist identity. That is, Sun transforms the original's critical exposition of the general historical conditions described by the consolidation of capitalism in a pre-capitalist society into a heroic identitarian fable about Chinese finding their proper place in the eternalized culturally redemptive experience of a globalized market economy. Rendering Brecht into a

generic exemplar of a white Western male proponent of stereotypes about China and Chinese women, Sun's play proceeds to instruct on the virtues of a fair and uncorrupted free market in an essentialized China through the medium of the wise use of money and credit bestowed by gods.

In Sun's drama, three gods appear at the beginning in the guise of Minerva-type, Jesus-type, and male Olympian-type figures. Whining and clueless, these Western gods – and they were doubly marked as Western because they were performed by white Bard students, while the other roles were performed by actors from Shanghai – bumble around in the complex social landscape of what is depicted as contemporary China. This site could also be the arbitrary pre-revolutionary location of Brecht's imagination,<sup>20</sup> thereby ambiguously reflecting the pre/post-revolutionary temporal conflation that serves among many Chinese intellectuals as a way to erase socialism as a legitimate historical moment altogether. In this unidentifiable spatial-temporal limbo, the gods – who, in Brecht, are not racially or ethnically marked<sup>21</sup> – go looking for the 'good person' who can lend materiality to their idealist view of human nature.

By contrast, Brecht's play, whose setting is an ambiguous place but a specific temporality of socio-economic crisis, begins with Wang, an itinerant peddler of water. Wang delivers the opening monologue:

I am a water-seller in the capital of Szechwan province. My job is tedious. When water is short I have to go far for it. And when it is plentiful I earn nothing. But utter poverty is the rule in our province. All agree that only the gods can help us.<sup>22</sup>

Wang thus waits by the city gates for the gods to appear; when they do, in addition to providing them water for free, he offers to find them shelter for the evening. As he goes on an initially fruitless search, the gods discover a false bottom in his water ladle. They do not accuse him of duplicity to his face, but he is discounted as the 'good person' they are looking for, even though he does find them accommodation at a prostitute's, who vacates her room to make space for them.

In Sun's version, the temporality of the events is universalized by beginning with the gods; this universality is soon reinforced upon the discovery of the false-bottomed ladle, whereupon one of the gods breaks from character, turns to the audience, and pronounces: 'It is fine to have a free market but you must not cheat people.' Sun here mobilizes the well-known Brechtian dramatic device of direct address to

the audience. Yet this device – what Benjamin called 'the interruption' – is intended to unsettle empathetic audience identification with the characters, *not* to produce identificatory catharsis.<sup>23</sup> Its effect should be an irruption into what could be taken as a linear flow of performative–historical time; it is *not* supposed to reflect a linear universalized temporal flow into a presumed homogeneous space emptily occupied by the stage/audience in subconscious mutual recognition. As Brecht explained this effect, which was derived from his understanding of Chinese opera:

The efforts in question were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play.... The alienation effect intervenes, not in the form of absence of emotion, but in the form of emotions which need not correspond to those of the character portrayed.<sup>24</sup>

The interruption is hence an excess not to be contained, rather than a supplement to existing terms of convention. Sun's mobilization of direct address as a temporal-spatial extension thus turns Brecht into his absolute opposite. His scene is intended to depict a moment of cathartic experiential identification rather than a historicized moment of social antagonism and the possibility of a politics.

If at the level of formal dramatic device, Sun turns Brecht into his opposite, he does exactly the same at the level of content in this scene. As Jameson has remarked in general terms, Brecht's project was to express the 'peculiar realities and dynamics of money',<sup>25</sup> to represent money as the alienating commodity-form that underpins the reification of everyday life in capitalism. In Sun, Brecht's exposure of money as commodity-form is turned into the universalization of commerce into the present and future of sovereign markets without context. Thus, Sun's god, who pronounces upon the goodness of the free market by selectively criminalizing cheaters, fully enters into and reinforces the reification of the money-fetish by positing a perfectly transparent relationship between money and the market. The play is recast into a morality tale of potential individual heroic action *within* the confines of the eternalized time–space of the commodity and the market. In Brecht, money – via Wang, the water-seller; and Shen Te/Shui Ta, the prostitute/her cousin – both unifies and disrupts the dramatic action along the lines of a fundamental antagonism between 'goodness' and the demands of commodification in the specific historical conditions of conflict between pre-capitalist and capitalist accumulation; whereas in Sun, money is merely an eternalized functional and

transparent medium towards the perfection of markets and the more perfect isomorphism between markets and the sovereign individual's pursuit of freedom and goodness.

This effect is culturally reinforced at the end of Sun's play. By the end, the Western gods become frustrated by the problems demonstrated by their chosen one – the good-hearted prostitute, Shen Te, turned wily shopkeeper, Shui Ta, through her gender-bending transformation into her tough-minded male cousin. Indeed, they become quite alarmed at the woman's inability to remain good. At this point, they descend from their divine perch, musically accompanied by the first chorus from the *Internationale*. Shedding the ethnic/racial difference that is presumed by Sun to be the sexist Orientalist cause of their – and Brecht's – distortions of China, the gods thus become self-identically Chinese so as to sympathize better with the prostitute/shopkeeper. That is, they identify the source of their frustration as being too distanced by their divinity and Western-ness from the reality of human/Chinese life, and decide that the remedy is to become human, which, it turns out, is Chinese. This evidently appeals to the transparency of racial identity/personal experience that corrects for a historically distorting Eurocentrism. It also serves as a reference to the ideal racial inclusivity of Chinese civilization, here figured as inherently levelling through the market and thus as the true fulfilment of the promise of the *Internationale*.

The convergence here between the particular universality of 'Chinese-ness' with the commodity economy as the utopian site of universal identitarian freedom, which collapses an idealized past into the present and future, stages almost exactly, albeit only in part, Weber's concept of the good society. Ostensible non-antagonism in the social realm, now globalized and gendered male, thence becomes the domain of an anti-politics describing the normalization, or purported depoliticization, of everyday life. In this sense, the radical transitional moment of which Benjamin speaks – that stops time in order for a critical analysis to take place – is transformed into the historicist concept of an inevitable transition to the (non-cheating) market as naturalized regulator of the lifeworld. This is articulated to the culturally authentic Chinese through the transformation of the Western gods into

Chinese as fulfilment of the deradicalized promise of the *Internationale*, which, it transpires, is universally globalist rather than historically internationalist. As in Brecht, the superstitious appeal to divinity is invalidated. Yet, in Brecht, this unmasking is a comment about the unsalvageable ahistoricity of the concepts of human nature and the divine.<sup>26</sup> In Sun, the disruption is merely a displacement of history – past and present – onto a putative West/China cultural divide, which leaves intact the eternity of the self-identical Chinese combined with capitalism as a fantasy of the present and a future without politics or the fetish of the divine. It stages exactly the desire for 'joining tracks with the world'.

### Anti-politics

My purpose in raising this episode – which, unique as it may be, is far from an isolated symptom<sup>27</sup> – lies in the ways that Sun claims to be politicizing Brecht. What interests me is not how far Sun deviates from some authentic Brecht, but the absence in Sun of contradiction, antagonism or alienation as a fundamental constituent of capitalist social relations and ideol-



Wang Jin, *To Marry a Mule*, 1996

ogy. Not only is Sun's recasting of the play antithetical to Brecht's alienation as a performative device that, in Benjamin's words, 'makes visible the element of crime hidden in all business',<sup>28</sup> it is also thoroughly anti-historical and anti-political – not merely apolitical – in so far as the specificities of socio-historical antagonism are dissolved into a meditation on an eternal human nature in response to the market as an ahistorical situation.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Sun transforms the historical problem of the Chinese market into the eternality of a culture clash – much as British commentators and many subsequent scholars did with the Opium War in 1839 – the resolution to which appears to be for everyone to become Chinese as a universal subjectivity facilitating an inclusive post-political experiential identity of perfect market sociability.

Voicing the concerns of a now-dominant intellectual/technocratic class that has joined tracks with the world – beset as individuals may be for their dissident views on one-party rule or corruption, among others – Sun's play efficiently stages a fantasized isomorphism between, on the one hand, a post-political interpretation of the West/China divide as culture clash resolvable through participation in markets and everyone becoming authentically 'subaltern' so as to experience this transparency fully, and, on the other hand, the post-revolutionary views of that class, who wish to transform their experiences of a Maoist revolutionary politics of antagonism into the singular reality of politics as an experience of victimization. This represents no appeal, as with Lukács's version of Lenin, to a 'reality more real ... than *isolated* facts'. Rather, it appears both as a class expression of the fear of the re-eruption of the putative cycle of the mass violence of Chinese history, and as an ahistorical claim to the conflation between the eternal present of markets and the eternal standstill of cultural subjectification, now as guarantor of Weberian individual freedom rather than as definition of Hegelian traditional stagnation.

The cultural forms of this ideological configuration took some time to coalesce in post-Mao China. In its now popularized version, *difference* is construed similarly to Perry Anderson's genetic approach to European history in his *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. That is, uniqueness is articulated in Weberian terms by drawing on a culturalist–statist conceit of origins – in Anderson's case, Europe's genesis in Roman classical antiquity and the Roman state; in the Chinese case, China's origins in Confucianism and the imperial state-form. Here, China's putative exceptionalist past becomes a basis for a reconceptualization that emphasizes the enduring culturalism of China

as adequate explanation for the necessity and fitness in the present of its convergence with global capital. Obscuring the restructurings of China's social and productive relations under pre-revolutionary imperialist capitalism, revolutionary socialism, and post-Mao capitalism, such a theoretical configuration concludes that the enduring essence of Chinese civilization over thousands of years that allowed it to emerge from the twentieth-century socialist-revolutionary aberration is attributable to the isomorphism between intellectual/technocratic elites, the state, the global economy, and the self-identical subjectification of all as engines of modernization. This isomorphism becomes the ideological realm of an anti-political possibility of convergence – joining tracks – with the world.

On a final note, what is also significant about Sun's drama is how it dovetails with many intellectual trends in the United States, which themselves have staged a turn to anti-political forms of culturalist knowledge. Most salient in this context is how China's commercialized noncapitalist past is now held up as a model that is not only particularly Chinese (that is, culturally so), but also, miraculously, particularly suited to the contemporary demands of global capital. In this configuration, the historical incommensurability among experience, politics and the past is recuperated as a symmetrical desire for a continuous anti-political, non-antagonistic path of modernization. The impossibility of politics in China is hence founded upon the repudiation of politics as a disruption of or distraction from a desired unity among state, capital and the intellectual/technocratic and cultural producing classes. As Henri Lefebvre wrote apropos Brechtian stage narrative, it 'condenses a becoming analogous with practical becoming: the exploration of potentialities, the transition from possibilities to actions and decisions'.<sup>30</sup> The absence of potentiality is no better illustrated when the limits to possibility are inscribed in the combination of an eternalized market and cultural prowess. These limits are only reinforced when an ostensibly feminized Orientalist China is protested, only to be transformed into the fantasy of an authentically culturalist China, which becomes the very definition of the site of a global anti-politics joining tracks with the world.

## Notes

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1. Cited in Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets*, Wittenborn Schultz, New York, 1951, p. xviii.

2. Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of His Thought*, Verso, London, 1997, pp. 11, 13.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
4. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, Dover, London, 1956, p. 140.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
6. Benjamin writes of this distinction: 'A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.' In 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, p. 262.
7. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, trans. Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 110.
8. Bertolt Brecht, 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting', in John Willett, ed. and trans., *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1964, pp. 91–9.
9. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1, trans. John Moore, Verso, New York, 1991, p. 20.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
11. Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, Verso, London, 1998, p. 47.
12. The idea of 'naturalized economism' is taken from Harry Harootunian, who uses it to discuss Japan in the Meiji period. See *Overcoming Modernity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001, pp. 300–306.
13. See here the numerous calls for China to float its currency on global markets, to move more quickly in taking down trade barriers, etc. Donald Evans, then commerce secretary, visited Beijing at the end of October 2003 to deliver the most strongly worded message to date on these issues (see, for example, reports in the *New York Times*, 28, 29 October 2003; and broadcasts by CNN). Yet, most economists unaffiliated to the Bush White House or to industry groups agree that if China were to float its currency, it would potentially lead to a collapse of the Chinese economy because of structural weaknesses in China's financial sector, among others. For the irrationality of the displacement of blame for the US economy's weakness onto China, see Joseph Stiglitz, 'Playing by the Book', *South China Morning Post*, 9 October 2003.
14. Jacqueline Newmyer, 'Will the Space Race Move East?', *New York Times*, 20 October 2003, p. A17.
15. The controversy sparked by China analyst Arthur Waldron in the pages of *Commentary Magazine* is indicative. See Arthur Waldron, 'The Chinese Sickness', *Commentary*, vol. 116, no. 1, July/August 2003, pp. 36–42; and the responses to this essay in *Commentary*, vol. 116, no. 2, September/October 2003. The most critical response was signed by eleven political scientists from various universities in the USA, along with one from Taiwan. While each of the critics pointed to specific exaggerations and misrepresentations by Waldron, not one disputed his essentializing of despotism as a Chinese 'sickness' (exemplified most recently for Waldron in the handling of SARS in summer 2003).
16. See the recent Philip Huang/Ken Pomeranz controversy, in *Journal of Asian Studies* among other places.
17. See, e.g., Timothy Brook and other late-Ming, early-Qing cultural historians.
18. These are the so-called Confucian capitalist arguments.
19. I should thank Kristin Bayer here, as it was she who brought the programme to my attention and who arranged for my visit to Bard to participate in it. She is, however, absolved of all responsibility for the opinions and analysis expressed here.
20. As Brecht notes in his journal for July 1939, 'the city must be a big, dusty uninhabitable place.... the vision is of a Chinese city's outskirts with cement works and so on. There are still gods around but aeroplanes have come in.' Bertolt Brecht, *Journals, 1934–1955*, ed. John Willett, trans. Hugh Rorrison, Routledge, New York, 1996, p. 30.
21. Indeed, one suspects that Brecht would never have marked them in such a fashion, as his critique is aimed at a universalist ideology of transcendence and eternity, which can be represented equally well by Chinese and Western gods. That is, it is the transcendence of ideological divinity that is the target of Brecht; not, as in Sun, their Westernness.
22. Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, trans. John Willett, Arcade Books, New York, 1994, p. 3.
23. Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theater?', in *Illuminations*, p. 150.
24. Brecht, 'The Alienation Effect', in *Brecht on Theater*, pp. 92, 94.
25. Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p. 13.
26. Brecht commented on the various misreadings of his play; in his journal entry for 7 January 1948, he writes: 'the Szechuan play [was interpreted as] a religious (atheists being god's loyal opposition) condemnation of the two-soul structure.' *Journals*, p. 384.
27. A rare counter-example is a play performed in Beijing in 2000 and 2001 entitled *Che Guevara* at the Central Academy of Drama. Essentially an attempt to recuperate Che and his revolutionary authenticity from the detritus and dominant repudiation of revolution, the play was a phenomenal box-office success, even while audience reaction to it was mixed. Chinese liberals lambasted the endeavour as a regressive step back towards Maoism, even while it was defended in the pages of *Dushu (Readings)*, the most prominent 'new leftist' journal in China. The play was self-consciously called an 'epic', not so much in the Greek vein but in the Brechtian sense. (For Brecht on 'epic theater', see 'The Epic Theater and its Difficulties', in *Brecht on Theater*; and Walter Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theater?') For an analysis of the *Che Guevara* phenomenon, see 'Che Guevara: Dramatizing China's Divided Intelligentsia at the Turn of the Century'.
28. Walter Benjamin, 'Brecht's Three-Penny Novel', in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, Random House, New York, 1989, p. 202.
29. For this as a convention of bourgeois theatre, against which Brecht wrote and conceived his whole project, see 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting', pp. 96–7. As Brecht writes: 'The bourgeois theater emphasized the timelessness of its objects. Its representation of people is bound by the alleged "eternally human". Its story is arranged in such a way as to create "universal" situations that allow Man with a capital M to express himself: man of every period and every colour. All its incidents are just one enormous cure, and this cure is followed by the "eternal" response: the inevitable, usual, natural, purely human response.'
30. Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, p. 22.

# Refiguring the multitude

## From exodus to the production of norms

**Timothy Rayner**

The fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is *the faith in antithetical values*.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §2

Hardt and Negri describe *Multitude* (2004) as a 'sequel' to *Empire* (2000). But for many this book will seem a strange successor. *Empire*, for all its radicalism, is a studiously academic, resolutely interdisciplinary work, and accordingly it has found critics and adherents in a variety of academic disciplines (law, politics, philosophy, sociology, postcolonial studies). The sequel *Multitude*, by contrast, is a less academic and more obviously politically motivated work. It remains to be seen how well *Multitude* is received in the academy – it is clearly written with a more general audience in mind. The tone is less theoretical and the language less technical than *Empire*. Whereas the first book proceeded with brazen decisiveness and theoretical inventiveness, *Multitude*, by comparison, is almost apologetic about its innovations; no sooner has it declared itself to be 'a philosophical book' than it is making concessions to the reader. All in all, one has less the sense of being *told* about a new network power and society currently transforming the globe than of being *invited to participate* in this transformation in whichever way possible. Such a shift in rhetorical strategy undoubtedly reflects, in part, Hardt and Negri's attempt to regain their footing after the unanticipated blow to the ontology of Empire that took place on 11 September 2001. One does not have to be a political theorist to know that in a situation of violence and uncertainty, the first thing to do is to build a community.

*Multitude* is manifestly a call to arms. Having established the premisses of their argument in *Empire*, Hardt and Negri are able to hone their perspective on the present, squarely targeting the 'war on terror' that the United States, along with various other coalition nations, has prosecuted in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Hardt and Negri argue that in the age of

Empire, war has become the norm. But this is a new kind of war, with new objectives: 'War has become a *regime of biopower*, that is, a form of rule aimed not only at controlling the population but producing and reproducing all forms of life.'<sup>1</sup> To this statement, Hardt and Negri add an important twist: biopower, in its management of life, both presupposes and produces *biopolitical networks* that are immanent to the social field – rhizomatic processes of collaboration and collective innovation, 'multitudes'.<sup>2</sup> In Hardt and Negri's view, everything hinges on how the struggle between biopower and biopolitics unfolds. In the age of Empire, they claim, we are faced with a simple dichotomy and decision: imperial biopolitical control or a new possibility for democracy currently emerging on our horizon – the 'absolute' democracy of the multitude.

This article stages a confrontation with Hardt and Negri's account of absolute democracy. While the discussion of this concept in *Multitude* is wide-ranging and provocative, Hardt and Negri's theoretical exposition leaves much to be desired. I fear that the 'general audience' approach that is taken by the authors has also been taken as licence to bury much of the fundamental conceptual content of this argument. Rather than unpack for us the theoretical nuts and bolts of the multitude (as we might have hoped after the equivocal final part of *Empire*), Hardt and Negri are content freely to apply their theoretical vocabulary – including 'biopolitical production', 'exodus' and 'the common' – as if the reader were already familiar with the terms. This does little to clarify the mechanics of the multitude. Worse, it works to conceal a number of contentious theoretical propositions with important implications for the democracy of the multitude. Chief among these is the distinction between 'constituted' and 'constituent' power – a distinction that animates all of Negri's work from the 1980s on, alone and together with Hardt.

The constituted–constituent power binary first assumes a central place in Negri’s work in his book on Spinoza.<sup>3</sup> Highlighting Spinoza’s ambiguous use of the terms *potestas* and *potentia*, Negri argues for a distinction between two modes of power. On the one hand, there is *constituted* power: the centralized, transcendental force of command that characterizes established forms of political order. On the other hand, there is *constituent* power: the localized, immanent force of socio-political constitution that underpins modes of order and maintains them in their being. In a subsequent work, *Insurgencies*, Negri locates the constituted–constituent power binary at the heart of a new political ontology. Citing a range of historical examples, Negri presents constituent power as the distributed, collective force of desire that drives ontological emergence and social innovation – a minoritarian power perpetually opposed to the ‘totalitarian’ sedimentations of the modern state.<sup>4</sup>

As Hardt points out, the distinction between *potestas* and *potentia* is readily made ‘in most European languages (*potere* and *potenza* in Italian, *pouvoir* and *puissance* in French, *Macht* and *Vermögern* in German)’ – though not in English, which has only the one word, *power*.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this explains Hardt and Negri’s decision to allow this conceptual binary to fade into the background in *Multitude*, which was written in English, presumably with an anglophone audience in mind. Despite its exclusion, however, the constituted–constituent power distinction remains central to Hardt and Negri’s thought, having particular relevance for the concept of absolute democracy. Ultimately, all that the omission of this distinction from *Multitude* achieves is to conceal the limits of the radical praxis that is proposed in the work. As in their previous book, Hardt and Negri argue that Empire cannot be overthrown, yet it can be contested and ultimately surpassed through the *withdrawal* of constituent power. Their radical proposition is that the multitude counterpose the power of *exodus* to the machinations of imperial governance: ‘Democracy today takes the form of a subtraction, a flight, an exodus from sovereignty.’<sup>6</sup>

Exodus is not simply a gesture of refusal. In the arguments of Italian ‘workerists’ and autonomists of the 1960s and 1970s, the refusal of work provokes *positive* transformations in systems of production.<sup>7</sup> As Paolo Virno explains:

Defection modifies the conditions within which the struggle takes place, rather than presupposing those conditions to be an unalterable horizon; it modifies the context within which a problem has arisen, ... alters the rules of the game and throws the adversary completely off balance.<sup>8</sup>

The disruption to the established order opens a space for innovation. The democracy of the multitude is both this space of rupture and the vector of creativity that springs forth from it. It is an ‘abyssal’ democracy, existing only in the suspension of institutional relations.<sup>9</sup>

The metaphysics of constituted–constituent power provides Hardt and Negri with a clearly defined problematic. The constituent power of democracy, in their view, is a productive insurgency, the expression of a mass withdrawal and redirection of social forces. The constituted power of Empire, by contrast, is an administrative command that ‘produces nothing vital and nothing ontological’; it is little more than ‘a parasite that draws the vitality from the multitude’s capacity to create ever new sources of energy and value’.<sup>10</sup> While clearly drawn, this problematic reveals its limits when Hardt and Negri turn to the political alternative to Empire – the absolute democratic order premised on the creative powers of the multitude. At issue here is the problem of how a multitude is to rule itself. Hardt and Negri provide generally satisfactory accounts, in *Multitude*, of how a multitude makes decisions, develops demands and produces norms. Their account of how a multitude might rule itself, however, is endlessly deferred, with postponements qualified by the suggestion that the concepts of modern political thought are inadequate to this task, and must be completely rethought before a positive vision of a post-imperial political order can be produced. These concepts, it is claimed, are compromised by their complicity in the history of the sovereign state – in Negri’s view, the constituted power par excellence. Hardt and Negri argue that ‘Sovereignty in all its forms inevitably poses power as the rule of the one and undermines the possibility of a full and absolute democracy.’<sup>11</sup> Far from asserting its rightful authority, the multitude ‘must today challenge all existing forms of sovereignty as a *precondition* for establishing democracy.’<sup>12</sup>

The present article is an experiment at the limits of Hardt and Negri’s account of absolute democracy, the limits of the constituted–constituent power binary itself. This binary, which forms the basis of Hardt and Negri’s argument, prevents them from establishing the ultimate implications of their account as a vision of a global democratic order to come. Simultaneously, and more relevantly for this paper, it stands in the way of a more modest theorization of the multitude, which would seek to apply this concept to the emerging jurisprudential powers of transnational social movements (TSMs). Recent sociological studies have shown that TSMs are playing an increasingly important role in the

production of national and international political and legal norms by creating issues, coordinating concerns and transforming affective frameworks and identities.<sup>13</sup> Hardt and Negri's concept of the multitude is generally well suited to the theorization of TSMs. The concept is particularly apposite for describing the structural and organizational features of what is known as the 'movement of movements', the coordinated constellation of struggles that emerged into global public consciousness with the Seattle protests of November 1999.<sup>14</sup> But Hardt and Negri's theory of power makes it impossible for them to use the concept of the multitude to account for the jurisprudential dimensions of these new transnational forms. Hardt and Negri accept that the multitude can produce common norms.<sup>15</sup> But they resist attributing a jurisprudential power to the contemporary multitude, which would entail an engagement with constituted legal regimes that is disallowed by the terms of their argument. The multitude will acquire a jurisprudential power, Hardt and Negri suggest, only with the reconfiguration of global political and legal systems, when 'the common becomes the ... basis on which law can construct social relationships in line with the networks ... that create our new global reality'.<sup>16</sup>

This paper seeks to re-enable Hardt and Negri's model of the multitude by uncoupling it from their theory of power, to develop an alternative model that allows for the theorization of the jurisprudential function of TSMs in the international context. The argument has two parts. The first task is to deconstruct the concept of the multitude, highlighting the historically contingent features of this phenomenon as opposed to the metaphysical dynamic that dominates Hardt and Negri's interpretation. To this end, I seek to renegotiate Hardt and Negri's genealogy of the multitude with a specifically historical (non-metaphysical) focus. Next, I build on the insights of this genealogy to develop a theoretical model of the multitude in its jurisprudential vocation. Thinking with and against Hardt and Negri, I show how the multitude can be understood as a unique mode of neo-Athenian republican politics that produces new normative trajectories through the establishment of 'common names'.

### Genealogy of the multitude

Hardt and Negri's argument, in *Empire and Multitude*, hinges on the claim that post-Fordist 'immaterial' labour, which centrally involves communication and affect, has today achieved a hegemonic status, transforming all forms of production and social relations in its image. Since the multitude is also a creature of

communication and affect, this enables them to identify post-Fordist society as the age of the multitude, which has lingered, as John Kraniuskas puts it, as 'an always present natural-historical and creative substrate ... since Spinoza's seventeenth century'.<sup>17</sup> Hardt and Negri's effort to link the concept of the multitude to the conditions of post-Fordist production represents an important theoretical innovation, with numerous philosophical and sociological applications.<sup>18</sup> But the historical narrative that Hardt and Negri use to explain the emergence of the postmodern multitude hardly does justice to this theory, being based in nothing more substantial than the quasi-mythological meta-narrative of constituted versus constituent power.<sup>19</sup>

To place the multitude on a historical (rather than a metaphysical) basis, we need to shift focus from the theme of immaterial labour towards two other factors in the genealogy of Empire. The first is the emergence, through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of strategies of biopolitical governance, and their dissemination in the form of an international human rights regime. The second factor is the rise, in the later twentieth century, of global communications technologies, which transformed the conditions of grassroots political organization and facilitated the emergence of a new form of supranational political subjectivity. While these factors play an important role in Hardt and Negri's argument, they are ultimately subordinated to the logic of their revolutionary dichotomy. This leads Hardt and Negri to overlook the historically singular character of the contemporary multitude, and to foreclose on the possibilities of absolute democracy.

Hardt and Negri's genealogy of Empire builds on Foucault's studies of biopower and the modern state. Foucault, as is well known, defines biopower in contrast with the sovereign power of the *ancien régime*. Whereas sovereign power operated by 'impeding [forces], making them submit, or destroying them', biopower works 'to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: it is a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them.'<sup>20</sup> Foucault argues that the rise of state biopolitical regimes had a major impact on the normative trajectory of civil law. Through the nineteenth century, he claims, juridical institutions were 'increasingly incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses (medical, administrative, and so on) whose functions [were] for the most part regulatory'. Law increasingly became a matter of enforcing norms of health and social discipline: 'A normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centred on life.'<sup>21</sup>

These developments set the scene for one of the great ‘strategic reversals’ of modern times. In the mid-nineteenth century, Foucault argues, the forces that resisted power began to ‘[rely] for support on the very thing it [power] invested, that is, on life and man as a living being’. Here we have the historical conditions for the emergence of the discourse of human rights and the legal institutions that would enforce it. Foucault explains:

[L]ife as a political object was in a sense taken at face value and turned back against the system that was bent on controlling it. It was life more than the law that became the issue of political struggles, even if the latter were formulated through affirmations concerning rights. The ‘right’ to life, to one’s body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or ‘alienations’, the ‘right’ to rediscover what one is and all that one can be, this ‘right’ – which the classical juridical system was utterly incapable of comprehending – was the political response to all these new procedures of power.<sup>22</sup>

In the attempt to foster and organize the forces of life, modern state biopower paved the way for multifarious struggles in the name of the right to life.<sup>23</sup> We will return to this matter shortly in the context of a discussion of the contemporary multitude. First, however, it is necessary to consider how Hardt and Negri develop Foucault’s work on biopower. One of the most crucial and intriguing steps in Hardt and Negri’s genealogy of Empire is to link Foucault’s history of biopower to the late-twentieth-century emergence of the international human rights regime set up by the United Nations in conjunction with various non-governmental, ecumenical and state organizations. Empire emerges on the basis of complex, internationally distributed networks of biopolitical control.<sup>24</sup> Humanitarian organizations such as Amnesty, Oxfam and Médecins sans Frontières are cast as the ‘capillary ends’ of these biopolitical networks. These NGOs, Hardt and Negri claim, ‘are completely immersed in the biopolitical context of the constitution of Empire – they anticipate the power of its pacifying and productive intervention of justice’. The capacity of these organizations to project the myriad causes and struggles of the impoverished and dispossessed of the world to the global stage builds on the long labour of Catholic orders, which for decades have sought to provide education and aid in the developing world, as well as to assist communities in their struggles for autonomy and the right to land. While the activists and campaigners of humanitarian organizations are not inappropriately cast as the missionaries



of our age (in that ‘[t]heir political action rests on a universal moral call’), the City in the name of which they toil is a biopolitical utopia. What is at stake here is not spiritual life, but life itself.<sup>25</sup>

The first step towards toppling the multitude from its metaphysical pedestal is to acknowledge that the contemporary global multitude is first and foremost a *biopolitically mediated event*. In Hardt and Negri’s view, the late-twentieth-century ascent of the multitude represents the culmination of the struggle – determinative for the history of modernity – between constituted and constituent power. But if we maintain focus on the essential role of biopolitical organizations in the ontogeny of the contemporary multitude, we see that this phenomenon in fact represents a singular and strictly localizable occurrence. The contemporary multitude would not and could not exist were it not for the complex networks of international agencies and institutions established through the later twentieth century in the service of life and human rights. By providing for the health and welfare of populations; by assisting them in their struggles through the provision of education, as well as techniques of strategy and organization; but most importantly by instilling in these populations a desire for enhancement and the passion for rights, the postwar international biopolitical regime served as a fundamental condition for the emergence of the global multitude.

To establish the distinction between the multitude as an institutionally mediated, biopolitical figure, on the one hand, and as a transhistorical expression of the metaphysics of constituted–constituent power, on the other, it helps to distinguish between two modes of biopolitical activity: a ‘major’ and a ‘minor’ biopolitics. This is coordinate with Hardt and Negri’s distinction between biopower and biopolitics, but the major–minor distinction shifts the discussion to an alternate theoretical register, which enables us to overstep the limits of the metaphysics of constituted–constituent power. The distinction between major and minor biopolitics is based on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s distinction between major and minor forms of life. According to Deleuze and Guattari, a major, or ‘majoritarian’, form of life serves as a constant or standard by which other forms of life are evaluated.<sup>26</sup> In opposition to majoritarian norms, Deleuze and Guattari affirm processes of ‘becoming-minoritarian’, understood as processes of collective, insurgent desire, which rend us from ourselves and carry us away on ‘lines of flight’.<sup>27</sup> If a major biopolitics is a regime of power that functions to shape, mould, regulate and control populations in relation to dominant standards, a minor biopolitics concerns the spontaneous alliance of intellect and desire across a diverse social field and defines the process by which a mass deviates from a given norm.

The advantage of reading the distinction between biopower and biopolitics through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between major and minor life is that it enables us to attribute a much broader set of capacities to the multitude than are granted by Hardt and Negri.<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari define a ‘minority’ simply as the process by which a mass departs from a given norm. The means and objectives of this departure can take many forms: from exodus for the purposes of altering the terms of a struggle to the articulation of demands for sovereignty and the recognition of rights. While Deleuze was critical of the notion of universal human rights, the concept of minoritarianism includes the possibility that minor becomings might proceed in the name of rights. As Deleuze claims, ‘there are no “rights of man”, there is life, and there are rights of life. Only life proceeds case by case.’<sup>29</sup> More pertinently from our point of view, minor becomings may spearhead changes in jurisprudential convention. Becomings transpire through the conjunction of radical differences, precipitating complex processes of mutual transformation. We see an example of this when social movements trigger progressive developments in the normative structures of political and legal regimes. Paul Patton has persuasively argued

that the jurisprudence of native title in countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand can be understood in terms of the ‘becoming-minor’ of the legal fraternity, coupled with the ‘becoming-indigenous of the social imaginary.’<sup>30</sup> Such an application of Deleuze and Guattari’s work not only suggests ‘a new and rich territory’ and research agenda for Deleuzean studies,<sup>31</sup> but a strategy for deterritorializing the multitude from its metaphysical basis, opening a vast new range of capacities and possibilities.



We will return to the jurisprudential function of minor becomings in more detail below, once we have considered how the multitude becomes a political subject. At this point, let us turn to another factor in the genealogy of the contemporary multitude: the revolution in information and communications technologies (ICTs) that began in the 1950s, accelerated through the 1970s and 1980s, and has since contributed to a vast transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions globally.<sup>32</sup> The ascending influence of humanitarian NGOs in the latter part of the twentieth century was greatly assisted by this technological revolution. Such technologies permit vast communications networks to be set up for the coordination and distribution of aid. Data can be swiftly accumulated to support complex empirical arguments to pressure governments and international organizations to act. The establishment of a globalized news media indirectly assists in the task, beaming footage of humanitarian crises into homes about the

world on a daily basis. More so perhaps than Immanuel Kant ever imagined, the citizens of a planet crossed by informational networks are forced to 'endure each other's proximity', and an 'injustice in one place is felt in all'.<sup>33</sup>

The ICT revolution is a second *sine qua non* condition of the contemporary multitude. The multitude could not acquire the power to affect global political arrangements meaningfully without these new technologies. To be sure, it is doubtful that the multitude could emerge as a global phenomenon without the aid of Internet and email. Hardt and Negri are well aware of this fact. In their view, the contemporary multitude is a species of *cyborg* life.<sup>34</sup> In the later twentieth century, they argue, new ICTs transfigured the object of biopolitical control, transforming human corporeality from an element of processes of production to a productive force in its own right. This argument is fundamental not only for Hardt and Negri's account of immaterial labour, but for the account of the democratic potential of contemporary transnational social movements. The contemporary multitude comes into being when biopolitics and technology conspire to create a virtual power, when 'naked life is raised up to the dignity of productive power, or really when it appears as the wealth of virtuality'.<sup>35</sup>

We have considered two historical conditions for the emergence of the global multitude. Let us now reflect on the implications of this discussion for the concept of the multitude itself. Admittedly, this discussion has been exceedingly schematic and brief. Yet, it is enough to enable us to make an important conceptual distinction. This is a distinction between the philosophical and essentially *ahistorical* concept of the multitude (Spinoza's multitude) and the contemporary global multitude, manifested in the ascending power of transnational social movements. While Hardt and Negri are aware of this distinction,<sup>36</sup> they do not always make the distinction clear. Rather, their overarching theoretical focus on the metaphysical dimensions of the multitude tends to obviate the bio-technological basis of its contemporary expression. This enables Hardt and Negri to shift quickly between different levels of analysis, alternating between the complex history of the contemporary multitude, on the one hand, and, on the other, a more simplistic discussion of the struggle between the multitude and Empire, structured in terms of the rigid distinction between constituted and constituent power. In these moments, the messy reality of minority struggles, institutional systems and technological innovations fades from view, and history blurs into the seductive simplicity of a revolutionary

concept. The multitude, Hardt and Negri claim, drives the constitution of imperial networks. Yet, on account of the constituted–constituent power distinction, it is consigned to the status of a counterpower – immanent and yet opposed to Empire. As a result, the relationship between the multitude and Empire can only take the form of provocation and response: 'Empire and all its political initiatives are constructed according to the rhythm of the acts of resistance that constitute the being of the multitude.'<sup>37</sup> Absolute democracy becomes an absolute insurgency, with the sole revolutionary objective of pushing 'through Empire to come out the other side'.<sup>38</sup>

The problem with collapsing absolute democracy into insurgency is that it grants us no basis for establishing any positive vision for the multitude beyond the overthrow of the capitalist order, and accordingly leaves us incapable of using this concept to theorize the jurisprudential powers of contemporary transnational social movements. To develop such a theoretical platform, we must wrest reflection free of all transhistorical metaphysical schemas, and grasp the multitude in properly historical terms. In place of Hardt and Negri's insurgent multitude, driven by the 'will to be against', I shall posit an insistent multitude, driven by the right to life.

### Real and virtual republicanism

The task before us is to develop a theoretical model of the multitude that emphasizes its jurisprudential vocation. But immediately we find ourselves in an awkward position. If the multitude is not to be understood as an expression of constituent power, how *are* we to understand this entity? It would appear that thus far we have simply presupposed that there actually *exist* entities such as 'multitudes', while denying ourselves the metaphysical basis that would justify such an assertion. We will indulge ourselves no longer. The challenge now is to specify not only how the multitude may be understood as a vehicle for the production of jurisprudential norms, but, prior to this, *just what it means* for something to count as a multitude in any non-metaphysical sense. To satisfy this condition, we will make it our first task to identify the specific form of configuration that defines the multitude as a political subject.

The constitution of the global political, in Hardt and Negri's view, is a tale of two republicanism. Empire revives the republican ideal of Imperial Rome, combining monarchic, aristocratic and democratic functions.<sup>39</sup> In keeping with the neo-Roman model, Empire functions to secure a zone of non-interference

for its constituents, securing the liberty rights of groups and individuals and the freedom of market activity – generally, the peace and order required for capitalist exchange. In opposition to Empire, Hardt and Negri affirm the ‘radical republican tradition of modern democracy’.<sup>40</sup> Three thinkers loom large in Hardt and Negri’s conception of modern republicanism: Machiavelli, Spinoza and Marx. However, this lineage runs together two quite different traditions that modernity has inherited from the ancient world. Machiavelli belongs in the neo-Roman tradition that Hardt and Negri associate with Empire.<sup>41</sup> Spinoza and Marx, on the other hand, are the inheritors of an older brand of republican thought pioneered by Aristotle: ‘neo-Athenian’ republicanism.<sup>42</sup>

There are important differences between neo-Roman and neo-Athenian republicanism. Neo-Romans propose an ‘instrumental’ account of civic virtue: the active participation of citizens in political life is essential for the laws and institutions of the polis to be effective in safeguarding liberty. Liberty, on this model, is conceived in strictly negative terms: the polis requires strong laws and institutions to ensure that citizens are not dependent on others for their freedom.<sup>43</sup> For neo-Athenians, on the other hand, civic virtue has an intrinsic *ethical* value, and the liberty that is derived from it is positive. Public engagement offers more than just freedom from external constraints, but the possibility of participation in a *common praxis* – a praxis that enables individuals to flourish as political beings, which for classic neo-Athenians is their true and essential nature.<sup>44</sup>

*Pace* Hardt and Negri, I want to argue that the contemporary multitude is only properly understood along neo-Athenian lines. The reason for this is that the event of the multitude has for its constituents an intrinsic ethical value. Whereas the neo-Roman republicanism of Empire frees individuals for a life in and on the global marketplace, the neo-Athenian republicanism of the multitude frees whole collectivities at a time to engage in a life-enhancing praxis. Such a praxis is intrinsically life-enhancing in so far as it involves the *re-creation* of the meaning of being. The classic republicanism of the Athenian polis located the ethical value of public engagement in the creation of a common political existence. The virtual republicanism of the multitude locates the value of engagement in the creation of *new* modes of political existence, each based in an original vision of ascending life and a shared normative horizon.

To substantiate this argument, we need to do two things. First, we need to deepen our understanding of

neo-Athenian republicanism, focusing on its ethical and ontological dimensions. Second, we need to explain how a mode of neo-Athenian republicanism is able to emerge at the global level, coordinating a disparate array of struggles. For the sake of the first goal, I will outline Spinoza’s vision of republican politics, linking the ethics and ontology of the multitude to the concept of the ‘common notion’. For the sake of the second goal, I will expand on a provocative and yet curiously underdeveloped concept in Hardt and Negri’s work: the ‘common name’.

Spinoza’s theory of republican politics centres on a concept expounded in the *Ethics*: the concept of *conatus*, or desire. *Conatus* is an index of life enhancement. According to Spinoza, an entity desires those things that preserve and enhance its power, and, conversely, loathes those things that threaten its ideal equilibrium.<sup>45</sup> Every living being has a ‘natural right’ to pursue its *conatus* and thus secure its essential preservation:

[E]very natural thing has by nature as much right as it has power to exist and operate; since the natural power of every natural thing, whereby it exists and operates, is nothing else but the power of God, which is absolutely free.<sup>46</sup>

Spinoza’s reading of the relationship between *conatus* and the enhancement of life has important implications for his interpretation of the social contract.<sup>47</sup> The most significant implication, for our purposes, concerns the ontology of the social unit. Thomas Hobbes perceived the social contract as a moment of political and existential transformation, whereby the disparate, warring multitude escapes the state of nature by becoming a unified civil constituency.<sup>48</sup> For Spinoza, however, there is no such transformation: the social unit is constituted by the *conatus* of the multitude, which conforms to secular laws in accordance with the laws of nature. The social unit, in other words, has its basis in a collective desire for life enhancement. Before it is instantiated in a legal document, the contract subsists in a shared anticipation that the apparatus of the state (the sovereign and civil law) will provide the conditions for mutual flourishing.

When the multitude unites in affirmation of a set of conditions for mutual flourishing, we may say it has forged a ‘common notion’.<sup>49</sup> Spinoza defines common notions as ideas that express the ‘infinite essence’ of *Deus sive Natura*, ‘God or Nature’ – an essence ‘which is common to all things’.<sup>50</sup> Common notions, we might say, are insights into ‘being’, where the latter is understood not as a given arrangement or order, but

as the infinitely reiterated event of complex constitution that provides for the empowerment of life.<sup>51</sup> From this perspective, we are able to see the integral relation between ethics and ontology in Spinozian political thought. The state, in Spinoza's view, is founded on a common insight into being – founded, that is, on the common affirmation of civic relations, understood as the fundamental conditions for human flourishing. The good life is inseparable from this insight into the divine essence; indeed, ethics *is* the common notion, the collective 'adequate' idea.<sup>52</sup>

This puts us in a position to specify the basic features of the contemporary multitude as a political subject. Just as Spinoza's civic multitude emerges, complete with a self-understanding of its conditions of enhancement, in the forging of a common notion, the contemporary globally distributed multitude emerges, as an intellectual and cooperative mass, in the ontological establishment of the common name. The theme of common names runs right through *Empire*. According to Hardt and Negri, the construction of common names is 'an activity that combines the intelligence and the action of the multitude ... a project that is a community'.<sup>53</sup> Yet the concept of the common name vanishes entirely in *Multitude*. In its place, we are presented with a series of vague allusions to the power of the multitude to create in common.<sup>54</sup> This omission is a major disappointment for those interested in the theory of the multitude. For

the common name forms a crucial part of the *virtual* dimensions of the multitude. The common name is what gives the multitude its specific character as a virtual republicanism.

What is a common name? On the face of it, the answer may seem obvious: a common name is a collective 'adequate' idea – an insight into 'being', understood as an assemblage of life-enhancing relations. While formally correct, this answer fails to establish the essential distinction between common names and common notions. Common notions are expressions of *Deus sive Natura*, Spinoza's divine substance. Common names, on the other hand, are expressions of a virtual ontology. Hardt and Negri understand the virtual as a 'set of powers to act (being, loving, transforming, creating) that reside in the multitude'.<sup>55</sup> The multitude becomes a political subject when these various powers to act are coordinated under the influence of a virtual attractor.<sup>56</sup> Attractors emerge when, in the midst of complex processes of interlocution, the exchange of values and ideals, the disparate desires of the multitude achieve a critical mass and are articulated in the form of a common name. At precisely this point, a distributed multiplicity discovers the political project that determines its common existence.<sup>57</sup> The simpler the idea that is expressed in the common name the better: slogans such as 'No war!' and 'People before profits!', which critics of progressive social movements decry as stupid and simplistic, in fact function as pure



centres of attraction. Beyond the banality of the slogan itself, these words mark a field of affective intensity, registering the configuration of a mass of desires under the rubric of a common assemblage of life-enhancing relations.<sup>58</sup> In the establishment of the common name, the multitude creates a new meaning for being; it ‘innovates’ being and opens history to the to-come.<sup>59</sup>

Considered in isolation, this account of the common name scarcely advances on Negri’s model. Significant differences emerge, however, when we fold this account of the common name back into the earlier discussion of minor biopolitics, which was central to the deconstruction of the multitude as a placeholder for the notion of constituent power. Whereas forms of constituent power are *essentially* opposed to the constituted order, functioning to challenge and elude this order in the creation of the social fabric, the concept of minor biopolitics simply describes the temporally determinate function of social movements in their struggle to transform the norms established by extant political and legal regimes.

Understood in terms of a minor biopolitics, the multitude is seen as founded in a distributed, biopolitically mediated desire for the enhancement of life. This desire is coordinated through the establishment of a virtual attractor – the common name – whereby the multitude achieves its political subjectivity as a virtual republicanism. Thus far, we have considered these two moments and aspects of the analysis in distinction from one another. What happens when we fold the latter aspect back into the former, retreating the concept of the common name? The concept of minor biopolitics casts the common name in a new light. By focusing on the properly metaphysical dimensions of minor biopolitics – the idea of a minor *becoming* – we are able to perceive in the common name the tacit jurisprudential potential of the contemporary multitude.

### Convergence and contamination

I have argued that the metaphysics of constituted–constituent power makes it impossible for Hardt and Negri’s multitude to engage positively the processes of governance of states and international institutions. On Hardt and Negri’s account, the multitude makes its mark on these processes by deserting them and by challenging institutions to adapt to its changing forms, but it cannot communicate with these institutions, infiltrate and reshape them from within – this would amount to a violation of its metaphysical essence. When we consider the multitude as a mode of minor becoming, however, the picture is altered significantly. As we have seen, a becoming involves the convergence

of radical differences within a process of mutual transformation. In the becoming of the wasp and orchid, for example, both entities are shaped by their symbiotic association: the wasp becomes orchid and the orchid becomes wasp. In the becoming of the horse and rider, the rider acquires some of the affects and capacities of the horse, while the horse acquires affects and capacities of the rider. These processes of transference do not take place in the individuals themselves, but in their common becoming – an intermediate, virtual zone of relation and enhancement.<sup>60</sup>

By introducing the theme of becoming into the concept of the common name, we are able to bring together what Hardt and Negri’s theory holds apart. Whereas in Hardt and Negri’s work, the common name resides on the plane of constituent power alone, on this new theoretical register it can be conceived as a moment of *convergence* of ‘constituted’ and ‘constituent’ forms, conjoining both these modalities of power within a process of mutual transformation. Through the establishment of common names, the multitude instigates new symbioses between progressive and conservative forces. In its minor becoming, the multitude *contaminates* the established order. For every stony bureaucrat or hopelessly compromised politician there is a lawyer, judge or Member of Parliament drawn into the basin of attraction of the common name.

This is how the multitude functions to produce political and legal norms. In the becoming-minor of the multitude, there is a becoming-multitude of the political and legal system.<sup>61</sup> And, indeed, how could it be otherwise? Those who seek to challenge the status quo must engage political and legal systems in order to dream their way to a better future. Those charged with maintaining order and dispensing the law require social movements simply in order to dream. The multitude is the emergent source of these new symbioses. Far from a principle that holds them apart, the multitude is the power that brings these forces into communication, that changes attitudes and identities on both sides of the divide, and that facilitates the slow process of jurisprudential transformation.

### Notes

1. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin, New York, 2004, p. 13.
2. ‘Biopower stands above society, transcendent, as a sovereign authority and imposes its order. Biopolitical production, in contrast, is immanent to society and creates social relationships and forms through collaborative forms of labor.’ *Ibid.*, pp. 94–5.
3. Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael

- Hardt, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991.
4. 'Everything, in sum, sets constituent power and sovereignty in opposition, even the absolute character that both categories lay claim to: the absoluteness of sovereignty is a totalitarian concept, whereas that of constituent power is the absoluteness of democratic government.' Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 13. For a succinct (and in my view decisive) critique of the radical distinction between constituted and constituent power, see Jodi Dean, 'The Networked Empire: Communicative Capitalism and the Hope for Politics', in Paul A. Passavant and Jodi Dean, eds, *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 284.
  5. See Hardt's foreword to Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, pp. xi–xiv.
  6. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 341. It is clear how the strategy of exodus underpins Hardt and Negri's proposal for peace in *Multitude*: 'A week-long global biopolitical strike could stop any war.' *Ibid.*, p. 347.
  7. There are few historical surveys covering the breadth and diversity of Italian Autonomist Marxism. The best is undoubtedly Steve Wright's *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, Pluto Press, London, 2002. For a summary of material available in the English language, see Steve Wright, 'Operaiismo, Autonomia, Settantasette in Translation: Then, Now, the Future', *Strategies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2003, pp. 107–20.
  8. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles and New York, 2004, p. 70.
  9. See Jason Frank, "'The Abyss of Democracy": Antonio Negri's Democratic Theory', *Theory and Event*, vol. 4, no. 1, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v004/4.1r\\_frank.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v004/4.1r_frank.html).
  10. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2000, p. 361.
  11. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 353.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 353; stress mine.
  13. See the collection of essays in Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker and Katherine Sikkink, eds, *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2002. For a review of the various political-legal proposals generated by TSMs, see Jeremy Brechner, Tim Costello and Brendan Smith, eds, *Globalization from Below: The Power of Solidarity*, South End Press, Cambridge MA, 2000, pp. 67–80; 143–4 n. 1.
  14. Hardt and Negri claim: 'This form of organization [the movement of movements] is the most fully realized political example we have of the concept of the multitude.' Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 217. For an account of the scope and ambitions of the movement of movements, see Brechner, Costello and Smith, *Globalization from Below*. See also the collection of essays and interviews in Tom Mertes, ed., *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* Verso, London and New York, 2004.
  15. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 204.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 208. I understand the notion of jurisprudence, here and elsewhere, in the broad sense of a philosophical reflection on the normative basis of law. Since laws are embedded within social and political structures, jurisprudential reflection necessarily entails an engagement with established (i.e. constituted) regimes. My argument regarding the difficulties preventing Hardt and Negri from attributing jurisprudential powers to the multitude is similar to that offered by Ernesto Laclau regarding the possibility of coding the demands of the multitude as rights. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri suggest three general rights to which the multitude may lay claim: the right to global citizenship, the right to a social wage, and the right to the reappropriation of the means of production (Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, pp. 396–407). As Laclau points out, however, in so far as these rights are to be implemented, they inevitably appeal to the 'transcendental' sovereignty of constituted power – a possibility which is 'denied by the central theoretical and strategic categories on which [Hardt and Negri's] analysis is based'. Ernesto Laclau, 'Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles', in Passavant and Dean, eds, *Empire's New Clothes*, p. 30.
  17. John Kraniauskas, 'Multiple Choice', review of *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, *Radical Philosophy* 130, March/April 2005, p. 30.
  18. See also Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*.
  19. See esp. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, pp. 69–90.
  20. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, Penguin, London, 1990, p. 136.
  21. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
  22. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
  23. I understand the 'right to life' not as a specific form of right, but as a general disposition towards the having of rights.
  24. 'In effect, imperial power can no longer discipline the powers of the multitude; it can only impose control over their general social and productive capacities.' Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 211.
  25. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–7, 313.
  26. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, Athlone Press, London, 1988, p. 105.
  27. *Ibid.*, pp. 105–6, 291–3.
  28. Hardt and Negri's theory of the multitude is clearly indebted to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minoritarianism. But Hardt and Negri deviate from Deleuze and Guattari in reading the becoming of the multitude through the framework of the constituted–constituent power distinction. Deleuze and Guattari are critical of all such forms of binary organization, which they link to the micropolitics of modern societies (see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 210). For a critical discussion of the relationship between the concepts of the multitude and minoritarianism, see Nicholas Thoburn, 'Autonomous Production? On Negri's "New Synthesis"', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2001, pp. 75–96.
  29. Gilles Deleuze, *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, 1988, avec Claire Parnet, at [www.subversiv.com/doc/gauche/deleuze.htm](http://www.subversiv.com/doc/gauche/deleuze.htm). Cited in Daniel W. Smith, 'Deleuze and the Liberal Tradition: Normativity, Freedom and Judgement', *Economy and Society*, vol. 32, no. 2, May 2003, p. 315.
  30. Paul Patton, *Deleuze and the Political*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 126. For a review of Patton's reading of Deleuze through the liberal themes of rights and

- jurisprudence, see Smith, 'Deleuze and the Liberal Tradition'.
31. Smith, 'Deleuze and the Liberal Tradition', p. 301.
  32. On the ICT revolution and its effects, see Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age*, Vol. 1, 2nd edn, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000.
  33. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Proposal*, trans. Helen O'Brien, Peace Book Company, London, 1939, pp. 33–4.
  34. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, pp. 214–18. Also Antonio Negri, 'Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo', in *Time for Revolution*, trans. M. Mandarini, Continuum, London and New York, 2003, pp. 254–6.
  35. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 366.
  36. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, pp. 201–22.
  37. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 360.
  38. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
  39. *Ibid.*, pp. 309–19.
  40. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
  41. See Quentin Skinner, 'The Paradoxes of Political Liberty', in David Miller, ed., *Liberty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, pp. 183–205. Also Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vol. 1, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978.
  42. For a clear account of the distinction between neo-Athenian and neo-Roman republicanism (with references to contemporary exponents), see John W. Maynor, *Republicanism in the Modern World*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 10–20.
  43. See Skinner, 'The Paradoxes of Political Liberty', pp. 194–201.
  44. *Ibid.*, pp. 188–91.
  45. Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*, trans. S. Shirley, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1992, pp. 6–7.
  46. Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes, Dover Publications, New York, 1956, p. 316. See also Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, pp. 200, 291–7.
  47. We should note that Negri argues for the exclusion of the social contract in Spinoza's *Political Treatise*. In Negri's view, the contract as such involves the transfer of power and the alienation of natural right, which is why (he claims) Spinoza avoids mentioning the contract in this work. See Negri, *Subversive Spinoza*, pp. 31–3. In place of the contract, Negri attributes to Spinoza a vision of democracy that emphasizes the right of the multitude to withhold consent from the constituted regime. It is true that the language of the contract disappears in the *Political Treatise* (whereas it was explicit in the earlier *Theologico-Political Treatise*). However, it is not clear that Spinoza, in this later work, abandons the notion of the social contract altogether. While arguing that the civil right is 'determined by the power of a multitude', Spinoza also claims that 'each individual has the less right the more the rest collectively exceed him in power; that is, he has, in fact, no right over nature but that which the common law allows him.' Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, p. 297. This looks very much like a contractarian 'transfer' of natural right. The impression of a lingering contractarianism in Spinoza's final work is further enforced in the chapter on 'The Functions of Supreme Authorities'. Supreme authorities, Spinoza claims, are 'guided' by 'the whole body of the dominion'. Yet, the 'affairs of state depend on the direction of him only who holds supreme dominion' (*ibid.*, p. 309). Such a conclusion would seem to reflect a much more traditional view of representative-democratic affairs than that which Negri attributes to Spinoza. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin, Zone, New York, 1992, pp. 265–8.
  48. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. R. Tuck, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 118–21.
  49. See Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, pp. 95–100.
  50. Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 37. What is common to all things is the fact that 'bodies agree in certain respects', *ibid.*, p. 13 l.2. Cf. Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, pp. 275–6.
  51. On this point, see Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy*, p. 99.
  52. 'Any common notion gives us direct knowledge of God's eternal infinite essence.' Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, p. 280.
  53. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 302.
  54. See especially Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, pp. 196–219, 336–40. For a detailed (if somewhat obscure) study of the common name, see Negri, 'Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo'. The following account draws heavily on this study, which was published subsequent to *Empire* but prior to *Multitude*.
  55. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 357.
  56. In the science of non-linear dynamics, or 'complexity theory', an attractor is the preferred position for a complex system, such that if the system begins from another state it will evolve until it arrives at the attractor, and stay there in the absence of other factors. A 'basin of attraction' is the field of influence that belongs to an attractor. Attractors are singularities: 'the inherent or intrinsic long-term tendencies of a system, the states which the system will spontaneously tend to adopt in the long run as long as it is not constrained by other forces.' Manuel Delanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, Continuum, London, 2002, p. 15. For more on the sciences of complexity, see Murray Gell-Mann, *The Quark and the Jaguar: Adventures in the Simple and Complex*, Freeman, New York, 1994; and Stuart Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe: The Search for the Laws of Complexity*, Penguin, London, 1995.
  57. 'We call "political subject" that multitude of singularities which engages itself in the construction of the common *telos*.' Negri, 'Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo', p. 259.
  58. Recent transnational struggles bear out a variety of assemblages consisting of diverse elements, such as: 'mobility – labour – rights'; 'anti-imperialism – peace – international law'; 'sovereignty – debt-relief – trade and institutional reform'. Such assemblages are rhizomes in the sense that parties are free to contribute additional elements to the assemblage. The common name that unites an assemblage functions as a principle of coherence that binds the core elements of each; thus an assemblage may be built upon and developed, but only reduced to that minimum of components which determine its basic state of equilibrium.
  59. Negri, 'Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo', pp. 159–68.
  60. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 293–4.
  61. I owe the idea of 'becoming-multitude' to Timothy S. Murphy, who read a paper on this theme at the Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2004.

## Culs-de-sac

Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum Press, London and New York, 2005. x + 116 pp., £14.99 hb., 0 8264 7067 X.

Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2005. xi + 148 pp., £29.95 hb., £12.50 pb., 0 80474408 4 hb., 0 8047 4409 2 pb.

Rancière and Badiou have moved to the centre of the gilded stage of radical French thought in recent years, probably due to a combination of the death of other 68ers and a certain critical mass to their oeuvres. Certainly, the translation and reception of their work has been particularly frenetic of late, and there has been plenty of material for comparative analyses, especially with regard to politics. In relation to their considerations of art there has been less, so the translation of these texts – which, despite being brief and occasional in many ways, present programmatic accounts of their positions – enables a timely critical assessment.

### Rancière

*The Politics of Aesthetics* is essentially a publishing vehicle for a single 40-page text, ‘The Distribution of the Sensible’. Its appearance as a monograph in France, *Le partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (La Fabrique Éditions, 2000), is far less exceptional than in Anglo-American publishing. With a translator’s introduction, a glossary covering all Rancière’s writings, an interview for the English edition and an afterword by Žižek, the book is testimony to the kind of breathless attention that Rancière’s work currently attracts, if not a certain desperation on the part of the publisher. It is not clear that this text deserves more singular attention than other essays by Rancière. For his part, he does not try to conceal its occasional character, written in response to a journal’s invitation.

In the foreword, Rancière identifies the two principal objectives of the text. The first is to respond to a set of questions by the editors of the journal *Alice* about the consequences that Rancière’s conception of politics has for aesthetics, specifically in relation to a section of the issue entitled ‘The Factory of the Sensible’, concerned with ‘aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity’. Second, Rancière frames his response as part of his attempt to displace the mournful trajectory of the debates around the avant-garde and modernity: ‘the transformations

of avant-garde thinking into nostalgia’. He identifies this in both the decay of ‘Situationist discourse’, from ‘radical critique’ to ‘the routine of disenchanting discourse that acts as the “critical” stand-in for the existing order’, and in the work of Lyotard, which he describes as what ‘best marks the way in which “aesthetics” has become, in the last twenty years, the privileged site where the tradition of critical thinking has metamorphosed into deliberation on mourning’. (On this, see Rancière’s essay, ‘The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller: Two Readings of Kant and their Political Significance’, in *RP* 126.) Against this mournful trajectory, Rancière describes his text as part of a wide-ranging and ongoing attempt at ‘re-establishing [this] debate’s conditions of intelligibility’, in which he proposes the radical displacement of the concept of modernity with a renewed clarification of the concept of aesthetics.

These two objectives are pursued by elaborating the aesthetic dimension of the definition of politics proposed in Rancière’s earlier work *Disagreement*. There, Rancière defines politics as a form of disruption of the established social order by a group or class that has no place within that order. It is not the empowerment of a group that already has a subordinated place or part. Rather, politics is the emergence of a claim to enfranchisement by a group that has been so radically excluded that its inclusion demands the transformation of the rules of inclusion. As Rancière puts it in *Disagreement*: ‘Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part.’ Politics exists in the process of this destruction of a social order, and it comes to an end with its reconstitution, however revolutionized the new order may be. Changes or alterations internal to an order, whether prior or posterior or besides a properly ‘political’ transformation, are distinguished by Rancière as a matter of ‘the police’.

Rancière’s definition of politics is inherently aesthetic in so far as this political disruption is a reconfiguration of the order of what is visible or perceptible. That is to say, politics is the disruption of an

order that claims to be total, not only by subordinating each of its parts to a particular place within it, but, in so doing, establishing the conditions of visibility for a part to be a part. The irruption of a part that has no part is therefore the irruption of something that is invisible, something outside the established sense of what can exist. Consequently, its inclusion does not just demand that it is recognized as akin to other parts, but demands a transformation of the fundamental terms by which parts are seen or become visible – that is, a transformation of experience. In other words, Rancière’s conception of politics revolves around a certain transcendental logic of experience, in so far as the order that politics disrupts is understood as a universe of possible parts or objects, extending to what can become an object of experience. Politics is the disruption of this universe by a part that is impossible, which therefore, in order for it to be included, requires a new universe. This new universe is understood by Rancière not as the realization of politics once and for all, but as the end of one of its episodes. Thus, the new order also remains transcendental in the sense that it is not absolute. As Rancière puts it in *The Politics of Aesthetics*:

aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.

This political dimension of aesthetics is elaborated through Rancière’s distinction of three different regimes: the ethical regime of images, the poetic or representational regime of the arts, and the aesthetic regime of art. The ethical regime of images, associated with Plato, is described as follows:

In this regime, ‘art’ is not identified as such but is subsumed under the question of images. As a specific type of entity, images are the object of a twofold question: the question of their origin (and consequently of their truth content) and the question of their end or purpose, the uses they are put to and the effects they result in. The question of the images of the divine and the right to produce such images or the ban placed on them falls within this regime, as well as the question of the status and signification of the images produced.... In this regime, it is a matter of knowing in what way images’

mode of being affects the ethos, the mode of being of individuals and communities.

The poetic or representative regime of the arts, associated with Aristotle, is defined thus:

I call this regime *poetic* in the sense that it identifies the arts – what the Classical Age would later call the ‘fine arts’ – within a classification of ways of doing and making, and it consequently defines proper ways of doing and making as well as means of assessing imitations. I call it *representative* insofar as it is the notion of representation or *mimesis* that organizes these ways of doing, making, seeing and judging....[H]owever, *mimesis* is not a law that brings the arts under the yoke of resemblance. It is first of all a fold in the distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in social occupations, a fold that renders the arts visible. It is not an artistic process but a regime of visibility regarding the arts. A regime of visibility is at once what renders the arts autonomous and also links this autonomy to a general order of occupations and ways of doing and making.

Finally, the aesthetic regime of art, which is primarily associated with early German romanticism and especially Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* – which Rancière describes as the aesthetic regime’s ‘first manifesto ... and remains, in a sense, unsurpassable’ – is given the following gloss:

I call this regime *aesthetic* because the identification of art no longer occurs via a division within ways of doing and making, but it is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products. The word aesthetics does not refer to a theory of sensibility, taste, and pleasure for art amateurs. It strictly refers to the specific mode of being of whatever falls within the domain of art, to the mode of being of the objects of art. In the aesthetic regime, artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself.... The aesthetic regime ... strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter and genres. Yet it does so by destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguished ways of doing and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making, a barrier that separated its rules from the order of social occupations.... It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself.

Rancière’s conception of the aesthetic regime of art is highly condensed here. It is clearer in another essay, ‘The Aesthetic Revolution’, where he clarifies the

inherent tension or contradiction that defines it. This revolves around Schiller's conception of aesthetics as both an art of the beautiful and an art of living:

Schiller says that aesthetic experience will bear the edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the art of the living. The entire question of the 'politics of aesthetics' – in other words, of the aesthetic regime of art – turns on this short conjunction.... It grounds the autonomy of art, to the extent that it connects it to the hope of 'changing life'. (*New Left Review* 14, March/April 2002, p. 134)

The key point is that the aesthetic revolution involves a singularization or autonomization of art, but only through its heterogeneous determination as a changed life. In other words the autonomy of the aesthetic involves a simultaneous autonomy of art and life. This autonomization of art destroys the internal determinations of art – its hierarchy of arts, genres and subject matters – while also destroying its delimitation from life. This ambiguity or equivalence of autonomy explains why autonomous art took on a political significance even in its most politically indifferent forms, such as the democracy that contemporaries read into Flaubert's literature of microscopic description because of the equivalent visibility it granted everything and everyone.

Yet this also explains why the aesthetic regime is liable to being misconceived or suppressed. It is in these terms that Rancière introduces his critique of the concept of modernism. He claims that this concept is not just a confusion of the aesthetic regime, but a precisely developed suppression of it. He describes modernism as having two main forms. The first is the purification of the autonomy of art from any reference to life and the re-establishment of the autonomy of the arts internal to art. (Rancière has Greenberg in his sights here, who takes on a conspicuously dominant role in his conception of modernism. While Greenberg's status is historically undeniable within art theory, the partiality and, in many respects, impoverishment of his account are not registered by Rancière, and result in his evasion of broader conceptions of modernism that have little to do with Greenberg.) The second form of suppression is something that Rancière calls 'modernatism': 'the identification of forms from the aesthetic regime of the arts with forms that accomplish a task or fulfil a destiny specific to modernity'. This appears to result from the failure of the aesthetic revolution in two ways: first, in the opposition of art to the failure of political revolution (e.g. by the surrealists, Frankfurt School, etc.); and, second, in the interpretation of this political failure as a failure of

its original aesthetic-ontological model (principally by Heidegger). Postmodernism is described as a reversal of this general process of modernity: the recognition of the fallacy of the autonomy of the different arts, not as a recommencing of aesthetic revolution, but rather as a deeper abandonment of the project of an autonomous life (e.g. the mournful abandonment of the revolutionary project of a fusion of idea and sense in Lyotard's reading of Kant). The avant-garde is differentiated into two ideas: a strategic idea of the party and innovation, and a properly aesthetic idea of a total transformation of life that is broadly faithful to the aesthetic revolution.

The passages in which the topic of 'The Factory of the Sensible' is addressed most directly are those on photography and mechanical reproduction. Rancière's claim here is that the visibility of the masses or the anonymous, which enable new forms of historiography, is not due to the invention of photography, as Benjamin suggests, but rather to an aesthetic regime that has a literary rather than a photographic heritage. Rancière's point is that the visibility of the anonymous had to have been made possible first, through a new sense of visibility, before photography could be recognized as an art of the masses. His claim is that the novel provided the paradigm for this, with its setting in relations of equivalence everything and everyone.

Highly elliptical definitions and dogmatic staking out of positions, which are consequently question-begging and often crude, dominate this text, as with many others by Rancière. Each section is precipitated by a question from the journal's editors, which Rancière then goes on to answer at length, each answer constituting a 'chapter'. The form is that of a pseudo-interview of a rather parodic kind, in which the questions are not critical, but mere prompts. For someone who professes to attempt to invent forms of writing that avoid the strategies of mastery, this must be considered a failure. Nonetheless, it does at least have the virtue of indicating the main coordinates of Rancière's position. And in this light we come across a fundamental aporia.

This concerns Rancière's account of capitalism, specifically the question of the relationship between the equivalence of exchange value and the equivalence of the aesthetic regime of art. This is touched on only once, in Rockhill's interview for the English edition. Rancière insists on distinguishing the equality generated by the aesthetic regime and the equality of exchange:

The play of language without hierarchy that violates an order based on the hierarchy of language is

something completely different than the simple fact that a euro is worth a euro and that two commodities that are worth a euro are equivalent to one another. It is a matter of knowing if absolutely anyone can take over and redirect the power invested in language. This presupposes a modification in the relationship between the circulation of language and the social distribution of bodies, which is not at all at play in simple monetary exchange.

This is an incredibly reductive account of exchange value. Surely it *does* modify the relationship between the circulation of language and the distribution of bodies. And if its empowerment of absolutely anyone is obviously severely restricted, it still played a massive role in dissolving medieval social hierarchy, and generating the comparatively indeterminate interaction of status and agency within modern capitalist societies. In any case, what is overwhelmingly needed here is an account of the relation between these forms of equality, given that, or in so far as, exchange value is the dominant form of relation that has a tendency to overdetermine other forms. Rancière fails to provide such an account. More significantly, he fails to account for how a culture of exchange value can be disrupted by the aesthetic regime of art. He actively refuses this, as if to give an account would be a concession to capitalism. Thus, in answer to probably the central



question of contemporary culture and politics, Rancière has nothing to offer but a kind of moral resoluteness. Far from reconstructing the conditions of possibility of debates around modernist art and politics, Rancière has merely reasserted its romantic heritage. But it was precisely the indifference of romanticism to the conditions of the political economy of capitalism that generated the aporias of these debates in the first place, and, in the process, rendered romanticism culturally inadequate and politically harmless. Rancière's position should be judged in the same terms. The affection with which his oeuvre is held by many on the Left looks dangerously like nostalgia for yet another form of romantic anti-capitalism.

## Badiou

Badiou's *Handbook of Inaesthetics* is less of an occasional publication than Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics*. It starts with a methodological essay in which Badiou stakes out his position and introduces his key concepts, which is followed by a series of essays on different arts, artists or artworks, through which this position is pursued. But the book retains the seams of a collection of essays. The opening essay was written for an 1994 anthology on the relation of artists and philosophers to education, which explains the foregrounding of the problem of education in this essay, and, more glaringly, the extent to which it makes no mention, let alone explanation, of the concept of 'inaesthetics'. All we are given is an epigraph:

By 'inaesthetics' I understand a relation of philosophy to art that, maintaining that art is itself a producer of truths, makes no claim to turn art into an object for philosophy. Against aesthetic speculation, inaesthetics describes the strictly intraphilosophical effects produced by the independent existence of some works of art. (A.B., April 1998)

Well, gee, thanks for that Alain. It is with good reason that Rancière has described Badiou's announcement of inaesthetics as a UFO. (See Jacques Rancière, 'Aesthetics, Inaesthetics, Anti-Aesthetics', in Peter Hallward ed., *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, Continuum, London, 2004.) Also, the impression of variety given by the contents page – listing nine essays on poetry, theatre, dance, cinema – obscures the dominance of particular concerns, specifically the significance of poetry as a model for the arts and of Mallarmé's poetry in particular. Effectively five of the essays turn out to be deeply indebted to Mallarmé, who turns out to be a very faithful representative of Badiou's philosophy.

As the title of the opening essay, 'Art and Philosophy', suggests, Badiou's preoccupation is with the relation of art to philosophy, which he maintains must be investigated as a relation to truth. Ostensibly, if not altogether transparently, it is to this end that Badiou diagnoses three currently available 'schemas' of the relation of art to truth, which he claims are today fused or 'saturated' with one another and therefore need to be distinguished. Badiou's taxonomy is broadly parallel to Rancière's, but with an alternative focus, and trumped by a fourth 'schema'.

Badiou calls the first schema of art the '*didactic* schema', which is defined by the thesis that 'art is incapable of truth, or that truth is external to art'. This is the schema that Badiou associates with Plato. The second is the '*romantic* schema', which, as its name suggests, is associated with the romantics: 'Its thesis is that art alone is capable of truth.' The third schema, associated with Aristotle, is the '*classical* schema', which combines two theses:

(a) Art – as the didactic schema argues – is incapable of truth. Its essence is mimetic, and its regime is that of semblance.

(b) This incapacity does not pose a serious problem (contrary to what Plato believed) ... because the *purpose* [*destination*] of art is not in the least truth.... [B]ut it also does not claim to be truth and is therefore innocent.... Art has a therapeutic function.

In other words, what Aristotle calls 'catharsis'.

Just in case you thought the abstractness and questionableness of these schemas was merely an artifice of presentation, Badiou proceeds apace with the claim that the twentieth century, 'was characterized by the fact that it did not introduce, on a massive scale, any new schema.' And in relation to, 'the massive tendencies of thought in the twentieth century', Badiou claims, 'I can only see three: Marxism, psychoanalysis and German Hermeneutics', each of which relates to art according to one or other of the three schemas he has outlined. So: 'Marxism is didactic, psychoanalysis classical, and Heideggerian hermeneutics romantic.' The twentieth-century avant-gardes are diagnosed as a hopeless confusion of these schemas:

From Dadaism to Situationism, the century's avant-gardes have been nothing but escort experiments for contemporary art, and not the adequate designation of the real operations of this art.... [T]hey were nothing but the desperate and unstable search for a mediating schema, for a didactico-romantic schema.... [T]he avant-gardes were above all anticlassical.

Badiou proposes to interrupt this confused and mournful scene with a new schema, presumably the one longed for by the avant-gardes... Badiou does not name it. Perhaps we should call it the 'inaesthetic schema'? In the first place, it is derived from what the three inherited schemas of art have in common, which Badiou concludes is their refusal of the simultaneous immanence and singularity of art's relation to truth. This negatively produces a positive definition of the new schema:

In these inherited schemata, the relation between artworks and truth never succeeds in being at once singular and immanent. We will therefore affirm this simultaneity. In other words: Art *itself* is a truth procedure. Or again: The philosophical identification of art falls under the category of truth. Art is a thought in which artworks are the Real (and not the effect). And this thought, or rather the truths that it activates, are irreducible to other truths – be they scientific, political, or amorous. This also means that art, as a singular regime of thought, is irreducible to philosophy. Immanence: Art is rigorously co-extensive with the truths that it generates. Singularity: these truths are given nowhere else than in art.

Badiou is not bashful about his idea:

It is imperative to recognize that beneath its manifest simplicity – its naivety, even – the thesis according to which art would be a truth procedure sui generis, both immanent and singular, is in fact an absolutely novel philosophical proposition.

All we are given by way of demonstration of this novelty is the fact that Deleuze persisted in thinking art as a form of sensibility (as percept and affect) and separated it from philosophy (which is alone attributed with the capacity for the invention of concepts).

The central issue of Badiou's philosophy of art – which is indeed the issue of his philosophy more generally – is whether his professed neo-Platonism overcomes the problems of Plato's original conception of philosophy; specifically his 'didactic' treatment of art. According to Badiou's fourth 'inaesthetic' schema, art produces its own truths, which are both immanent and singular to itself. In this sense, art is autonomous (which is not a new idea). Philosophy does not produce truths, but only registers them. Philosophy is therefore not autonomous, self-sufficient or unconditioned, but conditioned. (Indeed, besides art, Badiou maintains that philosophy has three further conditions – politics, love and science (or mathematics) – which are derived from those forms against which Plato himself tried to maintain philosophy's sovereignty.) This autonomy of art, and this limitation of philosophy's autonomy or

sovereignty, ostensibly differentiate Badiou from Plato. However, this difference becomes more questionable when we consider the rationalism of Badiou's conception of the autonomy of art.

Thus, Badiou maintains that the autonomy of the arts is due to the extent they are able to generate ideas that are not reducible to their sensuous appearance. So, for instance, he maintains that there are poetic ideas and cinematic ideas. But he insists that these ideas are not merely the projection or the thought of philosophy, but rather that they are singular to the art in question. This is central to his reading of Mallarmé. Badiou writes:

The modern poem is certainly not the sensible form of the Idea. It is the sensible, rather, that presents itself within the poem as the substituting and powerless nostalgia of the poetic idea....Through the visibility of artifice, which is also the thinking of poetic thought, the poem surpasses in power what the sensible is capable of itself. The modern poem is the opposite of mimesis. In its operation, it exhibits an Idea of which both the object and objectivity represent nothing but pale copies.

It is the ideality of the modern poem that renders Plato's judgement of poetry redundant for Badiou: 'modernity makes the poem ideal.... It thereby overturns the Platonic judgement more surely than Nietzsche had ever desired to.' However, even if we accept Badiou's claim that modernity renders poetry ideal, this does not render Plato's judgement redundant, so much as absolve poetry from it on Plato's own terms. In other words, Badiou claims that the ideality of modern art enables its autonomy from philosophy, but in reducing art to its ideas its autonomy is dissolved. This is demonstrated by the extent to which his essays on the arts are preoccupied with the reiteration of his basic philosophical terms, which he professes to find already there in the works. Badiou finds philosophy in art because he does not look for anything else. Badiou claims that philosophy is not sovereign since it is conditioned by the four relatively autonomous forms of truth. But what conditions these truths, such that there are four and only four of them, if not philosophy? We can recognize here an inversion that Hegel diagnosed in Kant's philosophy: Badiou's delimitation of philosophy is a self-delimitation, which therefore conditions what it claims to be conditioned by.

Badiou's inaesthetics is radically opposed to Rancière's aesthetics. Badiou's insistence on the autonomy of art and the arts, forged through his subtractive, non-sensuous thinking of being, stands in stark opposition to Rancière's account of the aesthetic regime, in which

the distinction of idea and sensibility stands in suspension, as does the autonomy of art. Badiou is typical of what Rancière considers as the modernist suppression of the aesthetic revolution, as he makes clear in his essay on Badiou's inaesthetics. However, the stakes of this opposition of inaesthetics to aesthetics are not at all high when it comes to considering the predicament of art within contemporary capitalism. Such a consideration would transgress the autonomous truths of modern art, which Badiou maintains are constituted independently of capitalism. Moreover, he thinks any political consideration of art is didactic, and should be redirected to the properly political realm. But even when we look there we are faced with a self-conscious subtraction of all political considerations from the analysis of political economy. As Badiou said in a recent interview: 'in order to think the contemporary world in any fundamental way, it's necessary to take as your point of departure not the critique of capitalism but the critique of democracy.' But without a critique of capitalism Badiou's renewal of the Platonic opposition of truth to democracy remains an archaism. For anyone seeking to pursue the artistic and political critique of contemporary capitalism, there is little to offer here.

In his afterword to *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Žižek repeats the account given in his own *The Ticklish Subject*, in which he associates Rancière and Badiou with Balibar and Laclau in a common post-Althusserian philosophy of politics that – contra liberal 'political philosophy', postmodern post-politics, and Lefort's Kantian Lacanianism – reasserted politics as the emergence of a supernumerary 'part' that cannot be deliberated within the existing order. Žižek points out that what they also share is an indifference or structural subordination of economics to politics. The consequence is indifference to the extent to which capital overdetermines social relations, including politics. Žižek's response is a characteristic inversion: he opposes the irreducibility of politics to economics with the irreducibility of economics to politics. It is not clear why we should be at all satisfied with this double irreducibility; why it doesn't just offer another dead end. What is required is a philosophy that is capable of thinking the relationship of emancipatory politics to developed capitalist economies. This must surely be the point of departure for any philosophy of art today. It is sobering to recognize how few contemporary philosophical enterprises even attempt this.

**Stewart Martin**

# Tinker, tailor...

Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster and Andrew Parker, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2004. xxviii + 247 pp., £69.00 hb., £17.50 pb., 0 8223 3261 2 hb., 0 8223 3274 4 pb.

How to found a state? In the beginning there would perhaps be only a few persons. A farmer, a mason, a weaver, and so on: enough to satisfy the basic needs. To these there might need to be added a few others to provide for material necessities: a shoemaker, perhaps. So begins the construction of Plato's *Republic*. In this construction Plato founds a city. And in this construction, and particularly in the role of the shoemaker, Rancière detects the origins of a central theme within philosophy: the relationship between the philosopher and his poor.

The shoemaker is there, of course, to make shoes. But why a specialist in footwear when a mason seems to be able to handle all aspects of the building of houses? And why a specialist in footwear when Plato tells us that for much of the summer the peasants will carry on their work unshod? Perhaps the shoemaker is also there for some other purpose. At every strategic point in the *Republic*, Rancière suggests, the shoemaker is present. Whenever it is necessary to think about the division of labour, to establish differences in natures and aptitudes, to define justice itself, the shoemaker is there. It's as though the shoemaker is doing a double duty behind the scenes. He makes shoes, to be sure; but he also seems to be useful to the philosopher for purposes that go far beyond his trade.

Through an exploration of such purposes *The Philosopher and His Poor* deals with three broad questions. How are we to conceive of the relation between the order of thought and the social order? How do individuals get some idea in their heads that makes them either satisfied with their position or indignant about it? And how are representations of self and other formed and transformed? These questions are dealt with through an exploration of classic philosophical *topoi* concerning the poor.

For the philosopher – that should really be ‘the philosopher’, to be distinguished from ‘the sociologist’ as he appears later in the book – the poor have often been present as objects rather than subjects of knowledge, objects with a particular function as philosophy's *exempla*. The poor enable the philosopher to constitute himself – as other than the poor. Thus despite the range of names given to the poor, their essential function has remained constant – to play the ersatz of philosophy. This is perhaps most clear in Plato's

*Republic*, in which the artisan can do only one thing: his trade. The artisan's focus on his own business precludes the potential to engage in a very different business, the business of the philosopher, a business over which philosophers possess a monopoly. This has two implications. First, as an artisan whose main business is his own business, the worker will never achieve the ‘communism’ required of the philosopher-kings. And second, the monopoly of knowledge grants to the philosopher the right to *lie* about the division of labour itself, in order to defend itself against those ‘outside’ the philosophical community.

Yet to criticize Plato for excluding the poor from philosophy and defending the autonomy of philosophers is to say nothing new. Rancière's trick is to turn this argument against those who initially appear immune from the same criticism: Marx, Sartre and Bourdieu. The background to the writing of the book and the timing of its publication are important here.

In 1975 Rancière helped to found *Révolution Logiques*, whose approach to the social history of labour was predicated on the assumption that what intellectuals said about workers and what workers said about themselves were often very different. What followed was an immersion in nineteenth-century labour archives exploring working-class traditions. The plural ‘traditions’ is important here, for the archive seemed to Rancière to reveal a working class which was much more mobile, much less attached to its tools, and far less focused on its own poverty and alcohol than the various traditions had tended to represent it. For example, the idea of ‘pride in work’ appeared to be far from a universal working-class norm. Rancière thus came to believe that the way to understand workers' culture was through its encounter with other cultures, through what was said about workers and their attitudes.

This book's publication in France in 1983 coincided with the period of power for the French Socialists. In this context Pierre Bourdieu's attacks on inequality and distinction were becoming increasingly influential, and it is hard not to read the book as more or less driven by its critique of Bourdieu. After all, there's nothing too dangerous about criticizing Plato on the poor. Although Rancière's analysis of Marx appears initially to be radical and challenging (according to



Rancière, the artisan is no more thinkable for Marx than for Plato; 'the poor', for Marx, is the non-class with its own work, namely the revolution), and it plays around with some interesting ideas (such as the observation by the forces of order that Karl Marx the communist is a cobbler, or Marx's comment about the paradoxical infatuation of Russian aristocrats with his work: 'it is not for tailors and cobblers'), it merely takes a long time to go over some familiar ground. Marxists have long debated Marx's own understanding of the proletariat, his claims about its lumpen brother which sound suspiciously like bourgeois prejudices, the difficulties passed over in the idea that we might hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon and be a critic in the evening, and the problems posed by turning a class of workers into a politically driven proletariat. It might also be pointed out that the discussion of Sartre is incredibly slight.

Rancière's real target thus appears to be Bourdieu's sociological approach to the question of class, an approach which is a challenge to the whole philosophical tradition of writing about the poor. Armed with statistical tables and opinion polls, the sociologist highlights certain institutions, most notably educational ones, central to both the reproduction of class and the dissimulation of the idea that class does not matter. Rancière's claim is that Bourdieu's sociology of class and distinction is far from convincing. Worse, it actually perpetuates the very hierarchy it purports to challenge, and assumes an inequality even more significant than Plato's. For even while condemning philosophy for its naturalization of class distinctions, Bourdieu's concepts such as *habitus* presuppose that the poor can only ever do their own business. 'Everything happens as if the science of the sociologist-king

had the same requirement as the city of the philosopher-king. There must be no mixing, no imitation.'

For Bourdieu as well as Plato and Marx, 'the poor' can do only one thing at a time. Thus despite Bourdieu's position as a critic of class privilege and social distinction, Rancière comes to argue that Bourdieu's criticism of philosophy as a denial of the social in fact turns out to possess a curious continuity with the exclusions of the philosophical tradition. Bourdieu's work consists in a kind of sociological inversion of Platonism which confirms Platonism's interdictions.

The book is thus interesting in the straight line it purports to detect between the ancient ruses of philosophy and the modern ruses of anti-philosophy, a straight line which appears to undermine the strongest sociological attempt to challenge the order of things. Rancière sees this as the chance to denounce the complicity between sociological demystifications of aesthetic 'distinction' and the old philosophy of 'everyone in his place'.

Yet in writing against this feeble consensus a little of another form of 'distinction' might not be amiss. For 'the poor', the artisan, the shoemaker, and 'workers' all slip and slide into each other in the argument in ways which are at times troubling. And though the trope of the shoemaker is interesting, it is on occasion also a little forced. Other labels for the poor pop up time and again, yet Rancière appears not to know what to do with them: the milliner and blacksmith make an appearance, but little is found for them to do and so they are dropped. Sartre's 'amphibians' come and go in a flash. And why not the hairdresser or the shop worker, figures who far more often appear in both the main texts of bourgeois thought, such as Burke's *Reflections*, and in contemporary ruling discourse about politics? More tellingly, there is little discussion of contemporary forms of shoemaking, most of which is conducted by wage labour for ridiculously small amounts of money in appalling industrial conditions and with little or no rights. For this reason, perhaps, the trope of the shoemaker gradually falls away as the book's discussion moves on. When the quaint figure of the artisan is replaced by the modern and most impoverished wage-slave, this particular philosopher has nothing more to say.

**Mark Neocleous**

# Come back Heidegger-Marxismus, all is forgiven

Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History*, Routledge, New York and Abingdon, 2005. 176 pp., £50.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 415 94177 6 hb., 0 415 94178 4 pb.

In his short essay on titles, Adorno comments on Peter Suhrkamp's aversion to 'and' in the titles of books. Adorno counters by suggesting that, 'In some titles, and ultimately in the best ones, the colourless word "and" sucks the meaning up into itself aconceptually, when the meaning would have turned to dust if it had been conceptualized'. The avowed project of Andrew Feenberg's *Heidegger and Marcuse* is to conceptualize Marcuse's reception of Heidegger's work, and it is evident that there is more than a little historical dust to sift. Given that Heidegger's work scarcely registers Marcuse, it is perhaps not surprising that Feenberg's emphasis is on Marcuse's Heidegger, rather than on some counterfactual dialogue between teacher and former pupil. Marcuse's early work bears traces of his study under Heidegger and what has been called Marcuse's 'Heidegger-Marxismus'. More controversial, however, is the claim that Marcuse's neo-Marxism remained implicitly Heideggerian despite his explicit interests in Critical Theory and Marxist aesthetics.

Two 'ands' in one title presents the further difficulty of the movement from catastrophe to redemption. This suggests, rather misleadingly, a Benjaminian discussion of the philosophy of history. The book's main line of argument is more accurately summarized by its listing on Feenberg's homepage, which, perhaps indicating an earlier working title, gives the title as *Heidegger, Marcuse and Technology: The Catastrophe and Redemption of Enlightenment*. The absence of 'technology' from the book's published title is surprising given its prominence in the book as a whole. In so far as it is possible to identify a catastrophe calling for redemption in this book, however, it is modern technology. Feenberg traces the question of technology in Heidegger and Marcuse in order to suggest a renewed critique of technology.

This critique of technology is prefigured in Feenberg's *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory* (1981), which argued for a dialectical paradigm of rationality suited to the task of social self-understanding and human liberation. In this early book, Feenberg claims that Marcuse elaborated a positive theory of liberated technical practice, a position *Heidegger and Marcuse* throws in doubt. Feenberg's

subsequent books – *Critical Theory of Technology* (1991, revised and republished as *Transforming Technology*, 2002), *Alternative Modernity: The Technical Turn in Philosophy and Social Theory* (1995) and *Questioning Technology* (1999) – indicate the persistence with which Feenberg has addressed the question of technology, including case studies developed at a less abstract level of argument. Extracting the question of technology from Marcuse's Heidegger is nevertheless fraught with problems, since the effective reception of Heidegger in Marcuse's thought precedes the emergence of Heidegger's reformulation of *techné* and technology. Moreover, Marcuse's understanding of technology more obviously reflects Critical Theory's relation to Marxism, and associated critical theories of instrumental reason, administration and the sociology of capitalism. The main lines of argument in Marcuse's neo-Marxist critique of technology are evident in his 1941 essay 'Some Social Implications of Modern Technology' (republished in *Technology, War and Fascism*, 1998, volume one of the *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, edited by Peter Kellner). Feenberg eschews discussion of this essay, and although his book's blurb claims a careful study of previously unpublished work by Marcuse, the readings offered focus on published work from either side of Marcuse's most sustained engagement with the Frankfurt School in the 1930s and 1940s.

Feenberg has elsewhere attempted to renew aspects of New Left socialism and first-generation Critical Theory, so the absence of a sustained discussion of Marx and Marxism in *Heidegger and Marcuse* can in part be made up there. Although the underlying source remains Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, it is hard not to notice a generalized attenuation of explicit Marxist formulations. The belated staging of Heidegger versus Marcuse suggests a settling of Feenberg's debts, designed to offer a retrospective introduction to his recent thinking on contemporary technology. But however much Feenberg's arguments are directed towards a reformulation of the potential of technology, the drift towards Heideggerian arguments needs a more historical account than is likely to emerge from speculative accounts of the implicit ontology of ancient craft.

In rough outline, then, *Heidegger and Marcuse* suggests how Marcuse's idiosyncratic reading of *Being and Time* might be understood as a way of interpreting Marx and Hegel through Lukács. But it also makes the stronger claim that 'Marcuse remained true at some level to an earlier Heidegger [that] the later Heidegger rejected and concealed.' But at what level? Beyond the difficulties of sustaining this claim against Marcuse's own historical trajectory, Feenberg wants to claim that 'there remains much in Marcuse that is theoretically incomplete precisely because he refused either to drop central phenomenological themes or to develop them phenomenologically.' Feenberg offers intriguing accounts of Plato and Aristotle, with Bruno Latour as a point of reference, to highlight the reading of Aristotle that Heidegger pioneered in lectures of the 1920s and early 1930s, lectures from which Marcuse evidently learnt. Heidegger's Aristotle is then read into Marcuse's doctoral thesis on *Hegel's Ontology* (1932, trans. 1987) to suggest an alternative genealogy to its synthesis of Marx, Dilthey and Lukács. The central and most interesting chapter in Feenberg's account is, accordingly, his reading of *Hegel's Ontology*, which weaves a fascinating path through the contextual difficulties against which Marcuse worked. The key claim is that Marcuse finds in Hegel, above all in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a fundamental ontological orientation towards history, and a phenomenological conception of historicity that seeks to displace the apparent ahistoricity of Hegel's absolute. Feenberg is nevertheless obliged to oscillate between the implicitly Heideggerian formulations evident in *Hegel's Ontology* and Marcuse's contemporaneous essays on phenomenology and historical materialism. Indeed, although Feenberg offers an illuminating account of the way Marcuse might have imagined a synthesis of Lukács and Heidegger, he also concedes that this has to be decoded and read between lines that otherwise remain parallel rather than convergent.

Moreover, it remains unclear whether Marcuse's turn to the early Marx and Critical Theory can be read as a regression in the face of unreconciled philosophical difficulties, or as a considered rejection of the attempt to combine phenomenology with historical materialism. The problem, as Feenberg puts it, is that 'Without a phenomenological notion of being-in-the-world, he seems to be engaged in inflated rhetoric or, worse yet, a naïve metaphysical challenge to the modern scientific understanding of nature.' He suggests that Marcuse can be redeemed by reading his work as a 'deconstructive strategy', a rather baffling and unorthodox way of describing the way Marcuse

plays off antinomial opposites against themselves to defy the categories of philosophical tradition.

Feenberg's reading of *Hegel's Ontology* is largely persuasive, however, and sets the stage for his illuminating account of the eclecticism of Marcuse's subsequent appropriations of Freudian *Eros*, of the account of sensuousness in early Marx, and of utopian claims for aesthetics, beauty and imagination. Feenberg evidently shares the scepticism with which Marcuse's aesthetics is usually greeted, but attempts to redeem an affirmative conception of technology from the ruins. Despite the tenuous optimism of Marcuse's response to New Left culture in the 1960s, Feenberg seeks to develop the notion of an aesthetic criterion through which the new technical *logos* of contemporary technology might be interpreted. This aesthetic criterion remains somewhat vague, however – more a retrospective redemption of the spirit of 1968 than an encounter with twenty-first-century avant-gardes. Not for the first time, the renewed claim for the critical potentialities foreshadowed in art falls back on the aesthetics of Kant and Schiller, rather than looking forward to more recent developments as exemplified by the poetics of John Wilkinson or McKenzie Wark's bracing *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004). The spirits of 1968 continue to haunt the historical horizons of Critical Theory's engagement with art, but there is surely a problem of diminishing returns. If the project of conceiving the proletariat as the subject-object of history falls victim to recognition of the proletariat's historical complicity with the very capitalism it would supplant, then contemporary art's complicity with capitalism provides an even more tenuous set of criteria with which to distinguish affirmative technology from post-industrial catastrophe.

Between reconstruction and critical intervention, Feenberg is less concerned to develop a detailed philological account of Marcuse's relation to Heidegger than to insert his own account of technology as a critique of both Heidegger and Marcuse. He attempts to 'make explicit a remarkable theory of *techné* initiated by Heidegger, continued by Marcuse, and suppressed in the end by both'. The readings he offers are often provocative and engaging, but they provide a call to renew Marcuse's existential politics rather than a substantiated account of what is living and what is dead in Marcuse's legacy. The accounts of Heidegger are also illuminating. But anyone who can suggest of Heidegger's thought that, 'Never has such a succession of non sequiturs played such an important role in the history of philosophy!' is unlikely to convince Heideggerians to turn to Marcuse. While

Heideggerians have largely ignored the work of Critical Theorists such as Marcuse, it is nevertheless evident that the Frankfurt School were influenced by Heidegger, even if only negatively. Feenberg could make more of attempts from within phenomenology to develop Heidegger's account of technology, such as those of Derrida or Bernard Stiegler, voices absent from his account, though he does align his account with the work of Jacques Taminiaux. Feenberg's book needs to be read against the background of attempts to reconcile Marxist Critical Theory with existentialism, in the wake of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. It provides a timely reminder of resources through which to renew the dialogue between historical materialism and phenomenology. However unlikely as a compound, *Heidegger-Marxismus* needs to be rescued from the history of its antagonisms.

Drew Milne

## Pace and sweep

Eli Zaretsky, *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*, Knopf, New York, 2004. xv + 429 pp., £16.05 hb., 0 679 44654 0.

Psychoanalysis is long past its heroic stage, in which its brave inventor fought with dragons social (anti-Semitism), interpersonal (Jung and other schismatics) and psychological (resistance). It has long outlasted this inventor, although it lies still within his thrall. Freud has hovered over the psychoanalytic movement since its inception, dominating its curriculum and acting as touchstone of legitimacy (try getting a psychoanalytic paper published without quoting Freud – an unnerving requirement given that he is sixty-five years dead). Freud also dominates the histories of psychoanalysis, which have often been biographies with a bit attached: Freud was born, he thought, eventually he died; he had some followers and then there were a few others. Even the histories from elsewhere that are not about Freud, such as Elisabeth Roudinesco's wonderfully hilarious *Jacques Lacan & Co.: A History of Psychoanalysis in France* (Free Association Books, 1990), are really dressed-up biography (in Roudinesco's case, laced brilliantly with gossip and character assassination) however much they manage to evoke the culture or feel of their times. Given how psychoanalysis centres on the personal, on identification, this is probably a general design fault: what is history about, if not the lives, loves, envies and unfinished business of individuals?

In this transference-laden context, *Secrets of the Soul* manages something admirable and different. Even though Freud lives on until page 263, this book is not *about* him in the reductive way typical of psychoanalytic hagiographies or anti-psychoanalytic hatchet jobs. Instead, it is concerned with what is fashionably termed the conditions of emergence of psychoanalysis, with what made it possible for psychoanalysis to start and survive, and also with the ways in which it has participated in, and fed back into, its social environment from first to last. Identifying psychoanalysis as '*the first great theory and practice of "personal life"*', Zaretsky shows how in its early period it allowed a new articulation of social forces to be heard, linked inextricably to the needs and desires of the 'second industrial revolution'. This second industrial revolution, originating in the United States, created an all-embracing organizational form, it drew on science, education and mental labour and – most significantly for psychoanalysis – separated out the workaday and the meaningful, accentuating the value of leisure and of the 'singular personal life'. It was this that psychoanalysis spoke to throughout the Western world: personal life as a work of art, as something to be ushered in, worried over, shaped to fit cultural needs, made tolerable or mythological, made real. Personal life, that is, as important, as something that each of us can hold dear.

Through the cross-cutting influences of war, mass production and consumption (the complexities and ambiguities of Fordism's creation of the modern subject are exceptionally well described), gender politics, libertarianism and the postwar welfare state, psychoanalysis appears in this book as a major intellectual force promoting emancipation and yet dragging its conservative feet, returning again and again to individualistic conformism. In tune with the times and out of it, both marginal and central, psychoanalysis gave depth and significance to the otherwise lonely individual, but also made that individual ever more available to the ministrations of consumer culture. And now, in the twenty-first century, after modernism's relative security, in the shadow of neuroscience, biochemistry and evidence-based therapy, deconstructed and critiqued by feminism and anti-racism, its institutional base eroded and its intellectual credibility hived off into the humanities alone, does psychoanalysis still serve some purpose? Zaretsky leaves this question rather open, but with a pessimistic gloss:

Democracy entailed the capacity for self-reflection and self-criticism, not patriotic self-congratulation and partisan rapacity. The optimism that propelled

psychoanalysis during its early history – an optimism associated with the first mass economic surplus in human evolution – is no longer easily available.

A thinning out of contemporary consciousness, first identified by the Frankfurt School and then by liberal conservatives such as Philip Rieff and the theorists of narcissism, has left psychoanalysis with some diagnostic work to do, but with fewer adherents to live by its principles and values. Interestingly a recent upsurge of interest in melancholia and loss may be heralding a return to more depth of feeling – a point not really worked on by Zaretsky. But only time will tell if psychoanalysis will provide an adequate language in which this can be expressed.

*Secrets of the Soul* is a welcome history in many ways. Although it has quite a strong American bias and a tendency early on to establish its difference from other accounts of psychoanalysis by drawing too formulaically on its socio-political explanatory framework, over the long haul it is engaging, fair-minded, broad and accurate in its coverage of psychoanalytic movements around the world, and immensely interesting in its account of how psychoanalysis has interlaced with social movements. It has pace and a grand sweep, and, as well as being theoretically sophisticated, it demonstrates a particular kind of humanistic virtue that might itself be thought of as psychoanalytic. Avoiding reductive explorations of the unconscious conflicts of its protagonists, it nevertheless conveys something of psychoanalysis's insistence that self-reflection, thoughtfulness and a concern with personal 'depth' might be honourable values. This could be, in the end, the legacy of psychoanalysis, perhaps even a starting point for something new.

**Stephen Frosh**

## Speciesism

Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, eds, *Animal Philosophy: Ethics and Identity*, with a foreword by Peter Singer, Continuum, London and New York, 2004. xxiv + 220 pp., £55.00, hb., £16.99, pb., 0 8264 6413 0 hb., 0 8264 6414 9 pb.

This is a frustrating but interesting book. First, the frustrations. The publisher obviously felt that Peter Singer's name on the front cover would give the book added worth. However, all the foreword offers are ill-defined stereotypes of the so-called 'continental' tradi-

tion and its disregard for the animal question. Singer baldly states at the outset that the continental tradition has made no concrete contribution to the question of how humans treat animals, and that this is in part due to the inadequacies of its philosophical resources. This is a thinking he characterizes as consisting of 'vague rhetorical formulations that appear profound but do more to camouflage weaknesses in reasoning than hold them up to critical scrutiny'.

This beginning invites us to hold our noses and tentatively wade into the mire of muddled thinking. The frustrations continue as the editors frame the relation between a thinking of humanity and a thinking of animality in terms of something called the animal question. Thinking about humanity and animality, it seems, has to be done in terms of the ethics of consuming non-human animals, if it is to count as philosophically worthy. Hence their conclusion that 'continental philosophy has only rarely given serious attention to the animal question'. This gives the impression that the editorial task was to trawl through readings to unearth references to animality in the writings of various philosophers, and then to upbraid them for not thinking clearly (or correctly) about the animal question. It is hardly a tempting beginning.

These concerns spill over into the structure of the book. The relation between humanity and animality is a central theoretical concern of continental thought and is interwoven through many different texts, but this does not easily reduce to political statements on the 'animal question', as the editors would like. I am not sure what it means to term Nietzsche 'pro-animal', for example. The readings chosen tend to be very brief excerpts, and are often from different texts, compressed into as few as three pages. In the case of Nietzsche, the readings are taken from five different texts, but still add up to no more than three pages. There are similar problems with the readings taken from Bataille, Deleuze and Guattari, and Foucault. Any book of readings experiences the difficulty of selection and context, but one that claims an 'essential' collection and then neglects to even accurately source some of its readings (Foucault and Deleuze)...

Rather than a book of essential readings, this is actually a series of short excerpts, followed by longer secondary essays on the authors' works. Some of these essays are very interesting. Calarco's essay on 'Heidegger's zoontology' offers an exposition of the conflict between Heidegger's attempt to understand nonhuman animals through their own forms of relationality, and his denial of any form of full subjectivity to them. This thinking of the relation between humans

and animals as both a continuity and a discontinuity is a thematic concern of many of the readings, and offers a distinctive and fertile contribution to thinking the so-called animal question. However, many of the essays revert to a critique of any thinking of the human as distinct from nonhuman animals in favour of an evolutionary and biological continuity across species that does not question its own biological understanding of life. In an illuminating discussion of the usage of madness and animality in Foucault's work, for example, Clare Palmer relies on a concept of *living biological organisms* to subvert the division between reason and animality. Unfortunately, the subversion of the division in this way might do away with reason altogether.

Jill Marsden's essay on Bataille maps the division between human and nonhuman in terms of immanence and transcendence, and elucidates Bataille's ambivalence to both of these terms. Marsden acknowledges that any return to nature is not necessarily a return to something benevolent. In a similar vein, James Urpeth's essay on Deleuze and Guattari outlines the concept of 'becoming-animal' as something neither human nor animal, which cannot be reduced to a continuity of behaviours or capacities, but has to be understood in the light of a different ontology of life. These essays illuminate the fertility of a thinking about humanity and animality which does not reduce itself to a utilitarian calculation or a biological reductionism.

In the reading taken from an interview, Levinas states:

The widespread thesis that the ethical is biological amounts to saying that, ultimately, the human is only the last stage of the evolution of the animal. I would say, on the contrary, that in relation to the animal, the human is a new phenomenon.

For many of those writing in this book, this is a crass form of speciesism, although Levinas qualifies and complicates his statement by saying that he does not know when the human arises. The challenge for those who charge speciesism is that they reduce the ethical to the biological, which has its own particular problems and difficulties.

Rather than demonstrating the poverty or paucity of thinking about nonhuman animals within the continental tradition (as its bizarre Foreword suggests), this book highlights how such thought is interwoven among all forms of thinking about what it means to be human. The wide range of writers included (Hegel, Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer, Wittgenstein, Agamben, to name but a few in addition to those already cited), indicates both the range and depth of thought about

humanity and animality within a tradition derided at the beginning of this book.

**Alastair Morgan**

## A curious omission

David Renton, *Dissident Marxism: Past Voices for Present Times*, Zed Books, London and New York, 2004. viii + 277 pp. £50.00 hb., £16.95 pb., 1 84277 292 9 hb., 1 84277 293 7 pb.

The central proposition of *Dissident Marxism* is that the failure of revolutionary socialism and the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union led to the creation of a dissident current within Marxism based on a shared commitment to socialism-from-below and a willingness to 'criticize the conduct of the Soviet state'. David Renton believes that the experience of this current should inform and 'nourish' the contemporary anti-capitalist movement.

The book is organized around a series of vividly written biographical essays of activists and theorists whom the author identifies with this dissident tradition. These include a useful summary of the life of Guyana-born Walter Rodney; a fascinating introduction to Egyptian surrealist Georges Henein, author of the anti-nuclear tract *The Prestige of Terror* (1945); and an overview of the work of Egyptian Maoist Samir Amin, which sits uneasily with the rest of the book. The final chapter is devoted to the life of David Widgery, East End doctor, radical journalist and founder of Rock Against Racism.

Unfortunately the lives of four of the earliest and most colourful Russian dissidents – Alexandra Kollontai, of the Workers' Opposition; Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Bolshevik Commissar for Education; anarchist Bolshevik Victor Serge; and the Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky – are squeezed into a single 24-page chapter. Theorists, however, are allocated a whole chapter each, which results in the unintended impression that dissident Marxism is characterized by theoretical dissent, rather than by practical activism.

The first chapter describes the social processes that shaped the lives of the dissident Left, and sets out some of the issues they were forced to confront. These included the need to explain the degeneration of the Soviet Union, to understand the changes in the world economy, and to explain and confront fascism. Renton suggests that Trotskyism provided a natural early focus

for dissident Marxism, and describes how Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution provided a genuine alternative to the Stalinist policy of building 'socialism in one country'. Following Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet Union, his attempts to create a new party in opposition to Stalin were more successful in attracting intellectuals than members of the working class. Other traditions, the New Lefts of 1956 and 1968, Castroism and African socialism, are also seen as possessing the potential to create and sustain dissidence, even if only for a short time.

The work of historians Donna Torr and E.P. Thompson is discussed in the context of the New Left that emerged in the aftermath of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Torr was an influential figure within the talented circle of British Communist Party historians who pioneered a new approach to history in the late 1940s known as 'history from below'. Members included George Rudé, Eric Hobsbawm and Christopher Hill. Torr, who never really broke with Stalinism, became the mentor of E.P. Thompson, who advocated a 'socialist humanism' and was a tireless activist within the peace movement.

The different forms taken by dissident Marxism were often determined by the social and political conditions of the time. In periods of economic stability greater emphasis might be placed on developing theories explaining how capitalism had evolved and how it continued to maintain its ascendancy. It is in this context that the ideas of Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy and Harry Braverman are discussed. Baran and Sweezy published the eclectic *Monthly Review*, and explained how capitalism had developed into 'monopoly capital' in which the state played a key role in integrating and organizing capital through the means of armaments spending. The new form taken by capitalism meant that socialists could not rely upon economic collapse to create revolutionary conditions, but should instead follow the example of the Cuban Revolution, which had effectively been a matter of will.

The writings of Samir Amin on the inequalities underpinning the international economy, and the consequent underdevelopment of 'peripheral' states, are discussed. Amin's analysis has a seductive explanatory power, but it is doubtful if his Maoist prescriptions based on the need for Third World countries to emulate Chinese socialism will do any more than tie them into a more aggressive form of state capitalism.

The book's self-limiting focus on anti-Stalinism as one of the defining characteristics of dissident Marxism (with the implication that the Soviet Union only failed after the death of Lenin) excludes consid-

eration of revolutionary Marxists such as Rosa Luxemburg, who challenged the Bolshevik model before the revolution and its repressive behaviour afterwards. Luxemburg's inclusion would have strengthened the argument in favour of a dissident tradition. Renton's reluctance to criticize Lenin also accounts for an otherwise curious omission – Sylvia Pankhurst, who provoked Lenin into writing *Left-wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.

The book also has little to say about the suppression of dissident left-wing movements in the earliest years of the Soviet state: the Left Social Revolutionaries, the Workers' Opposition, the anarchist-communists and anarcho-syndicalists in the cities, and the peasant anarchist movement in the Ukraine. The Kronstadt rebellion, which was an attempt to renew the revolution from below, was met not with concessions as is implied here, but with bullets. The suppression of the Kronstadt Commune revealed a dilemma at the heart of Marxism itself. The very act of seizing state power transformed Marxism from a revolutionary theory into an ideology justifying state power and the rule of a bureaucratic elite in the name of the working class. Anarchists have understood this, although a theoretical understanding was not enough to stop them from making common cause with the Bolsheviks in 1917, and with the Spanish Communists in 1936, in both cases to their ultimate cost.

In fact, there is an unexplored tension between anarchism and Marxism in several of the profiles presented here. Victor Serge never broke completely with anarchism, while Korsch and Henein both looked to anarchism as a way of retaining a revolutionary edge to their Marxism. There was indeed a 'dissident' Marxist tradition that incorporated activists and writers who attempted to combine anarchism and Marxism, such as Walter Benjamin, Eric Muhsam and Daniel Guerin. Their libertarian socialism and counter-cultural politics prefigured many of the concerns of today's anti-capitalist movement.

This book is welcome for assembling evidence that not everyone on the Left closed their eyes to Stalinism, and for the enthusiastic way in which the lives and ideas of the selected dissidents are presented. It also provides an unspoken reminder that the new anti-capitalist movement has to resolve its attitude to the state. Can institutions created for the purpose of repression and used for mediating and managing the various forms of capitalism be transformed into the means of human liberation? Or should we remain dissidents?

**Martyn Everett**

# Counter-traditionalist

Susan Sontag, 1933–2004

In the prefatory note to her first collection of critical writings, *Against Interpretation* (1966), Susan Sontag reflected that ‘in the end, what I have been writing is not criticism at all, strictly speaking, but case studies for an aesthetic, a theory of my own sensibility’. The statement holds true for all her work, as does the seriousness with which it is issued. For all the diversity of topics and shifting positions in Sontag’s writings over forty years, there remained a constant, centring, perception of writing as a project of self-discovery and self-invention. This is an intellectual project she frequently identified, and identified with, in the work on others, perhaps most notably Roland Barthes, about whom she wrote on several occasions.

In her 1966 introduction to the American edition of Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero*, Sontag asserts: ‘Only if the ideal of criticism is enlarged to take in a wide variety of discourse, both theoretical and descriptive, about culture, language and contemporary consciousness, can Barthes plausibly be called a critic.’ Fifteen years later, in her introduction to a collection of Barthes’s writings, she expanded on her appreciation of his ‘multiple identifications’ to argue that his work

consists of continuities and detours; the accumulation of points of view; finally, their disburdenment: a mixture of progress and caprice.... The writer’s freedom that Barthes describes is, in part, flight. The writer is the deputy of his own ego – of that self in perpetual flight from what is fixed by writing, as the mind is in perpetual flight from doctrine.

Sontag’s writing is similarly self-cancelling, most obviously in the essays where she writes an antithetical criticism, though all of her writings take up this stance and taken together make up a complex intellectual autobiography. This self-cultivation, very much a mixture of ‘progress and caprice’, presumes a privileged modernist birthright and an expansive conception of the critical and cultural work of the intellectual.

If there is an intellectual role Sontag self-consciously performed in her very public career it was that of the generalist or ‘writer-intellectual’. Her free-ranging studies of thought and culture covered such subjects as happenings, camp, science-fiction films, pornographic literature, photography, fascist aesthetics, cancer, AIDS, opera, dance, translation – to pick only the better-known examples – and she was fond of saying she was ‘interested in everything – and nothing else’. Explicitly endorsing the generalist model, Sontag acknowledged both American and European influences, though the European tended greatly to outweigh the American. (‘There is a terrible, mean American resentment toward a writer who tries to do many things’, she once grumbled.) Sontag’s notion of generalism was at one with an insistence upon autonomy, and she idealized the conception of the intellectual as a free-floating commentator on the general culture, unaffiliated to specific interest groups or institutions. Sontag could sound pious about this idea of the intellectual and her own relation to it, but few if any Americans sought to live it as a vocation in the way she did, to the point of iconic caricature as ‘The Last Intellectual’. The high-minded idealism of her dissenting approach is evident not only in her cultural criticism but also in her political activities. In her controversial visits to Vietnam, Cuba and Bosnia, as in her prominent involvement

in international organizations such as PEN – responding to issues of human rights, censorship and freedom of expression – she championed the role of the writer-intellectual as a critical conscience of a larger populace. Sontag's modes of intellectual address and appeal presumed the existence of a broad, educated audience responsive to a rationalizing critical voice – a presumption that proved difficult to sustain as America's political and cultural publics fragmented during her career.

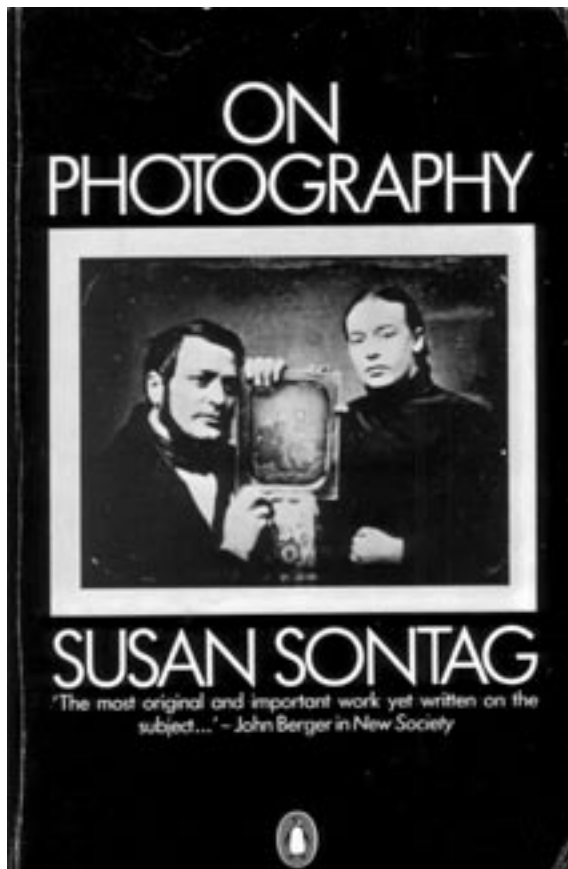
Sontag's assumptions about the transcendent imperatives of intellect register her identification with ideas and ideals of high European modernism. Her great themes of melancholic self-reflection, self-ennervation and intellectual exile owe much to her admiration of individual modernists: the fiction of Kafka, Beckett and Sarraute, the cinema of Godard, Bergman and Syberberg, the theatre of Artaud, and the intellectual projects of Benjamin, Cioran, Canetti and Barthes. Sontag frequently invoked such cultural heroes as an imaginative community of intellect and exemplars of a fractured counter-tradition of modernist thought. Her interest in ambitious artistic and intellectual projects reflects in part her fascination with the idea of consciousness *in extremis*. In her formally severe early fictions she explored degenerated or exalted states of consciousness; her characters are often involved in acts of 'mental disembowelment'.

In many essays she is drawn to the phenomenology of style or temperament in the writers she admires. The 'mind as passion' and the body in pain are central motifs. Her last published book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, considers how images of war and violence mediate our responses to human suffering. Reading Sontag, certain modernist terms of value recur: the negative, the transcendent, the transgressive, the authentic, the difficult, the silent. The urge to negate shapes the style as well as the content; she favours disjunctive forms of argument; aphoristic and epigrammatic modes of critical expression are widely applied. Throughout her career she was both a searching critic and mournful elegist of 'the decline of the new'. Her writings explore moral and political consequences of the breakup of modernist culture, searching out its meanings in the most general subjects – such as photography and illness – as well as in specific artistic and intellectual practices.

Although most of Sontag's heroes are European, she should nonetheless be understood as an American intellectual in the sense that she developed her public role within the specific intellectual culture of New York in the second half of the twentieth century. Sontag tells of a childhood dream of writing for *Partisan Review* and was already intimate with the writing habits and arguments of writers grouped around this seminal magazine by the time she arrived in New York in 1959. In the middle of the twentieth century, New York intellectual culture was receptive to generalists – Edmund Wilson, Paul Goodman and Harold Rosenberg were prominent examples. Most wrote for the moment and showed a stylistic preference for the essay form. They had a strong sense of European cultural models (partly due to the Jewish inheritance many shared), which nourished their cosmopolitan sense of culture. And though they did not produce distinct theoretical or methodological legacies, they revolutionized the concept and practice of cultural criticism in ways still not generally recognized. They promoted the *activity* of critical inquiry as an ideal of contention and interventionism, seeking an immediate relation to public issues. Sontag's early intellectual formation and activity were deeply influenced by critical and ideological tenets of the postwar generation of New York intellectuals. However, her writings also existed in tension with them, and many came to see her as a symbol of the group's 'decline' since the 1960s (see Irving Howe, 'The New York Intellectuals', in his *Decline of the New*, Gollancz, London, 1971).

In the period after World War II, the New Yorkers sought to come to terms with an American modernity that was fast outpacing their efforts to interpret it. Rejecting the Balkanization of 'high' and 'mass' culture common to New York intellectual debates,

Sontag promoted a new artistic pluralism and eclecticism that reflected a 'new sensibility' of cultural production and critical taste emerging in early 1960s' America. Sontag's efforts to map her own intellectual influences and tastes would provide a partial yet influential guide to the breakup of the liberal cultural consensus that held sway in the New York intellectual world. 'Notes on Camp' (1964) became a famed example of this process, as it celebrated an 'aesthetic sensibility' that offered an ironic and fugitive approach to the 'culturally over-saturated' experience of American modernity. Like so much of her early writing, it promoted a new critical consciousness of the long-established dialectical relationship between modernism and mass culture. Sontag's essays had a major intellectual and cultural impact in the mid-1960s. It owed much to the transgressive charge of her writings as they worked across conventionalized boundaries tacitly separating literary and visual cultures, moral and aesthetic ideas, and intellectual and bodily pleasures. Reviewers were quick to identify her as an intellectual 'swinger', a barometer of all that was radically chic in New York intellectual culture, 'a representative advanced consciousness'. And with her image adorning leading magazines she was widely depicted as the very face of the Zeitgeist. Writing in *Partisan Review* in 1969, its editor William Phillips referred to Sontag as 'a premature legend' and noted that 'the standard picture is that of the up-to-date radical, a stand-in for everything advanced, extreme and outrageous'. This picture framed Sontag for many years to come.



Closer (and later) reading of Sontag's early writings show her to be much more ambivalent about the new sensibility arts than critics were prepared to note. The 'theory of [her] own sensibility' that she was scripting through the act of cultural criticism was certainly more nuanced than the popular image Phillips refers to. Though championing strands of iconoclastic modernism in these writings, Sontag was also ambivalent about acting as an advocate or exponent of the new. On the camp sensibility, for example, she was equivocal, referring to 'a deep sympathy modified by revulsion'. This is also to say she was already wary about promoting an aesthetic sensibility at the expense of moral and social claims. In the later 1960s and 1970s she became more reflective and less exhortatory about the endgames of modernist culture; she interrogated the assumptions underlying the progressive avant-gardist movement towards 'the most excruciating inflections of consciousness' and became more and more sceptical, even alarmed, about ideas of social change drawing on aesthetic principles of negation, transcendence or transgression.

By the mid-1970s she was wary of 'over-generalizing the aesthetic view of the world' and deliberately distanced herself from what she saw as the commercial incorporation of modernist energies. This wariness is most evident in her writings on photography in this period. When she claims that the aestheticism of 'photographic seeing' is a generalized form of a once elitist taste, she is reviewing her treatment of camp, lamenting that 'we now make a history out of our detritus', not just an art. Sontag's repeated emphasis on the atomized, dissociated experience of photographic seeing as fully habituated to the logic of late capitalism articulates her sense that the image world threatens the very conditions for critical thought. *On Photography* is a brilliant, diagnostic meditation on

aesthetic, moral and political implications of photographic seeing; it is also an uneasy, personal act of intellectual negation.

In the 1970s and 1980s Sontag resisted the claims of a radically new 'postmodern' culture in favour of examining what remained of the modernist tradition – of its asceticism and powers of negation – at a time when it had been 'stripped ... of its claims as an adversary sensibility'. One consequence of this is that the elegiac note is strengthened, brought to the fore, lending her perspective on modernist ambitions an undercurrent of pathos and intensifying her sense of writing at 'a late moment in culture'. A strong sense of an ending courses through all of her work, at times veering towards the apocalyptic, at others toward the melancholic. In a 1967 essay on E.M. Cioran she had written of her 'sense of standing in the ruins of thought and on the verge of the ruins of history and of man himself.... More and more, the shrewdest thinkers and artists are precocious archeologists of these ruins-in-the-making.' The apocalyptic note sounded here tends to give way in her writings of the 1970s and 1980s to melancholy reflectiveness, and these 'ruins' take on a fuller allegorical significance. Sontag's fascination with the 'melancholic temperament' connects the portraits of artists and thinkers – Goodman, Artaud, Benjamin, Syberberg and Barthes – gathered in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (1980). She was both mourner and custodian of these ambitions, and dismissive of the 'facile eclecticism of contemporary taste' – what she identifies in *On Photography* as the false intellectual economy and indiscriminate pluralism of a consumerized modernism.

Sontag's writings on photography (and on illness) in the 1970s registered an uncertainty about the parameters and functions of a public liberal culture. As this concern became more acute in the 1980s, her strong sense of her writings as a 'project', a self-absorbing cultural criticism, seemed to stall during a period when she had to reassess the relationship between her writing, her culture and her audience. Throughout the 1980s she sought a wider distribution of her energies away from essay writing, with the signal exception of *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989). In the views of some commentators, Sontag began moving towards the political right in this period, but this is a misreading of her intellectual trajectory; in some part it was the very continuity of her cultural and political perspectives that caused her to attract the conservative label. If perceptions of her conservatism were overstated, this owed something to the major repatterning of intellectual politics in the USA in the 1980s. What Sontag found slipping away from her in the 1980s was any strong sense of an intellectual community, and issues of intellectual legitimation and direction hover around her work in this period. When she ventured towards the front lines of contemporary cultural politics in the United States – most notably with her essays on AIDS – her self-projection as a public intellectual addressing a general culture met with considerable criticism. With AIDS she had a subject about which she felt strongly and which called on her modernist outlook as a defining issue, a locus of multiple cultural, social and political resentments and anxieties. In 1986 she approached the subject in the form of a short story, 'The Way We Live Now', published in *The New Yorker*, giving powerful and poignant expression to 'the universe of fear in which everyone now lives'. In 1989 she published *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, which advanced the analytical and diagnostic reasoning of *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) to the study of discourses surrounding AIDS. Once again she sought to 'de-mythicize' disease in a strenuous moral effort to expose and resist the metaphorization of illness as judgement, and once again her approach is characteristically rationalist – an austere, dispassionate meditation – claiming she hoped to 'calm the imagination'. The tone and perspective annoyed many reviewers, though, who charged that she was too detached from her subject and wilfully ignorant of the cultural politics of AIDS activism.

One arena Sontag found suited to renewing her sense of intellectual vocation was the international forums dealing with issues of human rights and freedom of expression. International writers' gatherings were not new, but in the 1980s they blossomed as never before and Sontag became a familiar participant. A founder member of PEN American Center, she became its president in 1986, and was a strong advocate of the idea that the act of writing is a political (even a life-and-death) matter. Such a view was very much in accord with her long-held beliefs in the writer as a vanguardist voice of dissent and conscience. Sontag's commitments to the international writers' community and the politics of conscience kept alive the ideas of autonomy and responsibility she associated with public thinking. Throughout the 1990s and into the new century she seemed especially energized by issues of conflict and conscience and lent passionate support to several causes. Most famously, she publicly questioned the Clinton administration's handling of the crisis in the former Yugoslavia and spent several months in Sarajevo when the city was under siege. Whilst there she directed a local production of *Waiting for Godot*. There was much mockery of her actions among American commentators, but also considerable admiration and support. The mayor of Sarajevo has announced that the city will name a street after Sontag.

With her interest in the essay form diminished, Sontag turned her energies to fiction in the 1990s, saying she longed to explore the pleasures of narrative. Two early novels, *The Benefactor* (1963) and *Death Kit* (1967) had received mixed reviews and were overshadowed by the essays. Although she continued to write short stories it was not until 1992 that her third novel, *The Volcano Lover*, was published, followed in 2000 by *In America*. At first sight these novels appear surprising departures from anything she had written. *The Volcano Lover* is a historical romance: its subject is the infamous love triangle between Sir William Hamilton, Emma Hamilton and Horatio Nelson; and its central setting is late-eighteenth-century Naples. *In America* is also a historical romance, telling the tale of a Polish actress who emigrates to the United States in the 1870s, travels to California to join a commune, changes her identity and becomes a celebrated stage actress. With both novels Sontag seems to have been genuinely enthralled by the worlds of the narratives and keen to engage the reader in the passions she describes, but these are also metafictional in their self-conscious treatment of the genre and references to contemporary as well as historical issues. They are freighted with ideas, filled with mini-essays on the making of European and American modernities. They almost become compendiums of Sontag's intellectual interests. With *The Volcano Lover*, for example, she explores the historical roots of the 'aesthetic sensibility' she has long been both fascinated and appalled by, and in the figure of Hamilton critically portrays a destructive imperialism masquerading as melancholic connoisseurship. While Sontag wants us to believe in her novels as historical melodramas, they also function as dramaturgies of ideas and, more obliquely, as allegorizations of conflicts in her self-identification as a modernist intellectual.

*The Volcano Lover* and *In America* were generally well received, with the latter winning the National Book Award in 2000. She was working on another novel when she died. There is little immediate doubt, though, that she will be best remembered for her essays and for her passionate performance of the role of the public intellectual. The passion was certainly not diminished in her final years. In the aftermath of 9/11 she was subject to a media backlash and received death threats when she described the terrorist attacks as a 'consequence' of American actions and decried the 'unanimity of the sanctimonious, reality-concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators' (*The New Yorker*, 24 September 2001). And yet there remains some doubt about how she will be 'positioned' in cultural histories of late-twentieth-century America.

**Liam Kennedy**

# OBITUARY

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## Editor of the JBSP

### Wolfe Mays, 1912–2005

**W**olfe Mays had not one but two distinguished academic careers, bringing new meaning to the phrase ‘University of the Third Age’. His first degree was from Oxford, his doctorate from Cambridge, and he then served first as lecturer and finally as reader at the University of Manchester, from which he retired in 1979. He published books on Alfred North Whitehead, principally *The Philosophy of Whitehead*, for the Muirhead Library of Philosophy (George Allen & Unwin, 1959). He worked with Jean Piaget and translated his *Principles of Genetic Epistemology* (Basic Books, 1972). An extract on ‘The Teaching of Philosophy’, an article he wrote in 1965, is even now to be found on the website of *ltsn* (Learning and Teaching Support Network, Leeds). On his retirement, he became a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, at what was then Manchester Polytechnic. Ten years previously, he had been instrumental in launching the British Society for Phenomenology, setting up the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*. The first issue appeared in January 1970, with the title ‘Husserl and Phenomenology Today’, and contained among other items an account by Herbert Spiegelberg of Husserl’s London Lectures, held at University College, Gower Street, in June 1922. He edited the journal with distinction up until his death.

His second career was thus launched with his arrival at Manchester Polytechnic and the foundation, with David Melling (1944–2004), of the Human Sciences Seminar, at which he was this term to have presented a paper in memory of his co-founder, who had pre-deceased him. He provided incalculable support and encouragement to the emergent Philosophy Section at the now Manchester Metropolitan University, graciously sharing his office with a Research Fellow from 1994 to 2001. He played a critical role in the support of doctoral supervision, advice on the fulfilment of research degree committee requirements, and on due process in promotions procedures. He took part in all our symposia and day schools, presenting a paper on Husserl’s Fourth Investigation at the 2001 conference of the Society for European Philosophy, which was subsequently revised and printed in the *Journal*. In 1997, he moved from the Institute for Advanced Study, located in the All Saints Building, over to an office in the new Manton Building, as a result of which we had more regular contact with his distinctive style of philosophical discussion, as incisive as it was sometimes vitriolic.

In recent years his mobility had begun to decline, and he ceased to join in the post-seminar entertainment over beer and a curry, but there were a host of willing drivers to take him home, enjoying his company and relishing his observations. He attended a last executive meeting of the British Society for Phenomenology on 14 January, a week before he died, at which he announced his plans for the *Journal* for the coming two years. We shall miss him, and propose to secure the continuing publication of the *Journal* in a style of which we hope he might approve.



Joanna Hodge

# Crevices and footholds

Schrift, Bilder, Denken: Walter Benjamin und die Künste, Haus Am Waldsee, Berlin, October 2004–January 2005

**N**ow that the cultural pulse of Berlin throbs in the shabby area around Mitte, at the newly restored core of a reunited Berlin, an art outing to prim and posh Zehlendorf on the south-eastern edge of the city feels like a quest into some exotic and impenetrable zone, even if its strangeness resides in an un-Berlinerish well-heeled banality. The long-haul feeling is intensified when the destination address is Argentinische Allee and the tube station Krumme Lanke is one stop beyond Onkel Toms Hütte. This same geographically confusing sense of things struck Susanne Ahner as she walked between the tube station on Argentinische Allee and the S-Bahn on Mexikoplatz in the months before the exhibition. Ahner sought further traces of the wider world secreted in the nearby streets and managed to find – and photograph – places and scenes that relate to the many towns and streets in which Benjamin spent his forty-six years, from San Remo to Svendborg, Riga to Naples. Her photographs grace little tablets of high quality bitter chocolate, and, available at the museum's café for 50c, they become collectables, reminding us doubly of Benjamin's drive to collect and his fascination with the postcard and photograph.

The collector (and consumer) impulse was present in another exhibit, though, with prices starting at €100, at more inflated prices. Volker März has fashioned countless little Benjamin figurines (a few are visible at [www.maerzwerke.de](http://www.maerzwerke.de)). The work is called *Aura Transfer* and each little clay statue comes with a knowing caption or title. We see Benjamin with prostitutes, Benjamin dreaming, Benjamin and Jews, a Benjamin with holes, through which water streams, who pleads with Adorno for help (Adorno says No). There were also, of course, angels, and angels were elsewhere in this exhibition that found narrow and broad links between Walter Benjamin and art. Klee's *Angelus Novus* (in reproduction only) was there, of course, among the fifty-six artworks, in a room of attempts at 'The Angel of History'. Here, too, works by Christian Boltanski (*Monument*, 1984) and Anselm Kiefer (*The Angel of History: Poppy and Memory*, 1989) could be found. Whether the links to Benjamin were deliberate or accidental was not always clear. Elsewhere they were clearer – Valerio Adami's lithograph *Ritratto di Walter Benjamin*, 1973, once discussed by Derrida, and Aura Rosenberg's digitally manipulated photographs were certainly direct responses to Benjaminian themes, as Benjamin faltered

on a border or as angels hurtled across the horizon and rubbish piled up skywards.

Another room focused on more direct impressions of the man. It contained drawings and photographs of Benjamin: from a contemporary caricature to his passport photo that ended up in the Port Bou death records, to the famous mugshots, one or other of which grace every book of Benjaminology, to Gisèle Freund's series staged for an illustrated magazine in



1937, in which Benjamin poses as what he already was, a reader at the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale. This photo-reportage is updated in Candida Höfer's 1998 photograph of the same library, now superseded by a new development in the east of the city. GDR artist Werner Mahler's gloomy photographs of Port Bou in 1989, the Spanish border town where Benjamin took his life, were part of a project on lines of flight. Dani Karavan's sketches for his Port Bou memorial reinforced the theme of the afterlife of a legend. Lutz Dammbeck produced an afterlife in his fiction about Benjamin's arrival in the USA, where he works on 'The Authoritarian Personality' project and then takes part in Timothy Leary's drug experiments and works on the first computers, dying a forgotten man in an old people's home in Ann Arbor.

The theme of technological reproducibility (and the concomitant issue of aura) inevitably took its place too, in overfamiliar form in the case of Duchamp's suitcase of his best-known works, *Boite en valise*, 1963. A more general reference to 'the technological era' was suggested in Arman's *Accumulation Téléphones* (1962), a box crammed with now cracked and stained old telephone parts. As if the proposals of these works on questions of reproduction and collecting were faulty, there was the contradiction in the form of Timm Ulrichs's 1967 negation of the thesis of the 'Artwork' essay. He photocopied the front cover of the Suhrkamp book edition multiple times to show that eventually the degradation of each copy results in illegibility, or perhaps something after legibility, being the beautiful tonal variations of an aura reluctant to abolish itself. An exhibit of Joseph Beuys materials related tangentially to the reproduction theme. A number of Beuys artefacts – all of which had appeared in mass-reproduced form, such as *Stern* magazine covers, posters, T-shirts, newspaper obituary articles – had been collated by the Galerie Kryptische Konzepte and auctioned on eBay for €2,500. Re-created on the walls was a sample of what had been on offer.



The rooms were arranged according to the themes 'Personality and the Formation of a Legend', 'Appropriation of History: Memory and Presence of Mind', 'Art-Experience: Aura and Media', 'Remembering: Childhood and Collecting', and 'Arcades: Architecture and Threshold Experiences'. The purpose of the exhibition was to show the links between Benjamin's thought and artistic practice, whether through biographical traces, the selection of Benjaminian motives, or the considered and critical incorporation of his structures of thought into artistic form. Apart perhaps from Nietzsche, subject of an exhibition at the same venue four years ago, Benjamin has left the most artistic traces. His work, especially the work on mass reproduction and aura, has filtered into art practice – what art college over the last thirty years has not put his writing on the requisite reading list? The poetic and fragmentary nature of Benjamin's thought leaves many crevices and footholds for artists. The allusive mode of address in parts of his work encourages thematic rummaging, even, for example, for an architect such as Daniel Libeskind, whose sketches for the Berlin Jewish Museum are represented here.

Benjamin's interest in the image – that which is reproduced as well as the image in relation to thought, the *Denkbild* that he fashioned – plays its role here. It is in relation to this last theme that the most difficult questions of the exhibition arise, for this is where the three terms of the title gain significance. What is the relationship between writing, image and thought? Benjamin hoped to collapse all three onto each other – that was the meaning of the *Denkbilder*. Can art achieve this, and in the same manner? More usual is the illustration of pre- or semi-digested philosophical ideas. The thought is not operative in and from the material itself. At best, here in this exhibit, Benjamin's theses were borne out by the material's transformation of itself into art, rather than by any sense of art being equal to or ahead of the concept.

**Esther Leslie**

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