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COMMENTARY

Shack Dwellers on the Move in Durban

Richard Pithouse 2

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness:
Reading Lolita in Tehran in Connecticut

Simon Hay..... 7

ARTICLES

An Immanent Transcendental: Foucault, Kant and Critical Philosophy

Keith Robinson 12

Petrified Life: Adorno and Agamben

Alastair Morgan..... 23

DOSSIER *documenta 12 magazines project*

What is to be Done? (Education)

Introduction 33

Answering the Question: What is to be Done? (Education)

David Cunningham..... 34

An Aesthetic Education against Aesthetic Education

Stewart Martin 39

Doing Something and Doing Nothing

Esther Leslie 43

REVIEWS

Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*

Ken Hirschkop..... 47

Tony Smith, *Globalisation: A Systematic Marxian Account*

Joseph McCarney 50

Boris Groys and Michael Hagemeister, eds, *Die Neue Menschheit: Biopolitische Utopien in Russland zu Beginn des 20 Jahrhunderts*

Boris Groys and Aage Hansen-Löve, eds, *Am Nullpunkt: Positionen der russischen Avantgarde*

Boris Groys, Anne von der Heiden and Peter Weibel, eds, *Zurück aus der Zukunft: Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter des Postcommunismus*
Boris Groys, *Das kommunistische Postskriptum*

Kerstin Stakemeier 53

Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*

Michelle Speidel 55

Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*

David Macey..... 57

Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*

Howard Feather 59

Shack dwellers on the move in Durban

Richard Pithouse

Shack settlements began to be constructed in the South African port city of Durban following the loss of land and the imposition of various taxes after the destruction of the Zulu kingdom by English colonialism in 1883 and the simultaneous movement into the city of Indian workers who had completed their indenture on sugar plantations. Colonial authorities soon tried to act against the settlements but they were defended by a series of rebellions. For a while Umkumbane, the largest settlement, flourished and its urban cosmopolitanism produced all kinds of social innovations, including its famous gay community, where institutionalized homosexual marriage was pioneered in South Africa. But in March 1958, with the population of Umkumbane at 120,000, and the apartheid state achieving its full power, the Durban City Council, working within a colonial academic and policy consensus with a global reach, began a 'slum clearance' project that forcibly removed shack dwellers to racially segregated modern townships on the periphery of the city.

Forced removals were militantly opposed, primarily on the grounds that transport costs from the new townships to work were unaffordable. In 1959 demonstrations stopped the evictions three times. There were moments when the resistances were clearly organized and articulated as a women's project. As the conflict escalated lives were lost. In January 1960, 6,000 people marched into the city. Protest in and around the settlement had been tolerated to a degree but when shack dwellers went into the city that toleration was withdrawn. The army was brought in and resistance crushed. The mass evictions were largely completed by August 1965 and are remembered as a great crime of apartheid.

Yet by the early 1980s the apartheid state, occupying Namibia, at war with the Cubans and the MPLA in Angola and battling insurrectionary township rebellions across the county, lost the capacity completely to regulate the movement of Africans. People were able to flood into the city, seize land, and found communities autonomous from the state. This movement into the city was greeted with tremendous racialized panic in white and Indian suburbs but was celebrated by the ANC underground and in exile.

There was a bitter stand-off. But by the late 1980s the World Bank-backed elite consensus was that shack settlements, now called 'informal settlements' rather than 'squatter camps', were opportunities for self-help via popular entrepreneurship, rather than a threat to white modernity, state and capital. NGOs embedded in imperial power structures were deployed to teach the poor that they could only hope to help themselves via small businesses while the rich got on with big business in gated office parks.

With the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 settlement committees were expected to affiliate themselves to the ANC-aligned South African National Civics Organization (SANCO). After the ANC took state power, SANCO was tied to the state via a system

in which each SANCO settlement committee got one seat on the Branch Executive Committee of the local ANC branch, which was chaired by the local councillor. This was supposed to facilitate the bottom-up expression of popular views. In the beginning it seemed to work. Throughout the 1990s the ANC promised that, as their first priority, they would 'together with our people address the concerns of the poorest of the poor living in squatter camps like Kennedy Road, Lusaka and Mbambayi' (*ANC KwaZulu-Natal Victory Statement*, Durban 1999). Their power, including their power to demobilize popular militancy and to speak for its traditions, was justified first and foremost in the name of the poorest – people in 'squatter camps' like Kennedy Road.

Things began to change in 2001 when Durban was selected as a pilot for the United Nations Habitat 'Cities without Slums' project. This was initially celebrated as the beginning of the redemption of the ANC's promises. But now that shack settlements were slums to be cleared, rather than informal settlements to be developed, the provision of electricity and other services to settlements was immediately halted. It slowly became clear that the slum-clearance project plans to subject the minority of shack dwellers to forced removals to badly constructed shack-size homes in new townships on the rural periphery of the city. The majority are being cast as criminal, dirty and carriers of disease and will simply have their homes destroyed. The city has promised to 'clear the slums' in time for the 2010 football World Cup and the settlements are being destroyed in an order determined by the degree to which they are visible from the bourgeois world. Relocation to the rural periphery of the city moves people away from work, schools, health care and everything else that the city has to offer and is invariably catastrophic. This return to the brutal logic of apartheid is masked by a technocratic rationality which declares itself the vehicle that will 'deliver' to the poor. Because 'delivery' is relentlessly presented as a technocratic rather than a political project, opposition can easily be presented as criminal or anti-national in elite publics.

As all of this has become clear, the ANC party structure, reaching down into the intimacy of daily life, has been used to contain dissent. This has often taken the form of outright and at times armed intimidation. But in 2005 the police registered just under 6,000 illegal protests across the country, most of them issuing from shack settlements. Both the ANC elite and the left intellectuals who work on policies for the poor – rather than in the politics of the poor – share the view that the poor are demanding a more effective technocratic 'delivery' and refer to this upsurge in popular militancy as 'service delivery protests'. Speaking *to* the poor rather than *for* the poor would quickly disabuse them of this assumption.

The meeting is the engine

In Durban the first major break with party control of the settlements happened on 19 March 2005. The previous day bulldozers had started digging up a piece of land adjacent to the Kennedy Road settlement which had long been promised for housing. People had discovered from the workers on the site that this wasn't the beginning of the long-promised housing development but that a brick factory was being built. They gathered on the promised land, stopped the construction and asked the local councillor to come and explain what was happening. He arrived with the police and demanded the arrest of his constituents. They are, he said, criminal. That night there was a mass meeting in the settlement. The SANCO committee came under serious pressure and after long and careful discussion a new course of action was decided on. Early the next morning a few hundred people barricaded a nearby six-lane road with burning tyres and held it against the riot police for four hours, suffering fourteen arrests. With this spectacular act the settlement announced its independence from party control.

On the Monday after the road blockade, an illegal march on the police station where those arrested had been held was dispersed with more beatings, dogs and tear

gas. At a packed meeting that afternoon back at the settlement, there were none of the empty slogans, pompous speeches or ritualized invocations of the authority of leaders that characterize national liberation movements in, or close to, power; just short and intensely debated practical suggestions. The people of Kennedy Road had entered the tunnel of the discovery of their betrayal and discovered their capacity for open resistance. There was, in that moment, an overwhelming sense of profound collective isolation from the structures and pieties of constituted power. It was feared they would pay a high price for their exile from subordination to external authority. But they undertook this exile, and sustained it, as it steadily showed itself to require hiding in the bushes, beatings, arrests, anxious families, circling helicopters, nightmares and, for some, death threats.

The first two illegal protests from Kennedy Road were followed by a series of legal marches on the nearby local councillors, by up to 5,000 people. The state was not impressed and went so far as to have the army occupy Kennedy Road in a spectacular display of power. But the marches continued and included people from more and more settlements. In each of these marches the protesters carried a mock coffin and then staged a performance of a funeral for the councillor outside his office. They were burying not just the councillors as deficient instances of councillorhood but the whole idea of top-down party control. Kennedy Road had had to break with SANCO when they accepted political exile. But now other settlements began to vote out SANCO committees, seen as accountable to the local councillors, and to elect autonomous committees, seen as accountable to the people in the settlements. In some settlements this resulted in serious and often armed intimidation from members and associates of former SANCO committees. But on 6 October 2005 seventeen men and fifteen women, elected as representatives from twelve settlements that now had autonomous committees, met to constitute themselves formally into a movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo (people who stay in shacks), committed to fighting for popular democracy, land and housing in the city. A year later, thirty-four settlements are affiliated to the movement. In this time the Abahlali have democratized the governance of settlements, stopped evictions, won access to local schools, won some concessions around services like water, toilets and refuse removal; won sustained access by men and women to voice in elite publics; set up crèches, a sewing co-operative and vegetable gardens; enabled collective bargaining with the state and capital and forced the city's slum clearance project into a serious and popular legitimation crisis.





From the beginning the meeting was the engine of struggle for the Abahlali. Music, dance, ecumenical memorials for people who have died in the relentless shack fires, just hanging out, and now a sixteen-team football league, all work to sustain courage and weave solidarity. But the meeting, which is open to all, is where the intellectual work is done. The discussion at Abahlali meetings is not a performance of inclusion to legitimate an outcome determined elsewhere. Elected leaders and individuals with various forms of relative privilege are routinely subject to positions they did not arrive with. When the meeting produces a result, everyone is committed to it. This is due to deeply held ethical commitments; but it is also through necessity. There is no other way to build and sustain popular consent for a risky political project among

a hugely diverse group of vulnerable people with profound experiences of marginalization and exploitation in multiple spheres of life, including political projects waged in their name. There is no patronage to dispense. If democracy becomes a performance, rather than a reality, the collective movement out of the places to which shack dwellers are formally restricted will stop. Everyone knows this.

A new red shirt

At the beginning of 2006, the elections for ward councillors were looming. It was decided to stage a collective boycott. The boycott was carefully discussed in a series of meetings, which concluded that the difference between 'party politics' and 'people's politics' is that the former, as a mechanism of elite control, will always seek to capture the latter, as a space for popular democracy. The commitment to people's politics was not a decision to pursue autonomy from the state. On the contrary there is a hard-fought day-to-day struggle to subordinate the local manifestations of the state to society and to win access to state services like water, electricity, toilets, refuse removal, education and health care, on the terms of each settlement. However, it was a decision to pursue the political autonomy of the settlements that was the key to the rapid building of a mass movement.

It was decided to announce the election boycott with a march from the Foreman Road settlement into the city and on the mayor. As in 1960 this was a step too far. Mike Sutcliffe, the city manager and a former Marxist academic, illegally banned the march by fax. Nonetheless, two days later more than 3,000 people missed a day's work and gathered in the Foreman Road settlement, which had been surrounded by riot police. Marching would be very dangerous under these conditions, but living in the settlements was just as dangerous, and the 3,000 set off up the steep dirt track that leads out of the settlement singing *Yonk' indawo umzabalazo uyasivumela* (Everywhere struggle is welcome). The banners in the front read 'University of Abahlali base-Mjondolo' and 'No Land, No House, No Vote'. As they stepped onto the tarred road that marks the beginning of the bourgeois world they were attacked, shot at with pistols and rubber bullets and severely beaten. There were a number of serious injuries, many with permanent consequences, and forty-five arrests. But the police violence could not break the resolve of the marchers. Protesters, led from the front by Fikile Nkosi, a

young domestic worker, successfully kept the police from entering the settlement with barrages of stones. A suited effigy of the mayor was burnt.

A second attempt was made to march into the city on 27 February. Once again all of the necessary steps had been taken to stage a legal march into the city. By this time the movement had grown to the point where 20,000 people were expected. Sutcliffe issued another illegal ban and early on the morning of the 27th the police moved in on the three largest settlements in a military-style operation using armoured vehicles and helicopters. They arrested and assaulted key people and blocked off all the exits from the settlements. But this time the Abahlali had garnered the connections to be able to take Sutcliffe to the High Court. They won a quick victory and with the interdict in their hands marched into the city in triumph. Two days later the election boycott held across all the Abahlali settlements.

After more than a year spent trying to break Abahlali with direct repression the state came up with another plan. In July they informed Abahlali that if they wanted to be able to 'engage with government' they must 'be professional' and 'serious' and join the transnational NGO Shack Dwellers' International, which is often used by governments to simulate popular consent for repressive policies. Sections of the professionalized NGO-linked Left have been equally keen to subordinate this mass movement of the militant poor to various docile simulacra of people's power. For a while it looked as though the emergence of a militant mass movement of the poor would be able to democratize and deracialize some of the spaces and networks through which the professionalized Left use donor money to exercise their various modes of vanguardism. But it has now become clear that these spaces are not reformable. In many instances the response to the eruption of the mass movement of the militant poor into these spaces has been paranoid and startlingly authoritarian rather than celebratory. Abahlali have routinely been instructed to attend, and thereby legitimate, meetings planned by email, held in a language and jargon most don't understand, with agendas over which they have no influence and in places which are difficult for the poor to access. The standard division of labour in these meetings, a division that is often racialized, is that the poor get a few minutes to report on their experiences while professional activists do the thinking and decision-making. In many instances the real function of the meetings is to simulate the appearance of legitimacy for local and transnational networks of professional NGO-based or -linked activists.

After the failure of the state's attempt to co-opt the movement via the Shack Dwellers' International there has been a return to open repression. On 11 September, following a series of successful actions, Abahlali were invited to an interview on Gagasi FM. S'bu Zikode, Philani Zungu and Mnikelo Ndabanakulu were just about to leave for the interview from Kennedy Road when officers from the Sydenham police station, notorious in the settlements for its corruption, brutality and anti-African racism, pounced thrusting guns into the faces of the Bahlali and subjecting them to racialized verbal abuse. When they saw that Ndabanakulu was wearing one of the famous red Abahlali T-shirts they pulled it off him, insulted him, pushed him around, threw the shirt into the mud, made a great show of standing and spitting on it and announced that 'there will be no more red shirts here'.

The next morning there were hundreds of Bahlali in red shirts in the Durban Magistrates' Court. The state charged Zikode and Zungu with assaulting a police officer, but the magistrate released them without asking for bail. Both men had visible wounds, explaining that they had been personally assaulted by the superintendent, who had hurled political abuse on them as he bashed their heads against the wall.

Mnikelo Ndabanakulu has a new red shirt. It was made, with hundreds of others, on a rented pedal-power sewing machine by the Abahlali Sewing Collective in an all-night, song-filled sewing session in a candlelit shack. *Yonk' indawo umzabalazo uyasivumela.*

For further information on Abahlali baseMjondolo visit www.abahlali.org.

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness

Reading Lolita in Tehran in Connecticut

Simon Hay

Azar Nafisi's bestselling *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (Random House, 2003) has become a popular choice for required summer reading for incoming students at many colleges and universities across the USA, including my own. It has also been immensely popular with book clubs, library organizations and the like. Translated into thirty-two languages, it has remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over two years. Clearly, it offers a message that 'resonates' for a significant portion of the US – and world – reading publics. As a choice for incoming first-year students, Nafisi's book seems compelling because, as a reviewer from the *New York Times* is quoted on the cover as saying, it is an 'eloquent brief on the transformative powers of fiction'. But what kind of reading practices is the book describing and encouraging, and what reading practices are being declared significant intellectual engagements with literature, and with Iran, in this positioning of Nafisi's book?

Reading Lolita in Tehran tells the story of Nafisi herself and a small group of Iranian women who joined her once a week, after she resigned her job at the University of Allameh Tabatabai, for private discussion classes on a series of Great Works of the Western canon. Each of the four chapters of the book is built around the discussion of work by a canonical Western writer: Nabokov's *Lolita*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, James's *Daisy Miller* and *Washington Square*, and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Nafisi's book establishes early on that what is at stake for the young women who join her to read *Lolita* is the possibility of establishing a sense of individual identity, otherwise impossible (apparently) in the Islamic Revolutionary State of Iran. Only on entering Nafisi's house, she says, and removing their outer robes, did each student 'gain ... an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self'. As the women become more confident in themselves, they wear lipstick, nailpolish and jeans. In the early stages of the book, both high and mass Western culture allow the young women to establish selves that the Iranian – Islamic – world disallows.¹

In Nafisi's memoir, the classes allow the girls to develop their identities precisely because the classes themselves are forbidden: 'The room, for all of us, became a place of transgression.' The transgressive activity is a collation of unveiling and reading, both of which offer, according to the book's logic, a particular kind of freedom, one that establishes identity in the face of the 'torturous rituals ... governing what I was forced to wear, how I was expected to act, the gestures I had to remember to control ... [t]he daily struggle against arbitrary rules and restrictions' that living as a woman under a reactionary Islamic law has come to entail in Iran.

This is the book's central argument. At a literal level it follows these young women through a gradual progression of disrobement, accompanied by the application of Western accoutrements, and we are taught to understand this as a voyage of self-discovery. At a more abstract level, the book disrobes Iranian – and Islamic – culture for Western eyes, and by implication teaches us to understand this looking not as *scopophilia*, voyeuristic desire and desire-for-power, but as a healing, caring, *freeing* exercise. That the book is crucially concerned with the staged uncovering of female bodies is established early on, before the students have arrived for the first class, with Nafisi taking 'a long, leisurely shower. The water caressed my neck, my back, my legs, and I stood there both rooted and light.' In the next few pages Nafisi asks herself a series of questions and muses about teaching in Iran, from time to time reminding us of her nakedness: 'I smiled as I rubbed the coarse loofah over my skin, remembering...' In Nafisi's self-description – as in the collapse for her students of unveiling and reading – thinking and nudity are emphatically associated. And when she gets out of the shower, of course, like her students, 'I applied my makeup with care and put on bright red lipstick.'

There is nothing lewd about thinking in the shower. But this scene draws our attention to a central feature of Nafisi's project: the insistence on her – and her students' – *right* to disrobe, their right to be naked, and a refusal of a politics that understands the naked female body as inherently sinful. That project is without doubt an important one. But the covering and uncovering of 'Eastern' women's bodies for the benefit of Western audiences has a long colonial and Orientalist history. As Leila Ahmed argues in 'The Discourse of the Veil', Western contests over the political meaning of Islamic dress codes extend at least as far back as the difference between, on the one hand, colonialists of the nineteenth century like Cromer, who 'believed that unveiling was the key to social transformation', and, on the other hand, feminists like Mary Wortley Montagu, who argued in her letters that the veil 'was not the oppressive custom her compatriots believed it to be and in fact it gave women a kind of liberty, for it enabled them not to be recognized'.² The basic point is made most succinctly by Fanon, in the context of the veiling and unveiling of Algerian women before and during their war for independence: 'Removed and reassumed again and again, the veil has been manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a means of struggle.' Fanon describes the way that, early in the war, revolutionary women hid arms and messages beneath both the voluminous folds of their robes and the presumed docility, submissiveness, and harmlessness of their identity as Islamic women. Later, when precisely such a costume and pose singled women out for the suspicion of French guards at checkpoints, Algerian revolutionary women dressed in Western clothing and hid bombs, guns and messages in make-up kits and handbags, the unveiled Algerian woman now newly invisible to power in a way the veiled Algerian woman no longer was. Fanon's point here is that the veil expresses no truth in and of itself, but is rather a means by which other struggles are waged, and takes its meaning in any given context from those struggles.

A 'non-ideological' position

In her embrace of make-up and unveiling and her faith in her own nudity as revealing a truth that her veil conceals, Nafisi erases any history or politics to practices of veiling. This is something like an exaggerated version of embodied critique, where the refusal to abandon the body, the refusal to pretend that critique happens in a disembodied space, has become a claim whose truthfulness needs no guarantee other than its embodied location. The women's identities, unveiled, are truthful representations of the women *because unveiled*, because they wear make-up and jeans and reveal their faces and hair. But it is not only that Nafisi's stance produces truth-claims without evidence or argument. There is an ideology to her



project of unveiling that plays up to Orientalist scopophilia at the same time as it celebrates the values of Western capitalism.

In Iran in the early sixteenth century, dominant interpretations of the Quran did not legislate veiling, which was practised mostly only by the wealthy.³ By the late seventeenth century, however, it seems that the seclusion and veiling of women had become widespread, as the form of Islam embraced by the dominant classes changed. Veiling remained part of a largely repressive set of attitudes to women until the early twentieth century, when Reza Shah began his Westernizing

reforms. Under Reza Shah, class attitudes to the veil reversed, with the upper class embracing Western reforms including Western dress, while the working poor saw the veil as a sign of propriety. Reza Shah's legislation banning headgear other than European-style hats provoked working-class demonstrations that were ruthlessly crushed, and poor women stayed home rather than face police who would pull the veils from their faces. Reza Shah's unpopularity was strongest among the working class and the religious Right, and with his abdication most urban women began wearing chadors again, though without face veils. Eventually, the leaders of the religious Right insisted on a more patriarchal repressive version of Islamic law, and after the 1979 revolution, whatever its initial progressive ideals, the combination of the dominance of such patriarchal versions of Islam with strong anti-Western sentiment meant that veiling became once again mandatory. Even so, some religious and secular leaders continue to oppose mandatory veiling. In other words, at any given moment in Iranian history the meaning of the veil is contested across different religious practices and Quranic interpretations, across different class positions, and as a means of expressing different relationships to the West. Part of what has happened recently is that the question of the veil – as earlier in Algeria – has been reduced in public discourse to a question of Westernization versus Islamic culture, in ways that are obviously debilitating to forms of Islamic feminism.

Clearly, since 1979, in Iran, there has been drastic reduction in women's personal, political, cultural, legal and social rights. Legal changes have reintroduced polygamy, lowered the legal age of marriage for women to thirteen, pressured women out of the workforce, reduced or removed women's ability to inherit or own property, to divorce or gain custody of their children, as well as enforcing the wearing of the Islamic hijab. All of these represent steps backwards in the rights of women from the regime that had preceded it. But, as Nashat points out, 'the immediate impact of the regime's policies has been felt mainly by the educated professional and secular women and by female students, primarily in urban areas, and they constitute only a small part of the female population.'⁴ Nafisi's book draws attention to this segment of Iranian women, educated, wealthy, with links to the West (she herself was educated in part in Switzerland, and is the daughter of a pre-1979 mayor of Tehran), who come to stand in for Iranian women as a whole, or at least become those for whom our sympathy is demanded. (A late section of the book, describing the suicide-by-immolation of a university student who, she declares, only got into university because his rural family is appropriately fundamentalist, makes clear Nafisi's contempt for and dismissal of those who don't 'deserve' our sympathy, as well as making clear who these are: the rural, the fundamentalist, the uneducated, the poor.)

Reading Lolita in Tehran insists repeatedly that true transgression and rebellion are neither political nor ideological.

To me, Yassi [another of her students] was the real rebel. She did not join any political group or organization. As a teenager she had defied family traditions and, in the face of strong opposition, had taken up music.... Her rebellion did not stop there: she did not marry the right suitor at the right time and insisted on leaving her hometown of Shiraz to go to college in Tehran.

'Real rebels' don't join political organizations, but learn classical music and read the Western canon. Clearly these are rebellious acts, but in defining rebellion as anti- or a-political, Nafisi follows the Manichaean logic of her argument about the veil: a stance against the veil is a stance against Islam, and a stance against Islam is pro-Western. To reject the repressive patriarchal forms of Islam dominant in her moment in Iran is, she suggests, necessarily to embrace a romanticized bourgeois Western consumerist life. The most rebellious things Yassi can imagine are 'long walks holding hands with someone she loved, even [having] a little dog perhaps?' Rebellion produces not some radical new way of being, but rather a return to the class privileges that Nafisi's family possessed before the revolution.

That the book's 'non-ideological' position is a version of US capitalist individualism is seen most clearly in the last few pages, when the various stock phrases of Americana are thrown around wilfully to describe all that is good about American life and, by contrast, what is lacking in Iran: 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness', 'the rights of all individuals', 'demand for freedom', and, perhaps most significant, the claim that 'people's choices were their own'.

Nafisi discusses one of her students, Mahshid, who chose to wear a headscarf even before the Islamic government in Iran made it law: 'Before the revolution, she could in a sense take pride in her isolation. At that time, she had worn the scarf as a testament to her faith. Her decision was a voluntary act. When the revolution forced the scarf on others, her action became meaningless.' As an individual action, the wearing of the scarf is a statement or testament of belief; once it is legislated, it becomes only another form of un-freedom. What is at stake, ideologically, in making an argument like this in favour of choice?

Shades of lipstick

In Žižek's recent essay 'Against Human Rights', he argues that the liberal emphasis on personal choice always presupposes that one has already chosen a framework of liberal capitalism to make the choice within; any real ideological differences are thus rendered incomprehensible. And he does so via the example of the veil:

The problem of pseudo-choice ... demonstrates the limitations of the standard liberal attitude towards Muslim women who wear the veil: acceptable if it is their own free choice rather than imposed on them by husbands or family. However, the moment a woman dons the veil as a result of personal choice, its meaning changes completely: it is no longer a sign of belonging to the Muslim community, but an expression of idiosyncratic individuality. In other words, a choice is always a meta-choice, a choice of the modality of the choice itself: it is only the woman who does not choose to wear a veil that effectively chooses a choice.⁵

Nafisi's celebration of Mahshid's 'choice' to wear the veil works in precisely these terms: whether or not she chooses a headscarf, the meta-choice against Iranian Islam and for Western democratic individualism has already been made.

Žižek reminds us of the background to this meta-choice: 'the "subject of free choice", in the "tolerant", multicultural sense, can only emerge as the result of an extremely violent process of being uprooted from one's particular life-world' and forcibly incorporated into the capitalist world-system. What looks like choice, what is celebrated as democratic choice, the choice between wearing and not wearing a veil, is a result of the violent erasure of the particular and the local, about which there is no

choice. Nafisi's arguments about the function of the great books of Western literature take place against the background of this unspoken violence. The book insists on the power of the young women to make choices: Nabokov or Austen; shades of lipstick; even, later, the choices between high and low Western culture, and between staying in Iran or leaving for the West. But the existence of such choices is predicated on what is not in question: the choice of an ideological framework that prohibits the possibility of a critique of capitalism.

So what does it mean that this is a book that incoming university students are asked to read, and think about, before they begin their tertiary studies; and that reading groups and library projects and the US reading public in general have embraced so enthusiastically? In a sense, the book functions like *Wild Swans* in regard to China and *The Poisonwood Bible* in regard to 'Africa' as a whole. Both are novels that push a political line which 'resonates' with a large reading public, and that have been widely publicized and read. In the case of *Reading Lolita*, it is easy to see at a superficial level the book's appeal: it's a book about women in an Islamic society, a careful and compassionate and heart-warming narrative of their deep equality with us. And it is a book about the important forms of resistance that happen at the personal level, not just the big and bold (socially coded 'masculine') public resistances of marches, protests, sit-ins, revolutions, but the ('feminine') resistance that happens behind closed doors, in private spaces, within the psyche.

Yet this is, fundamentally, a book about how Western culture, Western cultural products, will set 'Islamic' women free. If only, it argues, all Islamic people were sensible enough to read Nabokov and James, rather than the Quran, if they listened to the Doors rather than Persian 'political songs and military marches', they would realize how much better off they would be if they just adopted capitalism. The book advocates and celebrates an ideology of choice derived from neoliberal capitalism, at a moment when our political leaders justify vast civilian massacres on the grounds that any threat to our 'way of life' (choice, capitalism) is terrorism. Rather than encouraging an engaged understanding of the complex of different and often competing social, religious and political practices that are so commonly reified in Western coverage as 'Islam', the book encourages sympathy at the individual level with these women by having them experience and express the superior values of Western capitalism. Such an ideology, put into the mouths of Iranian women and read by privileged Americans, reinforces the sense of cultural superiority and entitlement that Western audiences already 'know'. The book 'resonates' because it tells its readers what they want to hear (which is what 'resonates' has come to mean) and describes that confirmation as an exciting or even radical reading practice. Everything the book asks its readers to 'choose', they have already chosen, and in so choosing exercised no choice at all. Sounds like America.

Notes

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1. It is only later that Nafisi becomes uncomfortable with the way the students fail to distinguish between 'high' Western culture – Nabokov, Austen, etc. – and the products of 'mass' Western culture. As well as the jeans, lipstick and eyeliner, there is, for instance, Western technology and entertainment: 'They [Manna and Nima, one of Nafisi's students and her husband] were euphoric about their satellite dish' and the 'new American classic[s]' it brought them: American consumerism brings pleasure and freedom (p. 67).
2. Leila Ahmed, 'The Discourse of the Veil', in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 1992, ch. 8.
3. This paragraph draws heavily on Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2003; Ahmed, 'The Discourse of the Veil'; and Guity Nashat, ed., *Women and Revolution in Iran*, Westview Press, Boulder CO, 1983.
4. Nashat, *Women and Revolution in Iran*, pp. 285–6.
5. Slavoj Žižek, 'Against Human Rights', *New Left Review* 34, July–August 2005, p. 118.

An immanent transcendental

Foucault, Kant and critical philosophy

Keith Robinson

Every philosophy conceals a philosophy; every opinion is also a hiding place, every word also a mask.

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

The relation of Foucault's work to philosophy remains an unsettled issue. Indeed, Foucault sometimes preferred to present himself as 'the masked philosopher'. Much like Nietzsche's 'hermit', Foucault wrote books to conceal what lies within, a deeper cave behind every cave, 'a stranger more comprehensive world beyond every surface, an abyss behind every ground, beneath every "foundation"'.¹ However, a number of readers of Foucault have noticed that he constantly returned in his published work and interviews to an encounter with Kantian philosophy and the concept of the 'transcendental'. Although these readers – including Gilles Deleuze, Jürgen Habermas, Beatrice Han, Gary Gutting and others – represent a broad range of interpretations of his work, the idea of the transcendental plays a key role in these readings providing the grounds for the legitimation, critique or disqualification of Foucault's thought and its relation to philosophy. What is the status of the transcendental in Foucault's work and what is Foucault's relation to transcendental philosophy? Is the transcendental just another mask that is temporarily utilized and then abandoned in Foucault's thought when it became clear that forging a new relation between the transcendental and empirical would eventually lead to insurmountable logical and theoretical difficulties? Or, rather, is there perhaps an attempt on Foucault's part to 'restore the forgotten dimension of the transcendental',² developing a conception that goes 'all the way down', so to speak, an immanent conception of the transcendental consistent with a thought without ground?

Drawing from some of the readings examined here I want to argue for this latter view. Foucault's philosophy can be understood in terms of the development of his own conception of an immanent transcendental

out of resources provided, in part, from Kant's own work. Foucault's work could thus be seen as a 'radical transformation of Kantianism, a re-invention of the critique which Kant betrayed at the same time as he conceived it, a resumption of the critical project on a new basis and with new concepts'.³ Rather than a set of inconsistent, contradictory or viciously circular relations between the transcendental and the empirical, as some of Foucault's best-known readers have claimed, I argue that in Foucault's reinvention and transformation of Kantianism he develops an immanent conception of their relation as contingent and differential, a circle in which transcendental elements are immanently 'caught up in the very things they connect'⁴ without being reduced to the same or to a simple repetition. By contrasting these differing accounts of the transcendental I will attempt to renew the question of what is at stake in Foucault's critical project more than twenty years on, as well as raise important questions about the contemporary value of the transcendental, the Kantian legacy and the nature of philosophy itself.

In the first section I introduce the concept of the transcendental in Kant and post-Kantianism, indicating briefly how this has been taken up in contemporary philosophy. In the main section I explicate and contrast interpretations of the transcendental in some of the best-known recent readings of Foucault's work. In the final section I raise some questions regarding these interpretations, the continuing value of transcendental philosophy and the nature of philosophy itself, and I conclude by laying out the grounds for Foucault's conception of the immanent transcendental.

Kant and the post-Kantian transcendental

In modern philosophy it is of course with Kant that the concept of transcendental analysis undergoes a momentous transformation. In contrast to the medieval 'transcendentals' Kant tied the very meaning of

the 'critical project' to an analysis of transcendental conditions. Kant attempted to ground the possibility of knowledge by defining the necessary and universal conditions of experience as *a priori* and hence irreducible to the empirical. The famous answer given in the First Critique is that the necessary and universal conditions of experience rest on an *a priori* analysis of subjectivity. The Kantian analysis demonstrates that the transcendental subject synthesizes or 'schematizes' the sensible forms of intuition with the categories of the understanding to produce the conditions for the possibility of objects of experience and experience itself. In Kant's well-known formulation 'the conditions of the possibility of experience in general are likewise the conditions of the possibility of the objects of experience'.⁵ Experience, then, for Kant must have certain structurally necessary conditions and these conditions are double. There are two 'roots' or sources of knowledge and these are the *a priori* or transcendental conditions of space and time and the categories. The first critique is an analysis of how these sources could come together in a new kind of assertion: a synthetic *a priori* judgement. It is in answering the famous question of how synthetic *a priori* judgements are possible that Kant believed that he had secured an empirical realism on the basis of a transcendental idealism. For Kant this means two things: first, external objects can be perceived and exist independently of us: they are empirically real. Second, these real objects in space and time are relative to the *a priori* forms of experience, the set of necessary conditions that must obtain if experience and the object world are to have the character that they do for us. Our experience of the world as empirically real is possible because the limit-conditions of experience are transcendently ideal. Knowledge that transcends the bounds of these limit-conditions is impossible. Thus, the Kantian transformation of the transcendental concerns not the objects of knowledge themselves but our mode of knowing them, or, as Kant puts it, transcendental philosophy is an investigation of 'our mode of cognition of objects insofar as this is possible *a priori*'.⁶ If every aspect of Kant's account in the first critique is subsequently challenged it is arguably this insight regarding the genesis of modes of knowing *a priori* – upon how knowledge is legitimated, made possible or produced by either 'immanent' or 'transcendent' conditions that precede it *a priori* – that is retained and taken in new directions by post-Kantianism.

Although modern philosophy is deeply indebted to this Kantian legacy it is clear that the major post-Kantian traditions have been unable to accept Kant's

solution to the critical question of legitimating how knowledge is produced, and so modern philosophies, in the wake of Kant, either abandon the transcendental project altogether, radically limit its range and scope, or try to develop their own modified and reconfigured notions of the transcendental. Within the 'analytic' tradition, for example, philosophers have on the whole remained suspicious of the transcendental with its attendant issues of idealism and verificationism, and so transcendental philosophy has tended to become narrowly focused upon epistemological debates over the nature and structure of 'transcendental arguments' and whether they can be 'naturalized' or at least do sufficient work to defeat the sceptic. This kind of work is best exemplified by Stroud and Strawson and most recently by Cassam, Sacks and others.⁷ By contrast, in the recent 'continental' tradition philosophers have continued to appeal to modified versions of the transcendental despite its negative association with metaphysics, with the speculative, the ahistorical, the universal, the subjective or the foundational. In the early part of the twentieth century it is Husserl's commitment to a phenomenologically-inspired and reformulated transcendental idealism that remained enormously productive yet problematic for a whole generation of German and French thinkers beginning with Heidegger's own complex transformation of Husserl's transcendentalism and culminating, towards the end of the century, with Derrida's 'quasi-transcendentals', Irigaray's 'sensible transcendental', Deleuze's 'transcendental empiricism' and, of course, Foucault's own 'historical *a priori*'.

Whether Foucault's work can be understood from within the post-Kantian tradition as an effort to engage the concept of the transcendental is a question that a number of Foucault's best-known readers have explored. The issues that divide those readers revolve around the extent of Foucault's indebtedness to this tradition of transcendental thinking within European philosophy, whether his conception of transcendental thought either escapes or transforms the problems it was meant to deal with, or, indeed, whether it is inconsistent or aporetic and, therefore, insufficient as a strategy for dealing with the problems he addresses. Gary Gutting, for example, one of the best-known interpreters of Foucault, argues that Foucault's relation to transcendental philosophy, and post-Kantianism generally, is something of a non-issue since Foucault's thought has little or no connection to these traditions. Gutting would have us abandon reference to transcendental talk in Foucault. Foucault's work is not the work of a transcendental philosopher for Gutting since

a transcendental project is defined by a commitment to establishing necessary conditions for the possibility of knowledge. These necessary conditions refer to the constituting power of the transcendental subject that functions as ground for experience. Given that Foucault's work for Gutting undercuts this commitment by refusing to refer necessary conditions to a transcendental subject and by showing how necessary limits are historically contingent limits in disguise then, for Gutting, Foucault cannot be a transcendental philosopher. As Gutting says, Foucault's project in Kant's terminology is

critical (examining assumptions regarding the scope and limits of our knowledge), but it is not, like Kant's own project, transcendental. It does not, that is, claim to discover necessary conditions for knowing that determine categories in terms of which we must experience and think about the world and ourselves.⁸

Thus, for Gutting, Foucault utilizes historical rather than strictly *a priori* philosophical methods for his critical project since Foucault's works are 'primarily works of history' and his main concern is with 'forging a new approach to historical analysis'.⁹ For Gutting *The Order of Things* is Foucault's most philosophical book but if we construe its claims, for example in chapter 9, as a critique of individual philosophers it ends up as a discussion of the history of ideas and it ceases to work as an archaeological investigation of unconscious structures; on the other hand, if we view Foucault's discussion here as genuinely archaeological then it is the modern episteme governed by the concept of 'man' that is shown to be incoherent: 'in neither instance has Foucault made an effective case for or against a standard philosophical position'.¹⁰ Thus Gutting makes the claim that 'even in his most apparently philosophical moments, Foucault is not a participant in the debates of modern post-Kantian philosophy'.¹¹

Transformation of the transcendental

That a 'new approach to historical analysis' could be conducted alongside and in conjunction with a post-Kantian philosophical project is, since Schelling and Hegel, at least plausible, rather than mutually exclusive as Gutting seems to imply. One could argue that Foucault is not simply doing either history or philosophy, neither simply history of ideas nor history of philosophy, but working out a new philosophical relation to history. Moreover, that a new style of historical analysis could be conducted in association with a reconfigured form of transcendental philosophy is precisely the kind of project that Foucault himself had

already signalled an interest in, as early as his D.E.A., with the title 'the constitution of a historical transcendental in Hegel'.¹² References to a transformation of Kantian thought span the entire range of Foucault's work, beginning with Foucault's introduction to his translation into French of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* right through to the very last works. The Kantian *a priori* is reworked in several key texts, including *The Birth of the Clinic*, where Foucault introduced the concept of the 'concrete *a priori*' in order to examine the 'historical and critical understanding of the old experience'¹³ of disease, to late references to 'games of truth' as the historical *a priori* of experience. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault explicitly distinguishes what he called a 'formal *a priori*' from his own 'historical *a priori*' since he claims he was not interested in discovering the Kantian conditions of validity for judgements but rather in determining the concrete conditions of reality for 'statements'. 'The formal *a priori* and the historical *a priori* neither belong to the same level nor share the same nature: if they intersect, it is because they occupy two different dimensions.'¹⁴ Thus, the conditions that Foucault is interested in operate in another 'dimension' from the Kantian formal *a priori* but are no less 'philosophical'. In this other 'archaeological' dimension the conditions are not ahistorical and universal rules that determine in advance what could be given or said but are rather the historically changing rules of what is actually given and said. And these rules are themselves a 'transformable group' since they do not sit above events like an 'atemporal structure' in some 'unmoveable heaven' but are 'caught up in the very things they connect'.¹⁵ It is perhaps the nature of this being 'caught up' that Foucault's work constantly strives to understand and explicate, and it is also, as we will see, one of the major points of contention in interpreting Foucault's transcendentalism.

In the archaeological period, rather than rediscovering in Kantian fashion what might legitimate an assertion, Foucault claims that his historical *a priori* reveals the principles according to which statements survive, are transformed or disappear, and these principles are caught up in the very things they connect. Although at this stage the nature of these 'principles' that govern discourse are not entirely clear (as Foucault was later to claim, what else could he have been talking about here but 'power'?) what does seem clear is that Foucault often and explicitly developed his methodological approaches by transposing the Kantian formal *a priori* into another dimension, a dimension that does not change historically – as Foucault says, the historical

a priori is not simply a formal *a priori* endowed with a history – but a dimension that changes *with* history. Foucault's approach to this space is not dependent upon an *a priori* analysis of subjectivity or upon universal and necessary conditions, but upon a relative and variable historical *a priori* of knowledges. Thus, the idea that Foucault's archaeologies and genealogies are not transcendental in the strictly Kantian sense but perhaps still best viewed as contributing to a form of historicized transcendental philosophical discourse appears to be recognized by Foucault himself.

Apart from Gutting, whose conceptions of the transcendental and of philosophy appear perhaps too narrow to capture what Foucault is up to here, this novel relation between history and philosophy is recognized by other readers of Foucault's work, even if, in the end, some of these readers think this relation collapses under the pressure of its own internal contradictions. For example, Jürgen Habermas's well-known criticisms of Foucault are based upon accepting at least that the critique of conventional historiography (with its residual anthropologism and humanism) found in Foucault emerges out of what Habermas calls a 'transcendental historicism'. For Habermas Foucault's historicism is set within a 'weak' or looser sense of transcendental rules that are formed, displaced and regrouped as formations shift and are reshaped by nothing other than the ever-renewed technologies of power. In Habermas's account Foucault utilizes this power principle to replace the Kantian transcendental subject:

what the synthetic power of transcendental consciousness was hitherto supposed to accomplish for the one and general universe of the objects of possible experience – this synthesis – is now degraded into the subjectless will of a power effective in the contingent and disordered to-and-fro of discursive formations.¹⁶

Foucauldian power, in Habermas's reading, is joined together with the transcendentalist meaning of synthesis to produce a 'purely structuralistic activity',¹⁷ a 'Kantianism without the subject' as Ricoeur put it. But this structuralist activity cannot be simply 'pure' in Foucault, as Habermas points out, since the transcendental generativity of power is combined and connected with the emergence of events. The event is articulated with and immersed in structures of power, or structures are caught up in the events they connect.¹⁸

It is, however, this (con)fusion of the transcendental with the empirical, of connectives with things connected, that acts as the source of Habermas's and

others' criticisms of Foucault. For Habermas Foucault's concept of power operates in an 'irritating double role':¹⁹ on the one hand, Foucault's work functions in an empirical role where we are given descriptive and 'neutral' analyses of the technologies of power, yet, on the other hand, Foucault wants his work to operate in a critical transcendental role where analyses of the technologies of power explain how discourses about man are possible at all. Power in Foucault is 'contaminated' for Habermas because Foucault forces it to play these 'paradoxical' yet incompatible twin roles. As Habermas puts it: 'In his basic concept of power Foucault has forced together the idealist idea of transcendental synthesis with the presuppositions of an empiricist ontology.'²⁰ By attempting to historicize and temporalize the *a priori*, Foucault thus 'undertakes a fusion of opposed meanings' that performatively constitutes power as a conception both of 'transcendental generativity and of empirical self-assertion'²¹ simultaneously. For Habermas this cannot be a 'way out of the philosophy of the subject'²² because the concept of power that provides the resources for both empirical and transcendental roles is drawn from the philosophy of the subject itself. On Habermas's reading Foucault's theory of power is trapped within a vicious circle of its own devising – the well-known 'performative contradiction' – complete with all the aporias of the philosophy of the subject that, according to Habermas, Foucault thought he had left behind. These aporias are defined and specified in Foucault's case by what Habermas famously called 'presentism', 'relativism' and 'crypto-normativism'.²³

Where Gutting argues that the transcendental project entails a commitment to a Kantian subject and so Foucault could not be doing transcendental philosophy, Habermas also appears to assume that Foucault's transcendental project ultimately depends on a Kantian conception of the subject as man, without really providing additional argument for it, and that turning from this subject to a historicized transcendental form of power will not escape the conceptual constraints of the modern subjective tradition. However, the idea that Foucault's conception of the transcendental requires a Kantian understanding of the *a priori* subject is not 'necessary' if the transcendental is rethought as no longer dependent upon uncovering apodictic certainty, absolute foundations for knowledge or the discovery of what is true independently of experience. We have already suggested that Foucault was perhaps searching for a non-anthropological and historicized dimension of the transcendental (a 'completion' of Kant that Foucault often designates as the 'Nietzschean experi-

ence’) without presupposing the Kantian subject as ‘man’ or as condition of possibility. I would suggest that in carrying out this project Foucault can be interpreted as offering a ‘transcendental’ account of Kant’s own transcendental subject, a ‘critique of critique’, or what the post-Kantian tradition has sometimes called ‘metacritique’, and he finds some of the resources to do so in Kant.²⁴ A Foucauldian metacritique will involve the creation and analysis of a new critical space opened by the Kantian reflection, yet inverting the (Kantian) direction of the critical process and the significance of experience: instead of anticipating the possibility of all knowledge by prescribing in advance its own laws (Kant), Foucault begins with already constituted forms of knowledge in order to define retrospectively that which rendered them possible. Experience is a given whose conditions must be archaeologically or genealogically traced to their historical *a priori*. Thus Foucault’s metacritique offers a kind of turning around of the famous Kantian ‘turn’; beginning with the subjects and objects of real experience and genealogically uncovering their historical conditions rather than beginning with the subject and deducing the universal, ahistorical conditions of possibility for experience. If Foucault’s archaeologies/genealogies are his explorations into this new immanent transcendental dimension, then what remains to be elucidated is the way in which Foucault carries out this transformation of Kant by explicating the relation between his non-anthropological form of the transcendental and the empirical forms conditioned by it – how the conditions are ‘caught up in the very things they connect’ – and whether and how this conception avoids the aporetic doubling that Foucault diagnosed in Kant and modern thought.

The interest of Beatrice Han’s reading of Foucault in her *Foucault’s Critical Project*²⁵ lies in her searching examination of these issues. Indeed, Han argues that the central and unifying theme of Foucault’s work is the effort to develop a new historicized interpretation of the transcendental modifying Kant’s project by attempting to detach it from his ‘anthropological’ solution while retaining the form of the ‘critical question’. The ‘slalom’ of Foucault’s constantly changing methodological frameworks are explained as various attempts to find a working version of this historical transcendental that is coherent and consistent in its rejection of ‘man and his doubles’. The Foucauldian *a priori*, Han says, ‘is given in history, ... transforms itself with it, and ... nevertheless lies beyond it in defining the conditions of possibility, themselves variable, from which the knowledge of an epoch can

and must form itself’.²⁶ Han tries to show how this definition is variously transposed, reworked and refocused as Foucault’s thought responds to the internal demands and aporia of holding the historical and the transcendental together and apart. Like Habermas, Han argues that Foucault is ultimately unsuccessful in these attempts and falls back into a form of the ‘doubling’ or reductive oscillation between the transcendental and the historical that Foucault himself had uncovered as one of the characteristic problems of modern thought.

In view of Han’s thesis, perhaps the most illuminating contrast will be with Gilles Deleuze’s reading in his little book *Foucault*.²⁷ Deleuze’s book on his friend is important here because it explicitly describes Foucault’s work as a unique sort of neo-Kantianism that attempts to seek out the historical *a priori* conditions of experience, of what makes something visible or readable, sayable or seeable, and so on. Thus, a ‘statement’ for Deleuze is precisely not to be confused with propositions or phrases since it is the condition of propositions or phrases. Equally, the ‘visible’ in Foucault, according to Deleuze, is not what can be seen but the condition of what can be seen. However, what really sets Deleuze’s analysis apart is that he thinks that Foucault’s ‘neo-Kantianism’ is precisely the problem of the ‘mutual presupposition’, reciprocal determination and ‘coadaptation’ of these two forms, of seeing and saying, light and language – *without one being reducible to or simply collapsing into the other*. Deleuze articulates a ‘transposition of the transcendental theme’ and a logic of thought in Foucault that directly challenges the theses of Gutting, Habermas and Han. In other words, Deleuze offers an account of the *a priori* in Foucault that engages the problems diagnosed by these readers yet displaces the logic of reduction and the issues of internal consistency and methodology that they identify.

Han and Deleuze thus agree that Foucault develops a modified transcendental project, but they disagree over the extent, nature and coherence of that modification. Against Gutting, both Han and Deleuze agree that Foucault’s emphasis on conditions enables him to construct a completely new philosophical relation to history: for Han a ‘middle path’ between idealism and materialism; for Deleuze a philosophical experiment with the real beyond history. The primary question that divides them here is precisely the nature of the *a priori* conditions and their relation with the conditioned. For Han the stakes of Foucault’s philosophical project lie precisely in whether he can hold the critical space between the transcendental and the historical open

without one collapsing into the other. Initially, it is on archaeology, ‘sister and rival of phenomenology’²⁸ Han says, that Foucault will confer the task of finding this non-anthropological version of the historical transcendental. Thus I will focus here only on parts of Han’s analyses of archaeology and contrast them briefly with Deleuze.

Han finds differing archaeological phases of the historical *a priori* in Foucault corresponding to the early archaeological texts. In *The Birth of the Clinic* Han concludes that Foucault ends up with a ‘confused phenomenology’²⁹ generated by attempting to integrate the implicit presuppositions of a Merleau-Ponty style of phenomenology into Foucault’s nascent archaeological framework. For Han, Foucault may have been influenced by Merleau-Ponty because of his constant references to concepts like the ‘gaze’, ‘perception’, the ‘visible’, and so on, and the effort to identify historical variations of the structures of perception in a given domain. However, the fact that Foucault does not



have a theory of ‘one’s own body’ (*le corps propre*) and refers the relation between seeing and saying to an *a priori* space anterior to perception rules out this possibility. Thus, *The Birth of the Clinic* for Han ‘finds itself without any real theoretical support’,³⁰ caught in the confusion between the transcendental and the empirical.

In Deleuze’s reading, by contrast, Foucault’s repeatedly stated efforts to move beyond any phenomenological framework are developed by uncovering an *a priori* visibility that cannot be reduced to the acts of a seeing subject or the data of a visual meaning for a body–subject. Thus, in *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault says the *a priori* is ‘anterior’ to all perceptions, ‘governing them from afar’.³¹ There are moments for Deleuze in *The Birth of the Clinic* when Foucault

invokes a ‘medical gaze’ that *appears* to rely on a unitary subject whose position never changes with respect to objects. However, Deleuze argues that the ‘archaeology of the gaze’ refers predominantly to an anonymous ‘virtual’ space or ‘absolute visibility’ outside of the gaze, which is not defined by sight but rather by ‘multisensorial complexes’³² that occupy a depth space. This precedes perceptual contents and makes them possible. Equally, Deleuze finds a separate sphere of the articulable in *The Birth of the Clinic* that conditions what is said such that the ‘non-relation’ between the articulable and the visible is clear even if the priority of the articulable is not sufficiently emphasized. Foucault’s denunciation of the subtitle of *The Birth of the Clinic* amounts, for Deleuze, then, not only to an assertion of the primacy of the articulable over the visible but also to a block on any phenomenological recuperation of the ‘gaze’, regardless of whether that philosophy is committed to a phenomenology of the subject or the body. Indeed for Deleuze, although

Foucault may have found inspiration in the late Merleau-Ponty, his major archaeological achievement consists in this: ‘the conversion of phenomenology into epistemology’³³ where ‘knowledge’ (*savoir*) is understood as the ‘non-relation’ between seeing and speaking, an irreducible disjunction and doubling where each form has its own objects and subjects. (For example, there is no ‘single’ object madness that a consciousness could direct itself towards. Madness is seen in different ways just as it is articulated in different ways from one period to the next and even in different stages of a period.)

In the next phase of the *a priori*, Han argues, *The Order of Things* abandons all reference to perception and, in a way that bears similarities with Deleuze, reconstructs the *a priori* as a relation between the separate forms of language and being, each with their own autonomous and independent ontological modes of existence, that more or less ‘correspond’ to produce differing historical relations between words and things. This ‘hidden metaphysics’³⁴ is ‘ironical’ for Han not because Foucault is interested in what precedes and makes ‘words and things’ possible, as it was for Deleuze, but because *The Archaeology of Knowledge* will disavow the existence of these separate ontological regions in favour of a ‘nominalism’ that finds ‘objects’ constituted in discourse rather than an independent zone of things. Where Deleuze sees a conversion of phenomenology into epistemology in Foucault, Han sees a conversion

of ontological or metaphysical realism into a nominalist or discursive idealism. Thus, from *The Archaeology of Knowledge* on, Han posits another phase in the archaeological endeavour to find the conditions for the possibility of knowledge as well as a decisive break in Foucault's thought.

For Han, in this final archaeological phase the status of the rules of the *a priori* in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and the specific kind of determination they exert, remain problematic. After a discussion of the prescriptive and descriptive nature of the rules, Han, following Dreyfus and Rabinow, argues that for Foucault the rules must be descriptive (they can't be prescriptive because Foucault is committed to the 'neutrality' of archaeology and he denies that his *a priori* operates causally), and yet, as Han points out, Foucault argues that the *a priori* 'makes possible and governs'. So Han concludes that 'Foucault ends up in the difficult position of claiming for the historical *a priori* an efficacy which is excluded by archaeology's very theoretical premises, hence the strange notion of regularities which regulate themselves'.³⁵ For Han this repeats the empirico-transcendental confusion evidenced in the earlier archaeological versions of the *a priori* and risks falling into the 'anthropological sleep' that Foucault had himself warned us of.

However, for Deleuze this is to treat statements as if they were formed by rules operating on a transcendent level whose status is constant in relation to a homogenous system. For Deleuze, on the contrary, the rules of the discursive formation are immanent and found on the same level as the discursive, but that level is shifting and in continuous variation, operating neither laterally nor vertically but transversally. Thus 'statements of a discursive formation move from description to observation, calculation, institution and prescription, and use several systems or languages in the process'.³⁶ In effect, the regularity of statements is self-regulating for Deleuze since the formation of statements is governed by rules of inherent change or variation that are neither exclusively formal nor purely extrinsic – that is, determined by social practices. For Deleuze, Foucault's conditions are concerned with real and not possible experience; they are immanent to the 'object' and the historical and are therefore essentially 'rare' or limited according to the formation in question. According to Deleuze 'the conditions are never more general than the conditioned element and gain their value from their particular historical status. The

conditions therefore are not "apodictic" but "problematic"... What in fact they present is the way in which the problem appears in a particular historical formation.'³⁷ Thus Deleuze defines the rules or conditions of the discursive formation as functioning according to the logic of the 'multiplicity', and, if the *Archaeology* does signal a decisive break in Foucault, for Deleuze it is because 'it represents the most decisive step yet taken in the theory-practice of multiplicities'.³⁸ Thus, Foucault's work is an experiment with multiplicities, 'a pragmatics of the multiple'.³⁹ In addition, the *Archaeology* for Deleuze registers the completion of the detachment from phenomenology 'always already' under way in the previous books; an emphasis on the primacy of the articulable (now the 'statement' or the 'discursive') over the visible (now designated as the 'non-discursive') which was not sufficiently flagged in the preceding books. Rather than a move away from any 'hidden metaphysics' the *Archaeology* signals the



emergence of something like a 'flat ontology' (Foucault will later say 'historical ontology') that develops out of and transforms the 'depth' or 'vertical' analysis of 'Being' found in *The Order of Things*. Thus, the 'being of language' of *The Order of Things* becomes 'there is language' in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, but in either case, for Deleuze, 'one speaks' in an anonymous murmur. Thus *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is both an experiment with the autonomy and self-regulation of the articulable as an independent, *a priori*, anonymous multiplicity (which is not to be confused with words, phrases or propositions) and an exploration of the metaphysical topology of its surfaces – 'the positivity of the dictum'⁴⁰ – that are neither visible nor hidden. Behind the curtain there was nothing to see, but all the more important each time to describe the complex folds of the curtain. For Deleuze, in fact, this is Foucault's most important historical principle.

Deleuze has Foucault experimentally drawing out a sort of immanent ‘transversal’ space that cuts across traditional unities, groupings, disciplines, and so on, a self-organizing transcendental space that has ‘no need whatsoever of unity to form a system’.⁴¹ Learning to reach what Deleuze calls the ‘extractive conditions’ of this space required both a critical development of what was there all along and the creative construction of new concepts. So, rather than a strict discourse on method, Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* becomes the creative ‘poem of his previous works’.⁴²

For Habermas and Han, Foucault’s answer to the critical question swings from the transcendental to the historical and back again in an unstable reproduction of the same and a repetition of the ‘doubles’ that mirrors the ‘analytic of finitude’. In contrast Deleuze sees in Foucault’s transposition of the transcendental a vital grappling with the history and becoming of thought, a creative continuity that develops more like a volcanic chain, moving seismically from one crisis to another, revealing a deeper consistency and coherence that cannot be easily measured from the surface. Although the stakes of Foucault’s critical project as each of our authors understands it could be seen as at points compatible, they fundamentally disagree over how one evaluates the philosophical apparatus that underpins it. Han, for example, holds Foucault’s work on the historical *a priori* in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* accountable to a strict logic of ‘exclusive disjunction’ where the rules, which must be either descriptive or prescriptive, inhabit a transcendent space clearly delimiting them from the empiricities they govern. Habermas finds similar logical problems in the tensions between transcendental and empirical elements in Foucault’s genealogical work. Deleuze, however, finds in Foucault an immanent transcendental that operates as an ‘inclusive disjunction’ accounting for itself and its ‘object’ according to the logic of the multiplicity. Here statements and their spaces of dispersion merge at the level of the rules of their formation, tracing out lines of inherent variation. Habermas, Han and Deleuze agree that in Foucault the relation between condition and conditioned is (or ought to be) radically disjunctive, heterogeneous and differential, but they disagree over the nature of the disjunction or difference involved (exclusive or inclusive, external or internal difference) and whether this is coherently maintained.

What ultimately divides these readings is, in Deleuze’s idiom, the logic or ‘image of thought’ upon which their respective interpretations are premised. At stake here, then, are not only differing understandings

of the Kantian legacy and interpretations of the function and nature of the transcendental, but the commitments one has to the very image of philosophical and critical thought, of how one should proceed in thought, of how we should be ‘doing philosophy’. For Habermas, for example, although critique would require the rejection of the Kantian role of philosophy as ‘judge’, critique cannot abandon judgement itself. A tribunal or court is still necessary and would proceed in accordance with the priority of the concepts of communicative action, consensus and the principles of procedural rationality. For Deleuze, by contrast, the ‘judgements’ of philosophy can only be affirmed through ‘criteria’ governed by creativity. On this view, philosophy begins in the ‘middle’, when we are provoked and compelled to think – to take the ‘witches ride’ – leaving behind any external ‘foundation’ or ‘ground’. And when we are forced to think philosophically we do not reflect, contemplate or communicate. Rather, philosophical thought proceeds through the creation of concepts that respond to problems that change. In the creation of the concept – if it is a good concept – one ‘counter-actualizes’ the problem, changing the ‘space of possibilities’ through which we think about the problem and live with it. For Habermas and Han, however, philosophical discourse requires a foundation. To be sure, they do not mean a metaphysical ground or first principle but a foundation defined, at least in part, in terms of criteria derived from rationalized principles of consistency and coherence. For Deleuze, however, Habermas’s and Han’s understanding of these terms still amounts to the application of external criteria, of principles of transcendence or juridical concepts to a body of work whose logic of development doesn’t conform to their conception of a consistent or stable rational system. For Deleuze, if there is a foundation in Foucault it is immanent or self-founding, driven by a rhythm of thought far from equilibrium. There is no direct ground beneath our feet but only an indirect conditioning by the transcendental condition of the historically given. Thinking in the absence of transcendent foundations is, as Foucault says, a ‘perilous act’. For Deleuze, Foucault’s work amounts not only to an encounter with the ‘history of thought’; it also involves a perilous experiment with its *becoming* in which thought thinks its own history, but in order to free itself from what it thinks and be able finally to think otherwise. For Deleuze the application of external criteria from outside the work will not understand the nature of this conditioning and the experimental becoming at its heart – will not do justice to the dangers and passions of this work of thought as a critical and creative project

of thinking-otherwise. How, then, might we formulate a conception of the transcendental consistent with this approach to philosophy?

An immanent transcendental

In order to address this question we can characterize the different responses to the role of Kant and the thought of the transcendental in Foucault in several ways, but the differences can, for the sake of brevity, be reduced to one primary issue: whether and how Foucault's replacement for the Kantian *a priori* subject – a non-anthropological transcendental – that is itself historically 'formed and modified' in experience escapes his own critique of the 'empirico-transcendental reduplication' which purports to show 'how what is given in experience and what renders experience possible correspond to one another in an endless oscillation'.⁴³ The critics' objections to what they take to be Foucault's transcendental approach here are close to what we will call the 'standard objection' to transcendental argumentation per se. The standard objection to transcendental arguments generally is that they are question-begging and circular, that their conclusions are presupposed in their premisses, or that their conclusions are simply premisses in disguise.⁴⁴ The accusation of 'contradiction' or circular reasoning is a claim that both Habermas and Han level at Foucault, underpinning their critical interpretations of his conception of the transcendental and supporting their claim that Foucault's own conception of the transcendental suffers from aporias and doublings similar to those he himself identified within anthropological thought. Although a circular argument is not formally invalid, since if the premisses are true then the conclusions will be also, it will not be of use as a 'proof' because if the conclusion merely repeats the truth contained in the premisses then nothing will have been 'proven' true. Although neither Habermas nor Han relies on the idea that a transcendental argument must offer 'proofs', the issues that separate them from Deleuze depend upon how one understands the coherence of Foucault's methodologies, the 'internal consistency' of his argumentation, the need for a 'foundation' or 'ground' and its application to the relation between the transcendental and the empirical. Although neither Habermas nor Han is opposed to a modified transcendental, both appear to develop their criticisms in parallel with what they take to be Foucault's own critique of the 'empirico-transcendental duplication' and the standard objection to transcendental arguments. What I want to question here, then, is the relevance and validity of the claimed parallel

between the premisses of Foucault's own critiques, for example his critique of anthropology in *The Order of Things*, and the criticisms levelled at him by Habermas and Han.

Foucault's objections to the 'empirico-transcendental duplication' cannot be viewed as exclusively premised upon or derived from notions of logical contradiction, coherence and consistency, nor should Foucault's methods be seen as aiming at breaking free from or avoiding the process of doubling.⁴⁵ Rather, I want to suggest that Foucault's objections to the analytic of finitude are indeed based on the *form* of circling, doubling or duplication and the type of *content* this doubling presupposes and permits, but not doubling, folding or duplication as such. The doubles that constitute the analytic of finitude are all determined 'anthropologically' by the form of *identity* in their concepts or representations so that their content is a repetition of the same. This 'unveiling of the Same' or the identical involves a dialectical relation or doubling where the content that is repeated remains within the form of (identity of) the concept incorporating otherness, difference or distance. In a crucial passage in *The Order of Things* Foucault says:

From one end of experience to the other, finitude answers itself; it is the identity and the difference of the positivities, and of their foundation, within the figure of the *Same*. It is apparent how modern reflection, as soon as the first shoot of the analytic appears, ... moves towards a certain thought of the Same – in which Difference is the same thing as Identity.⁴⁶

Foucault's objections here are to that form of the circle or doubling – captured in the play of identity and difference within the positivities and their foundation – governed by the principle of the 'Same' that makes all difference correspond to identity. In its anthropological configuration the transcendental syntheses performed by the 'I think' are doubled by the empirical syntheses of a living, speaking, labouring individual since Man's finitude 'answers itself' by referring his positive forms to the background and foundation of his own finitude as both a subject that knows and an object of knowledge. Thus, in Foucault's critique of 'modern reflection', the principle that governs synthesis and the reproduction of the doubles in the synthesis is an external principle or condition of the Same where the transcendental repeats the empirical. I want to suggest that we can find a more affirmative, differential principle of synthesis in Foucault, a non-identical sense of circularity, doubling or folding positively recognized by Deleuze. However, the nature of this

doubling, the way in which the ‘transcendental’ elements in Foucault are affirmed and internally ‘caught up in what they connect’ without being governed by the figure of the Same, is the very aporetic condition of what Foucault’s thought is all about – indeed the very basis of the ‘critical freedom’ implicit in his approach to philosophy – at least from the perspective of Deleuze’s reading.

The differences on this key point between various interpretations of Foucault’s transcendental can now be recast in terms of how we characterize the unity and separation in the relation between transcendental and empirical elements – what I referred to earlier in Deleuzian terms as a distinction between an exclusive and inclusive disjunction. Foucault’s transcendental does not seek a foundation for experience in something outside it or in some presuppositionless beginning but in a structure immanent with yet irreducible to the experience it generates. Foucault’s texts move within the circle of the ‘already said’, the circulation of ‘discourses’, ‘powers’ and ‘knowledges’ through which experience is constituted. What is at issue is precisely the structure of a ‘region’ of experience (e.g. ‘madness’, ‘punishment’, etc.) with all of its interconnected elements and the shaping patterns or ‘systems of thought’ that condition it. Thus the ‘unity’ of experience has the character of what we referred to earlier in Deleuzian terms as a ‘multiplicity’ that organizes the separate components together in a complex ‘internal’ articulation of a differentiated structure. In Foucault’s transcendental there is not one set of elements that ‘grounds’ another set of elements in a ‘grounded’ whole. Rather, the transcendental structure (the historical *a priori*) is not independent of the elements but fully dependent upon them just as the elements depend upon the relations between themselves and the structure. The structure and the elements are held together in such a way as to form an essentially indeterminate and open-ended multiplicity where the relations themselves (relations of force, knowledge, power, self, resistance, etc.) determine the distribution of elements, places, functions, and so on, in the ‘experience’ being produced. Thus the elements double, fold or encircle the structure in a differential relation just as the structure differentiates itself from its own genetic elements. This whole relational structure of the immanent transcendental is put into play in Foucault’s texts through a dynamic differential temporality, historical processes that stratify and those that lead to our becoming in the ‘present’. Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical descriptions attempt to lay out the structure of the experience concerned (madness, illness, punishment,

sexuality, etc.) in the light of this differential temporality, where what lies within the circle of experience is exposed and opened to the forces of the outside. If this conception of the double as differential is worked out ‘epistemologically’ in the earlier texts and ‘strategically’ in the texts on power, it is in the final texts when Foucault focuses the immanent transcendental on the interior experience of ‘subjectivation’, the relation to oneself, that the concepts of the fold, the double and a differential circling are brought to the fore and take on a ‘completely new appearance’ while retaining their ontological importance.⁴⁷ In the late Foucault, experience, in its exposure to the forces of the outside, is now to be analysed in terms of the way these forces fold back upon themselves and affect themselves as the affect of self upon self, enabling the creation of ‘new forms of subjectivity’. As Deleuze puts it:

the theme that has always haunted Foucault is that of the double. But the double is never the projection of the interior; on the contrary, it is an interiorization of the outside. It is not a redoubling of the One but a redoubling of the Other. It is not a reproduction of the same but a repetition of the different.⁴⁸

Replacing the vicious circle of anthropological thought with its repetitions of the Same this conception of the folds and doublings of the immanent transcendental in Foucault becomes valid as a ‘diagnostic’ principle for us:

understood in this way, the diagnostic does not establish the facts of our identity by means of the interplay of distinctions. It establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of forms of discourse, our history is the difference of times, that our selves are the difference of masks.⁴⁹

The fold or double as difference becomes the non-anthropological or diagnostic principle of the internal genesis and ‘unity’ of experience in Foucault, the ‘groundless ground’ of the immanent transcendental.

The immanent transcendental in Foucault develops out of resources provided by Kant.⁵⁰ Foucault’s transformation of these resources began very early on through a reading of the *Anthropology*, underwent further development in a number of works with his novel conceptions of the *a priori*, and continued through into the final texts with his work on ‘problematization’, ‘games of truth’ and ‘subjectivation’. I have argued that one condition for doing justice to Foucault’s critical project would involve carefully situating his thought within the rich, multiple and often conflicting trajectories and traditions of modern philosophy for which Kant and his critical project of transcendental

philosophy stands as the principal ‘figurehead’. Within these traditions the exploration of the transcendental pushes up against questions relating to the very limits, scope and nature of philosophy itself. I have suggested that a certain ‘differential’ and temporal conception of circling or doubling is necessarily bound up for Foucault not just with an immanent understanding of the transcendental and transcendental inquiry but with philosophical inquiry itself. The immanent, differential and historical nature of the transcendental in Foucault will distinguish his philosophical and critical approach from formal/logical procedures (structuralism, ‘analytic’, etc.), phenomenology and hermeneutic inquiry. Indeed, for Foucault the opening of such a space would not only mark the ‘return of the beginning of philosophy’; it would be ‘nothing less and nothing more, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think’.⁵¹

Notes

1. F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin, London, 1973, §289, p. 216.
2. M. Foucault, *The Order of Things (OT)*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1970, p. 321.
3. G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. H. Tomlinson, Athlone, London, 1983, p. 52.
4. M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge (AK)*, trans. A. Sheridan Smith, Routledge, London, 1972, p. 127.
5. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, A158/B197.
6. *Ibid.*, A11–12/B25.
7. There is a large body of literature – both ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ – on this topic. A couple of representative texts are Robert Stern, ed., *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999; Hans-Johann Glock, ed., *Strawson and Kant*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2003.
8. G. Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p. 59.
9. G. Gutting, ‘Review of Foucault’s Critical Project, B. Han’, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 1 May 2003, at <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=1262>.
10. Gutting, *Foucault*, p. 66.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 66. This is a striking claim that Gutting does not appear to make in his earlier *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.
12. ‘La Constitution d’un transcendantal historique dans *La Phénoménologie de L’Esprit* de Hegel’, cited in D. Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, Flammarion, Paris, 1991, p. 47.
13. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic (BC)*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge, London, 1973, p. xv.
14. Foucault, *AK*, p. 128.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
16. J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (hereafter *PDM*), trans. F.G. Lawrence, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 253–4.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
18. This is why Foucault objected to being called a ‘structuralist’, since structuralism tried to ‘evacuate the concept of the event’, as Foucault put it in an interview in 1977. See *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow, Penguin, London, 1986, p. 56.
19. Habermas, *PDM*, p. 273.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
24. I did not have space to include a discussion of Andrew Cutrofello’s excellent book *Discipline and Critique*, SUNY Press, New York, 1994, which attempts to work out a nonjuridical or metacritical version of Kantian ethics in a Foucauldian framework. Also see Amy Allen’s fine paper, ‘Foucault and Enlightenment: A Critical Reappraisal’, *Constellations*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2003.
25. B. Han, *Foucault’s Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical* (hereafter *FCP*), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
27. G. Deleuze, *Foucault*, Athlone, London, 1988.
28. Han, *FCP*, p. 6.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
31. Foucault, *BC*, p. 5.
32. Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 59.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
34. Han, *FCP*, p. 65.
35. Han, ‘Reply to Gary Gutting’, pp. 5–6; available at: http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~beatrice/Gutting%20_answer_%202003–05.pdf.
36. Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 5.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
41. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton, Athlone, London, 1994, p. 182.
42. Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 18.
43. Foucault, *OT*, p. 336.
44. This is of course a claim originally laid at the door of Kant and critical philosophy. For a now classic version of this argument in the literature, see Stephan Korner, ‘The Impossibility of Transcendental Deductions’, *The Monist* 51, 1967, pp. 317–31.
45. The original version of this argument is found in Dreyfus and Rabinow’s *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1986 (see Part 1, ch. 4) and is repeated by both Habermas and Han.
46. Foucault, *OT*, p. 315.
47. Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 111.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–8.
49. Foucault, *AK*, p. 131.
50. Foucault arguably found a trace of this non-anthropological conception of the transcendental in Kant’s *Anthropology*, which he suggests repeats the *a priori* of the critique ‘in a temporal dimension’. Time is no longer a non-empirical condition of synthesis as it is in the first critique. Rather, time gnaws at the synthetic activity itself. One could argue that Foucault here uncovers a line of development, not carried forward by Kant, that he will himself take up and transform. See Foucault, *Introduction à L’anthropologie de Kant*, thèse complémentaire; available at www.generation-online.org/p/fpoucault8.htm.
51. Foucault, *OT*, p. 342.

Petrified life

Adorno and Agamben

Alastair Morgan

In his 1965 lectures on metaphysics, Adorno maintained that ‘the form in which metaphysics impinges on us urgently today’ is ‘the question whether it is still possible to live’.¹ Such a question is speculative, since the possibility of life is taken to have migrated to the margins of human experience. For Adorno, life in postwar capitalist societies was a life that ‘does not live’.²

The contemporary philosopher who has most insistently taken up this theme of a dissolution or destruction of experience in late modernity, encapsulated by Auschwitz, is Giorgio Agamben. Agamben’s work on bare life, Auschwitz and the decay of experience displays a number of affinities with Adorno’s critical project. They share both an account of damaged or bare life in modernity as an empty space in which power can produce and effect responses, and an attempt to delineate forms of critical subjectivity which do not rely on vital notions of desire. Both Agamben and Adorno want to recuperate a concept of ‘life that does not live’, which, as a form of life in which something like a bare life *cannot* be isolated, provides a position for a critical subjectivity. The shared normative structure of these philosophies lies in their attempt to trace this position immanently, within the delineation of the features of a damaged life. Adorno poses it as a ‘new categorical imperative’: humans must attempt to ‘arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself’.³

This new categorical imperative becomes a meeting point for metaphysics and politics in the attempt speculatively to construct, through the immanent degradation of life, the possibility of a life that could transcend such immanence. Such a metaphysical project hinges upon a constellation of modal concepts – *possibility*, *potentiality* and *exigency* – and the ways in which they relate to the concept of life. For Adorno, it involved a return of metaphysics to materialism. In this article, I consider these three modal concepts in Adorno,

and Agamben’s work. Both Agamben and Adorno are concerned with a form of experience that is not a sovereign transgression of the bounds of the actual, but instead holds itself in reserve in relation to any project of liberation, whether this be configured in terms of a bursting of the bonds of reified existence through desire, or an affirmation of a life beyond the human. Both thinkers also attempt to resist the nihilistic tendencies of an intrinsically negative thought, through a refusal to embrace pure negativity as such.

This nihilism is a temptation intrinsic to the concept of a ‘life that does not live’: the temptation to emphasize in the denial of life a means beyond life. Such a formulation has a dialectical air about it, but ultimately, if it is thought without mediation, it becomes a simple identification with the forms of power that have produced such a situation. It becomes so because it affirms the site of bare life as the route through which, and by which, redemption occurs. It is an affirmation of the redemptive value of extreme degradation. Adorno introduces an element of this in his embrace of a denial of life as a form of freedom, but then withdraws it:

one might well compare this situation to that of the philosophy of late antiquity, in which, in response to the same question (the possibility of life), people fell back on expedients such as ataraxy, that is, the deadening of all affects, just to be capable of living at all.... I would say that even this standpoint, although it emphatically embraces the idea of the freedom of the individual, nevertheless has a moment of narrow mindedness in the sense that it renders absolute the entrapment of human beings by the totality, and thus sees no other possibility than to submit.⁴

My purpose in reading Agamben and Adorno together on this question is to try and resist the proximity to Adorno of many of Agamben’s positions. The article traces three main differences between Adorno’s

and Agamben's thinking of the speculative experience of life – differences that arise from the extreme proximity in their theories of possibility, potentiality and exigency.⁵ These three main differences concern: (1) Agamben's emphasis on a Heideggerian concept of pure possibility as the opening of experience, as opposed to Adorno's Aristotelian conception of potentiality; (2) Agamben's metaphysics of Being versus Adorno's materialist metaphysics; (3) Agamben's pure philosophy of redemption, in distinction from Adorno's secular, negative philosophy of redemption (a philosophy that dissolves into theology, as opposed to an inverse theology).

My supplementary thesis is that an adequate way of thinking the political and the normative as intrinsically linked to metaphysical experience can only be developed once the trajectory of Adorno's account is differentiated from certain tendencies within it that have become apparent through its similarities with some of Agamben's writing. Agamben thus functions as an evil demon here. He represents the temptation to read Adorno in a way that can only lead us astray. This is a genuine temptation, not least in so far as the convergences between their thought suggest that they might offer a common alternative to a (Nietzschean–Bergsonian–) Deleuzian metaphysics of life. Adorno's and Agamben's work differs from Deleuze's in two main ways. First, it is a thinking of life that centres on the human, rather than life beyond the human. Second, it continues to rely on concepts of potentiality/possibility, in contrast to a conception of the virtual that attempts to destroy the concept of possibility as it has been traditionally thought. My comparison of the different modal concepts at play in Adorno's and Agamben's work is part of an attempt to construct a framework for thinking the relation between metaphysics and life that continues to deploy the concept of possibility.

Possibility, potentiality, matter

Both Adorno's and Agamben's concepts of possibility refer back to Aristotelian discussions of the concept, and these readings determine the different paths that the concept of possibility takes in their respective thought. Ultimately, it is a question of matter, in that the salient importance of Aristotle's conception of possibility for Adorno is that it is tied to matter, rather than form, while Agamben does not interpret or refer to this element of Aristotelian theory. Although to refer to 'Aristotelian theory' in general here is somewhat disingenuous, as the concept of possibility, and indeed the form/matter distinction, appear in different guises

in Aristotle's work, and are interpreted in different ways by commentators on Aristotle.⁶ The aim of my argument is not to appraise different readings in terms of a correct interpretation, but to explore how these different emphases in reading Aristotle give rise to divergent constructions of the concept of possibility.

Aristotle's conception of possibility relates to the difference between *dynamis* and *energeia*, which Agamben reads as an opposition of potentiality to actuality. This opposition is important for Agamben since it is through it that he wants to interrogate the meaning of possibility within human action: what it means when someone says 'I can, I cannot.'⁷ The problem for Agamben's reading is that he appropriates these terms from Aristotle's account of possibility, without a sense of their distinctive Aristotelian usage. For Agamben, possibility is prior to actuality, and the problem is how the possible becomes actual. Formally, the problem becomes an attempt to think a form of possibility that does not exhaust its potentiality in its actualization. However, there is no recognition that for Aristotle *actuality is prior to possibility*. In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle writes: 'We have discussed the various senses of "prior", and it is clear that actuality is prior to potentiality.'⁸ This is clearly not the relation between possibility and actuality that we are usually dealing with, for example in terms of causal relations. The reason for Aristotle's distinctiveness here is his attempt to transform the Platonic idea, and preserve elements of its timelessness, but to relate it materially to a world that changes.

The Platonic idea is related to form, to actuality, but this actuality as form is prior to all possibilities which in some way exist in an unfulfilled state in search of a form. As Aristotle writes: 'For of non-existent things, some exist potentially, but they do not exist, because they do not exist in fulfilment.'⁹ This paradoxical statement only makes some sense if related to the distinction between *dynamis* and *energeia*, which does *not* map straightforwardly onto a distinction between possibility and actuality. *Energeia* is form in so far as it is realized in matter, a force which as immanent idea moves matter towards a realization. Form is a substrate, a substance of which the stuff of matter partakes. This is the transposition of Platonic Ideas into Aristotelian philosophy. The Platonic Forms or Ideas exist, but not transcendent to matter, rather as immanent to their development. Therefore *dynamis* as pure possibility is the thought of matter without form, existing in pure possibility awaiting a form. For Aristotle, it is the ideas as substantial immanent forms that have a higher reality than pure possibility



as matter, and need to be thought as prior, but in relation, to possibility. This is why some non-existent things can exist potentially, in terms of Aristotle's formulation, but not actually: because they have not been formed, they are not fulfilled. Adorno thus formulates Aristotle's conception of possibility as a reversal of our understanding of the relation between possibility and actuality: 'To state the position paradoxically, reality in Aristotle's philosophy corresponds to what we call possibility and possibility to what we call reality.'¹⁰ For Aristotle, *energeia*, as form, is the higher form of reality, whereas pure possibility, as matter, is not in accordance with the real or the actual.

Agamben's concept of potentiality and its relation to possibility is not clearly delineated in his writings. He notes that Aristotle refers to two kinds of potentiality. First, there is a potentiality which is developmental in nature, and refers to inherent human capacities that can develop over time. The second form of potentiality relates to a capacity which a person has that can be actualized or not actualized, such as the potential of the poet to write a poem.¹¹ Such a potentiality is related to a contingency, that an action may or may not take place. Such a contingency can be read in terms of either the fact that certain actions take place, but are not necessary, or in terms of an indeterminateness, a contingency in which something can be in one way or another without either having a certain prevalence or priority.¹² For Aristotle, contingency is related to a certain potentiality which can either

become actual or not. That which has a potentiality to be also has a potentiality not to be. In this sense there is a pure possibility as potentiality, which is this radical contingency. For Aristotle, possibility is related to contingency, as each potentiality can fail at any time to be actualized. However, as we have seen, this notion of potentiality resides in a particular conception of the relation between matter and form.

Both Adorno and Agamben stress the concept of *dynamis* in their reading of Aristotle: the concept of pure potentiality or possibility, as a form of radical contingency. However, for Agamben this is a radical contingency related in some way to the *will*. Agamben talks about potentiality in terms of the alternatives 'I can, I cannot.' Agamben moves between readings of *De Anima* and the *Metaphysics*. Perhaps this is why his concept of potentiality does not relate to the context upon which Adorno draws in his reading of the *Metaphysics*' concept of matter as pure possibility. However, for both thinkers, the central issue is that of pure possibility and its mode of existence as pure possibility. Agamben reads this as 'a potentiality that is not simply the potential to do this or that thing but potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality.'¹³ He interprets a certain phrase of Aristotle's as stating that all potentiality is an impotentiality, all potentiality exists as potentiality in the possibility that it might not realize itself as actual. The Aristotle is currently translated as: 'What is potential is capable of not being in actuality. What is potential can both be and not be, for the same is potential both to be and not to be.'¹⁴

Agamben reads this passage as the 'originary figure of potentiality, which we may now define with his own words as the *potential not to be*'.¹⁵ He does not read this passage in the context of the relation of form to matter. In that context, the potentiality not to be is a form of contingency related to the fact that a matter might not find its form. Agamben wants to relate this to a concept of possibility in terms of the will and a passage from potentiality to actuality in terms of the act. But the relation between potentiality and actuality in Aristotle's text here is not related to the problem of a passing over from potentiality to actuality in terms of action, but in terms of the relation of matter as pure possibility to form as its immanent fulfilment. Agamben's characterization of the problem of potentiality as that which is 'truly potential is thus what has exhausted all its impotentiality in bringing it wholly into the act as such' configures the passage from potentiality to actuality in the form of will. This is not immediately present in the relation of form and

matter, as actuality and possibility in Aristotle. The result, for Agamben, is a thinking of possibility as pure negativity, as the existence of a pure negativity as a *hesitancy*, an affirmative concept of negativity. In his concept of freedom he tries to think freedom in relation to this potentiality not to be, a potentiality to hold itself in reserve.

The figure that represents this potentiality without action for Agamben is the fictional character in Hermann Melville's short story 'Bartleby the Scrivener'. Bartleby is a legal copyist who joins a firm and refuses to complete work that he is assigned, and even refuses to leave the building when he is sacked. He ends up dying in a state of 'radical passivity', when he has been forcibly removed from the legal offices.¹⁶ Bartleby is exemplary for Agamben in that he represents the separation of the will from its realization in a determination, an action or a decision. Potentiality is here a radical contingency that refuses to actualize itself, and attempts to hold itself in a state of pure possibility:

Bartleby calls into question precisely this supremacy of the will over potentiality ... Bartleby is capable only without wanting ... The formula that he so obstinately repeats destroys all possibility of constructing a relation between being able and willing ... It is the formula of potentiality ... 'I would prefer not to'.¹⁷

This formula disengages Bartleby's action from any form of will or life, but does not enable those around him to attribute any meaning to his actions. For Agamben, Bartleby is an exemplar of a 'life that does not live', but can find a resistance to any form of power that wants to take hold of it. Furthermore, he resists this power not on the grounds of his will or his desire, but on the grounds of a potentiality that never actualises itself.

In fact, although Agamben claims that this formula is separated from the will, there is still some sense of an active will here. What has happened is that the will has dissolved into an experience of potentiality as potentiality, and discovers itself as will in the formula 'I would prefer not to'. This formula is neither an 'I can' nor an 'I cannot', but just this oscillation between the two modes. Bartleby's relation to potentiality is thus a hovering between affirmation and negation, a hovering between an affirmation of being and a nihilist rejection of being. Agamben terms this an absolute contingent, and it is the basis of his fundamental ontology of potentiality. This absolute contingent relates its contingency (the fact that it could or could not be) to its possibility (as something that can take place). It

holds in reserve its actualization and thus maintains a relation to potentiality as potentiality. This experience of potentiality is an intellectual experience that nevertheless dispenses with a relation to truth, an experience of thought that 'frees itself from the principle of reason'.¹⁸ This is an experience of a form of life in which something like a bare life cannot be isolated; hence its importance for Agamben in political terms as a form of resistance to the sovereign power that operates through the decision on bare life in the state of exception. But what kind of life is this?

Bartleby's existence as impotentiality is radical nothingness itself. It is certainly an escape from the will, but only in terms of a radical depersonalization that ends in death. Agamben's argument as to the decay of experience suggests that the very process which produces bare life as an empty form of life that can be subject to the isolation and decision of what is living and what is dead is also the experience that can move us beyond such a state, since this experience results in an awareness of our lack of identity with ourselves. The dissolution of experience through the emptying of traditions and beliefs, the transformation of experience as *Erfahrung* into experience as *Erlebnis*, results in an opening, due to the very lack of a place in the world. It is the strength of this paradigm of bare life that it leads to such an invocation of a wholly immanent existence; its weakness is that this immanence converts itself into a pure transcendence. This tension is evident in Agamben's account of bare life as both a worrying political ontology of the present (in that the political forms of late modernity are full of examples of such a bare life) and the means by which an alternative politics can take shape through a metaphysics of potentiality.

Mimesis of petrified life

Agamben's concept of potentiality has meaning as one moment within metaphysical experience, as a turning against life, or a recognition of life as deadened. This negative redemptive moment serves as a vacuum which dissolves subjectivity of its rigidity as ego, and at the same time illuminates the world as a deadened existence, as the possibility of a constructed eternal – capitalism itself as eternity constructed in a transient mode. The stasis of the negative redemptive time serves as a mirror for the stasis of society, but at the same time it arrests the process of decay, if only for a moment. This arrest provides a perspective from which the possibility of reconciliation can be viewed in negative terms. Adorno gives an account of such a negative redemptive moment in his essay on Kafka.

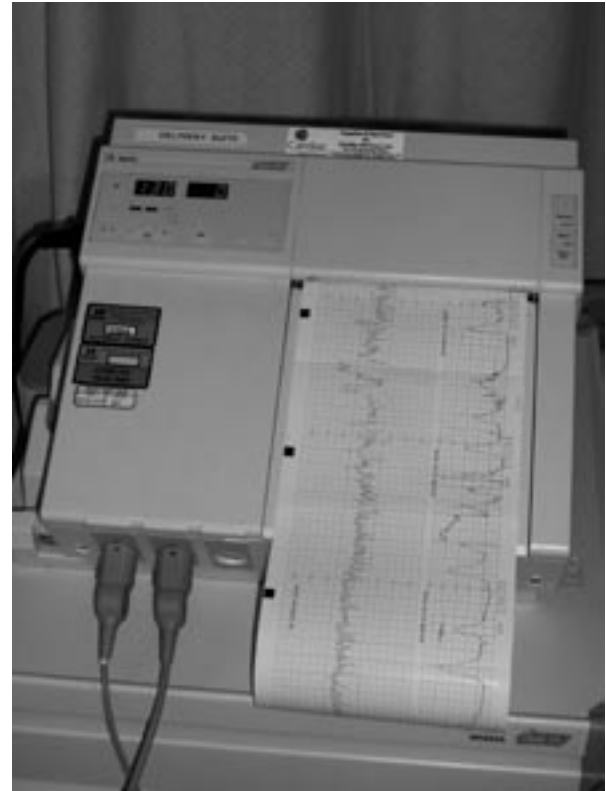
In this essay, Adorno emphasizes the particularity of details within Kafka's works, details which protrude but are incommensurable with any greater meaning. Adorno's intention is to deflect a symbolic reading of Kafka's texts in terms of an existentialist drama of an individuality fatefully existing in an absurd universe. The particularity that most captures Adorno's attention is the emphasis on gestures, both linguistic and non-linguistic. Adorno describes a certain characteristic linguistic gesture of Kafka's in the form of the parable. Kafka's writing often functions through a parable which has no key to interpretation. The sentences affirm an emphatic meaning which when interrogated fails to appear. In this sense, they are analogous to a linguistic gesture, a statement such as 'that is the way it is', which dissolves when the interpreter attempts to decode it. The parable without a key for its interpretation exhausts all meaning in its emphatic presentation as indecipherable linguistic gesture.¹⁹ This linguistic gesture is punctuated by a whole series of bodily gestures and physiognomies that are clearly delineated but hard to understand. There are the figures such as the transformation of Gregor Samsa into the giant bug in *Metamorphosis*, and Kafka's many peculiar animal fables ('Investigations of a Dog', 'Josephine the Mouse Singer'), but also small details in the novels themselves, such as Leni's fingers being connected by a web of skin in *The Trial*, or the frequent descriptions of what psychiatry terms 'inappropriate affect', the accompanying of sad words with laughter, for example. The physical gestures punctuate and dislocate the linguistic gestures:

Gestures often serve as counterpoints to words: the prelinguistic that eludes all intention upsets the ambiguity, which, like a disease, has eaten into all signification in Kafka.²⁰

The prelinguistic, though, is not a bodily moment that can be returned to as if it had not been affected by any destruction of subjectivity. It is not in the bodily gesture that a humanity can refund its embodiment, but the gesture, unwilling, lights up the fate of a certain form of embodiment as a destruction of experience.

What occurs with the bodily gesture in Kafka is something both eternal and ephemeral, slowed down to a point of standstill. The gesture takes on the aura of an eternalized image, but at the same time is purely ephemeral, unwilling and transitory. Adorno refers to such gestures as 'eternalized' and they have the effect, like Benjamin's dialectical images, of bringing 'the momentary to a standstill'.²¹ The gesture is an extreme form of individuation, the bodily expression

of meaning without language and often without intention, but it returns in Kafka as a horrific revelation of something beyond the subjective ego, the revelation of an alienated yet precarious life within the subject. The subject is frightened by its own gestures, and those of others, and, at the same time, invests them with an emphatic and premonitory meaning. What this moment reveals in Kafka's work is a moment of



regression, marked by a revelation of the objectivity within the subject:

The crucial moment, however, toward which everything in Kafka is directed is that in which men become aware that they are not themselves – that they themselves are things.²²

This awareness is horrific, but it also opens on to a dissolution of subjectivity which can reveal itself in the momentary time of a 'now' that does not complete time, but arrests life itself in the gesture, and in this arrest returns the subject to all that it depends on and all it has lost as embodiment. There is a closeness to a redemptive reading of gesture in Adorno here, but the final move of a gathering of this temporal breakthrough as a redemption of all that is lost in a completion of time is lacking. There is no completion, only momentary arrest, and no fulfilment, but only a form of extreme dissociation. The destruction of gesture does not presume an absolute gesturality to which it relates, but only the loss of any relation to the gesture as such.

Agamben writes of gesture in a very similar way, of the gesture being a figure of: ... [an] annihilated human existence, its 'negative outline', and at the same time, its self-transcendence not toward a beyond but ... in a profane mystery whose sole object is existence itself.²³

The 'profane mystery' is related to a concept of an absolute gesturality, which Agamben then outlines as the sphere of a redemptive politics, a politics that would relate itself to an 'absolute gesturality of human beings'.²⁴ But there is no positive redemption of an absolute gesturality in Adorno's negative thinking of the gesture. The similarity with a redemptive experience is that the gesture is an index of absolute loss, as horror, the body confronting the subject as something beyond its control, and in that moment of being beyond control. The gesture also figures a form of reconciliation, a life which could be surprised by the excess of its own embodiment over the structures of its subjectivity.²⁵

In Adorno, this recognition of life as deadened is not affirmed as the site of the redemption of that which is absolutely lost, but is the first moment of the possibility that things could be otherwise. Metaphysical experience begins with the experience of life as deadened, but it does not remain there, or hold itself in such a state. The experience of a potentiality that



holds itself in reserve, a turning against life, is only the *first moment* in metaphysical experience. Adorno gives us a fuller account of Aristotelian possibility than Agamben. It is this account of possibility that will serve as the second moment in metaphysical experience, a response to exigency.

For Adorno, the Aristotelian conception of possibility is an important corrective to the direction in which the relations between possibility, actuality and necessity have been taken in Western metaphysics since Aristotle. In particular, Aristotle's conception of matter as pure possibility serves as a corrective to the migration of possibility into pure form in Kantian

philosophy. Matter is the indissoluble something as the content of any thought. Aristotle's definition of matter as potentiality contains the thought that there can be no form without something as the ground for its synthesis. There must be a material there to be formed. Adorno outlines a tension in Aristotle's theory of matter as pure possibility that he traces in his account of freedom:

There is a curious tension and difficulty in the concept of ὕλη (matter) in Aristotle; on the one hand it is denigrated, disqualified, censured in every respect, including the moral, while on the other there is the remarkable assumption whereby this element, though heterogeneous with regard to form, is endowed with a kind of animation, a tendency, even a certain kind of yearning.²⁶

This account of matter as inseparable from both possibility and freedom is crucial for Adorno. His account of freedom will rely on a contradiction between a concept of possibility as pure form, which has migrated into the transcendental subject, and an attempt to rescue the concept of matter as pure possibility, both as ground of freedom and as heterogeneous to form.

Adorno attempts to think the subject as a body that thinks. To be more accurate we could call this an experience of the ineliminable materiality of thought itself. What does it mean to call this an experience? At one level, Adorno emphasizes this materialism as a logical implication of all thought, a certain emphasis on the reliance of all ontological categories on a material 'something'. Adorno tends to assert this rather than to argue for it:

There is no Being without entities. 'Something' – as a cogitatively indispensable substrate of any concept, including the concept of Being – is the utmost abstraction of the subject-matter that is not identical with thinking, an abstraction not to be abolished by any further thought process.²⁷

This is more than the Kantian thing-in-itself. Adorno needs more than a noumenon; he needs a material moment as the noumenal which can matter for thought, that can be experienced rather than just conceived.

To try and rectify this aspect of Kant, Adorno argues for a form of thought that is not fundamentally divided from affect. The motive for thought itself, rather than will as transcendental ego, will be related to pleasure and need. Pleasure and need are not separate from thinking but the motor or unrest that drives thinking. The primary drive for such a thinking is the suffering of the body, the physical moment within thought that is registered as a lack of bodily fulfilment. Thinking is deeply motivated by the suffering body. Within a

metaphysical experience, there must be some response to this stored-up but deeply suppressed potential, this reliance of thought upon its material moment. The difficulty is how to understand this return of a suppressed relation to materiality within metaphysical experience. As we have seen, the first moment of metaphysical experience consists in a turning against life, through the experience of a mimesis of deadened life, but this experience must, in itself, produce a response to materiality that is deeply suppressed, a response to a potential that has never been realized as potentiality. Agamben has written about such a concept as an exigency within thought, a modality that he terms specifically 'messianic'.²⁸

Exigency

For Agamben, exigency is a modality in which something has been completely forgotten, but still remains unforgettable within life. Agamben's definition of exigency follows quite closely Adorno's account of Aristotelian possibility. Exigency is the demand of an actual existence for its own proper form of possibility. Agamben writes of it in the following terms:

Leibniz defines the relation between possibility and reality as follows: *omne possibile exigit existere*, every possibility demands to exist ... I do not think this formulation is correct. In order to define what is truly an exigency, we should invert the formulation and write: *omne existens exigit possibilitatem suam*, each existent demands (*esige*) its proper possibility, it demands that it become possible. Exigency consists in a relation between what is or has been, and its possibility. It does not precede reality; rather it follows it.²⁹

This formulation of an existent that hovers in contingency awaiting the process whereby it can become possible, rather than actual, offers us an interesting way of thinking metaphysical experience. Its possibility is the return of something already existing as potentiality, but deeply suppressed, yet its return is not as an actualized existent (since it cannot be actualized within a reified society), but as an active possibility, as an active potential.

However, there are two problems with Agamben's definition. The first lies in the notion of a proper possibility for an exigency. This becomes the motor for an affirmative redemptive move within Agamben's philosophy. The exigency becomes messianic in its total identification with what is lost and forgotten and it is only through the total dissolution of the subject in an identification with all that is lost and forgotten, that a messianic redemption of what has been lost can

be retrieved. Normatively, the demand of what is lost is not a demand for remembrance or commemoration, but a demand for the dissolution of the subject in an act of faith towards that which is lost, an act of faith that Agamben grounds as a historical and political responsibility. It is not this act of faith that is necessarily a problem, but the redemptive move, which identifies the place of what is lost and forgotten as the only proper possibility of its remaining unforgettable. This dissolves any possibility of a response to the process of loss and forgetting other than through a complete identification with it, in the hope of redemption.

The second difficulty concerns thinking something as completely lost yet nonetheless unforgettable. However, this is important if reification has in fact become so complete that the possibility of life rests in an experience at the limits of possibility. How does that exigency within thought return within metaphysical experience, as a potential that demands its possibility? If the first moment of metaphysical experience is a mimesis of deadened life, then within that experience there must be a return of all that thought depends on that is other to it. One way to think of this would be in terms of the Freudian 'return of the repressed'. Repressed material, whether of a primal repression (a repression that denies the repressed content any entrance into consciousness) or a secondary repression (what Freud terms 'repression proper', where instincts entering consciousness are repressed), maintains the character of something completely unconscious, completely lost, but unforgettable because it constantly returns in displaced ways, and substitutes itself for other objects and fetishes.³⁰ Adorno supplements Freud's ahistorical concept of repression with an account of the importance of forgetting within a history of reification. Forgetting is a process that is necessary for life and, of course, for memory, but it is how we forget that determines the nature of an experience of recall (*Erinnerung*).

In the letter to Benjamin in which Adorno writes about this, he points to Benjamin's critique of Freud's lack of a distinction between *Erinnerung* (active recall) and *Gedächtnis* (memory)³¹ and links this with Benjamin's account of shock and reflex experience. There is a form of forgetting in which the material forgotten never entered consciousness with enough depth in the first place. Such a forgetting irretrievably loses what it forgets; it is what Adorno terms a 'reflex forgetting'. On the other hand, what Adorno terms 'epic forgetting' is a forgetting that retains the possibility of a recall which could awaken what is lost, in experiences such as the *mémoire involontaire*.³² If

all reification is a forgetting, as Adorno argues, then there are two processes of the forgotten within reification: one which remains unforgettable, because of the way it entered experience in the first place; the other which is irretrievably lost. If forgetting is increasingly becoming a forgetting of reflex experience, then the process of attempting to recall that which has been forgotten or repressed becomes harder and harder. The response to such an exigency of the forgotten within the metaphysical experience is therefore twofold. First, there is the experience of memory itself, whether involuntary or not, of the possibility of a different relation with objects other than that of a dominating identification. But this possibility relies upon a form of reification in which what has been forgotten has not been irretrievably lost. The increasing reflex character of modern experience raises the possibility that all that lies in metaphysical experience itself is a mimesis of deadened life, which does not open up a recall of other ways of relating to objectivity. Then the response within metaphysical experience would become simply a response to suffering, the affective remnant of all that has been lost in the process of reification.

The Open, the place name

Up to this point, I have traced two moments within metaphysical experience. First, there is the turning against life, encapsulated in a mimesis of deadened life. This is produced through a determinate negation of reified life. Agamben articulates this moment through the idea of a potentiality that holds itself in reserve, but does not then relate that potentiality to a material exigency, in the way that Adorno's thought attempts. This leaves us with a metaphysical experience, in Agamben's philosophy, that dissolves into an experience of ideal possibility, of an opening to Being, whether as an irretrievable exigency from the past or the hope of a Messianic redemption to come. What is problematic from the viewpoint of the relations between metaphysical experience and politics is that the site of bare life (reified life) itself becomes the vehicle through which redemption occurs. The difference between bare life and a form of life in which a bare life cannot be isolated is minuscule, and it has to be, because of the belief that redemption can only come about through the dissolution of the subject via an identification with that which is absolutely lost and forgotten.

Agamben concludes *Homo Sacer* as follows:

This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a bios that is only its own *zoē*.³³

He poses a question as to how a *bios*, a way of life, can be its own *zoē*. How can a mode of existence seize hold of the bare life that escapes it? This, for Agamben, is the meeting point of metaphysics and politics: 'how can a form of life (i.e. bios) seize hold of the very *haplōs* that constitutes both the task and the enigma of Western metaphysics.'³⁴ Agamben posits a form of life corresponding to the Greek *haplōs*, which he defines as the philosophy of pure Being. The possibility that lies in an experience of radical potentiality is the possibility of an experience beyond materiality, an experience of Being itself, but an experience that can only mark its distance from the immanence of bare life, through its closeness to bare life. The possibility that lies at the culmination of a metaphysical experience, for Agamben, then, is the possibility of an experience of 'the open', of the 'unconcealedness—concealedness of being'.³⁵ The late Heideggerian pedigree of this position is obvious. The concept of the open names an experience of possibility beyond all potentiality, beyond all exigency, an experience of ideal or pure possibility. However, the link between the experience of potentiality and that of the open remains unclear. The experience of potentiality merely appears to transcend itself into an experience of the open.

However, this problem also haunts Adorno's account of metaphysical experience. Metaphysical experience begins in the negative redemptive moment of a turning against life, of a mimesis of deadened life. Within that moment, there is a recognition that this petrified life reveals all that thought depends upon as non-identical with thought, and that it reveals this through forms of recall, either conscious or unconscious, of other ways of relating between subject and object in a non-dominating fashion. This is the response to exigency that we talked about earlier. Nonetheless, it is still not clear how this produces the possibility of a different mode of relating to objects, the possibility of reconciliation. Following the revelation of life as deadened, and the realization that this is not all there is to life, there must be some glimpse of reconciliation within metaphysical experience. This is a changed concept of reconciliation, of a form of cognition and a state of society which could allow a relationship between subject and object that would not be dominating.

Reconcilement would release the non-identical, would rid it of coercion, including spiritualised coercion; it would open the road to the multiplicity of different things and strip dialectics of its power over them. Reconcilement would be the thought of the many as no longer inimical, a thought that is anathema to subjective reason.³⁶

Reconciliation in both reason and society would be that state in which what was alien to thought and identification remains in its difference within thought. This would be a different model of fulfilled experience. This fulfilment does not lie in completion, or even rational identification, in the sense of a completed coincidence of subject and object. Error, fallibility, the fact that thought fails in its identifications, would all still be the marks of an unreconciled society, but would nonetheless be constitutive characteristics of rational experience itself. However, for the negative redemptive moment to open up the possibility of reconciliation, this possibility must have some deeply suppressed potential as an exigency within life.

One account Adorno gives of a metaphysical experience is in Proustian terms of the promise of the place name:

One thinks that going there would bring the fulfilment, as if there were such a thing. Being really there makes the promise recede like a rainbow. And yet one is not disappointed; the feeling now is one of being too close, and not seeing it for that reason ... what it takes to form this universal, this authentic part of Proust's presentation, is to be entranced in one place without squinting at the universal.³⁷

The important thing here is not necessarily the experience of the promise of happiness and its inevitable failure; it is the model of experience contained in the happiness of the place name itself, which means that the disappointment is not experienced when the place does not fulfil the hoped-for requirements. This is undoubtedly a model of transcendence, experience as transcendence, but it is distinctive in that it is related to the fullness of experience, rather than to intellectual intuition.

What kind of possibility is opened up by the experience of the place name? One could see this as an ideal conception of possibility in the sense that the lack of fulfilment opens up the subject to an experience of pure possibility. In the lack of disappointment encapsulated in the experience of the place name lies an experience of pure but empty possibility, an experience simply that things could be different. However, this would return us to the migration of possibility to an empty, contentless experience, which Adorno criticized in Kant. What the experience of the place name reveals is the antinomical nature of such metaphysical experience. The desire within the place name is for all that is invested within the concept (the name) to be revealed within actual experience, but the reality is that there is always something intransigent within experience

to such a utopian longing for the true substance of cognition. Utopia would lie in a concept that truly identified its object, but the possibility of such happiness is necessarily thwarted by the lack of fulfilment constitutive of experience, in which there is always a moment of non-identity within any identifying procedure. Nonetheless, the lack of disappointment opens up a different relation to the possibility of a true identification, a relation in which it is possible to cling to the yearning for identity, yet at the same time to exist in the acknowledgement that this is not possible – which in its turn opens up an experience of possibility that would not demand substance or complete actualization, but would exist somewhere in the space between actualization and idealization. The place name, then, reveals a tension between ideal and material concepts of possibility, a tension that is constitutive of metaphysical experience itself.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes the following about the relation between utopia and possibility:

To want substance in cognition is to want a utopia. It is this consciousness of possibility that sticks to the concrete, the undisfigured. Utopia is blocked off by possibility, never by immediate reality; this is why it seems abstract in the midst of extant things.³⁸

The yearning for substance within the concept is the yearning for the possibility of a true identification, but such an identification is always blocked off by the non-identical. Possibility is therefore the constant rebuke to the demand within the concept that it coincide perfectly with the object or the experience itself. The model of a utopian experience would be an emphatic and non-dominating coincidence, a 'that's the way it is'. But such a utopia is blocked by possibility itself, which lies in the moment of non-identity to any identifying procedure. The metaphysical experience of possibility is an experience that remains within the yearning for coincidence, but at the same time acknowledges the impossibility of such a coincidence, for the sake of another kind of possibility, the possibility of the non-identical. Within metaphysical experience, there is an interplay between an ideal concept of possibility (the possibility that the concept could completely identify the object) and a realization, an experiential and material realization, that such an experience does not occur, is not possible. What occurs within the metaphysical experience is that the yearning for identity becomes dislocated from the domination intrinsic to the identifying procedure and exists alongside the realization of the impossibility of its fulfilment as an opening of possibility itself.

This possibility is ideal, in the sense that it opens the subject to that which does not exist, but it does so only through a complex interaction with, first, a determinate negation of reified life (the turning against life, the mimesis of deadened life) and, second, the response to exigency as a suppressed potential, which becomes actualized as potentiality (matter) within metaphysical experience. For Adorno, the path to a life in which bare life cannot be isolated can only be traced through a critique of its place within metaphysical experience, rather than a redemptive identification with bare life itself, of the kind we find in Agamben's metaphysics.

Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme, Nachgelassene Schriften*, vol. 14, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1998, p.175; *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 112.
2. Adorno takes as the epigraph to Part 1 of *Minima Moralia* Ferdinand Kürnberger's aphorism, 'Life does not live'. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951), trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, New Left Books, London, 1974, p. 19.
3. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften 6*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1996, p. 358; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, Routledge, London and New York, 1966, p. 365.
4. *Metaphysik/Metaphysics*, pp. 175/112.
5. In his recent article 'The Dreambird of Experience: Utopia, Possibility, Boredom' (*Radical Philosophy* 137, May/June 2006, pp. 36–44), Peter Osborne outlines four concepts of possibility in philosophical usage, which he lists as: the formal-logical concept of possibility (Kant), the concept of potentiality, as the 'already-actually possible' (Aristotle), an existential concept of possibility (Heidegger), and a concept of virtuality which dissolves possibility into an ontology of difference and becoming (Bergson and Deleuze). My main concern in this article is with an Aristotelian concept of potentiality as it is used differently by Adorno and Agamben, and with an ideal conception of the possible, which I relate variously to a Kantian formal transcendentalism (i.e. the possibility of the noumenon as that which is contentless but necessary, as a thing-in-itself, for the operation of thought) and a Heideggerian conception of possibility, which is more associated with the possibility of an experience of the event of Being, than with the existential conception outlined in *Being and Time*.
6. See Jonathan Barnes, 'Metaphysics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 94.
7. Giorgio Agamben, 'On Potentiality', in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. with an introduction by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1999, p. 177.
8. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, (Θ), 1047b, in *A New Aristotle Reader*, ed. J.L. Ackrill, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987, p. 326.
9. *Ibid.*, 1049b, p. 326.
10. *Metaphysik/Metaphysics*, pp. 60/37.
11. Agamben, 'On Potentiality', p. 179.
12. See Jaako Hintikka, *Time and Necessity – Studies in Aristotle's Theory of Modality*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973, pp. 27–34 and pp. 94–9, for discussions of the relations of potentiality, contingency and possibility.
13. Agamben, 'On Potentiality', p. 180.
14. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX (Θ), p. 332.
15. Agamben, 'On Potentiality', p. 182.
16. The phrase 'radical passivity' is taken from Thomas Carl Wall's book *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben*, SUNY Press, New York, 1999.
17. Agamben, 'Bartleby, or On Contingency', in *Potentialities*, p. 255.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 259–62.
19. T.W. Adorno, 'Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10.1, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1996, p. 255; 'Notes on Kafka', trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. with an introduction by Rolf Tiedemann, and trans. Rodney Livingstone and others, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2003, p. 212.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 258/215.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 263/219.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 267/222.
23. Giorgio Agamben, 'Kommerell, or On Gesture', in *Potentialities*, p. 84. Agamben also writes on gesture in an essay entitled 'Notes on Gesture', in *Infancy and History*, pp. 137–40.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
25. Alexander García Düttmann has written about Adorno's thought as a gesture, in terms of its emphasis on the necessary exaggeration of all thought, a thought that always overshoots its object. See his 'Thinking as Gesture: A Note on Dialectic of Enlightenment', *New German Critique* 81, Fall 2000, pp. 143–52.
26. *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*, pp. 117/74.
27. T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996, p. 135; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, Routledge, London and New York, 1966, p. 135.
28. Agamben, Giorgio, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2005, p. 39.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
30. Freud, Sigmund, 'Repression', in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards, Pelican Freud Library vol. 11, Penguin, London, 1991, pp. 150–51.
31. T.W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz and trans. Nicholas Walker, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, p. 321.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
33. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 188.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2004, p. 57.
36. *Negative Dialektik/Negative Dialectics*, pp. 18/6.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 366/373.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 66/57. I am indebted to Simon Jarvis, who pointed me in the direction of this passage from *Negative Dialectics*.

documenta 12 magazines project

What is to be done? (education)

This dossier is *Radical Philosophy's* contribution to the *documenta 12 magazines* project. Documenta is an international exhibition of modern and contemporary art that has been held in Kassel, Germany, since 1955 and currently takes place once every five years. For many years now, it has been at the forefront not only of the exhibition of international contemporary art, but also of institutional reflection upon its intellectual, cultural and political functions. In the last decade, these two aspects – exhibition and discursive self-reflection – have become increasingly intertwined. In this respect, Documenta has become, for many, a model of a new kind of art institution, which incorporates a growing body of cultural activities into its structures of presentation, not as supplementary or complementary functions, but as integral parts of a single, expanded mode of address.

The *documenta 12 magazines* project is the latest in the series of activities that have come to surround and contextualize the Documenta exhibition. Its stated aim is to initiate a dialogue among over seventy print and online periodicals, throughout the world, on three themes, chosen by the artistic director of Documenta 12, Roger M. Buergel, as 'leitmotifs' for the exhibition, on account of their 'transregional' relevance: *Is modernity our antiquity?*, *What is bare life?*, and *What is to be done? (Education)*. The idea is to draw out 'the interests and specific knowledge of the respective local contexts' on these topics of purportedly common interest. All contributions will be published on the intranet platform of *documenta 12 magazines* and in the online magazine of *documenta 12*, as well as in the participating journals themselves, and can be used (copyright-free) by the other magazines taking part in the project. A selection of contributions will be published in three print editions of the *documenta 12 magazine* and in other media of *documenta 12*.

The magazine project thus has a dual function. On the one hand, its independent cultural function, and stated aim, is to further transnational cultural collaboration and contribute to longer-term cooperations and intellectual networks, including opening up new channels for independent distribution. In this respect, despite its orienting concern with art's relationships to *theory* and to *the public*, respectively, the project

exceeds the cultural function usually associated with art institutions, since many of the journals in question (like *Radical Philosophy*) are not 'art magazines'. This is what grant-awarding bodies call 'knowledge-transfer'. On the other hand, in so doing, it performs an intellectual and political legitimation function for Documenta – not just the exhibition but, primarily, the institution and its 'brand'.

This is a structural tendency that has long been discernible in the cultural industry (especially the music industry) of which art institutions are increasingly a part: the paradoxical sponsoring of 'independence' as informally subcontracted research & development for major institutions. This is not just an expression of what Gayatri Spivak has described as 'the definitive tendency of the dominant to appropriate the emergent', but also the manifestation of a more novel need within the dominant to *produce* the emergent, qua emergent, on a transnational terrain, as the condition of its appropriation. Yet this remains a fundamentally contradictory, and hence potentially productive, albeit necessarily compromised, intellectual and cultural space (see Peter Osborne, 'The Power of Assembly: Art, World, Industry', in *Zones of Contact: Catalogue of the 2006 Biennale of Sydney*, 2006). With the decline of independent Left political-intellectual cultures, the artworld remains, for all its intellectual foibles, the main place beyond the institutions of higher education where intellectual and political aspects of social and cultural practices can be debated, and where these debates can be transformed.

In the last ten years, *Radical Philosophy* has increasingly engaged with theoretical and political issues in contemporary art (Stewart Martin's 'A New World Art? Documenting Documenta 11', in *RP* 122, November/December 2003, was a comprehensive critical response to Documenta 11). We have chosen to respond to *documenta 12 magazines'* invitation with three short pieces by members of the editorial collective on its third topic, What is to be done? (Education). And we have interpreted the brief regarding 'local context' quite narrowly, to offer reflections from the standpoint of a contemporary anglophone appropriation of the German critical tradition, of which Documenta itself represents one, institutionalized variant.

PO

Answering the question: What is to be done? (education)

David Cunningham

The question ‘What is to be done?’, Adorno remarked, frequently ‘sabotages the logical progress of knowledge that alone allows for change’. However, despite being always-already-inscribed within the imperatives of instrumental rationality, it is, he acknowledged, nonetheless ‘unavoidable’.¹ This is especially so for the Left, and for a radical philosophy that is obliged to consider what ‘anti-capitalism’ might mean today, beyond its rhetorical functioning as placeholder for a desired solidarity of opposition to the current state of things.

Of course, if this question continues to haunt the Left it is because of the canonical status assured it by Lenin. Published just two years into the last century (its recent centenary deafeningly silent), *What is to be Done?* was the essential communist handbook of organizational tasks for the first part of the twentieth century at least. The relation of its conception of the party to Marx’s remains contentious, as does the degree of its debt to Blanquist–Jacobin ideas of revolutionary conspiracy. But it is certain that little could be less compelling or fashionable today – Slavoj Žižek’s liberal-baiting bid for an ambiguous revival of ‘Lenin *contra* Leninism’ notwithstanding. Indeed, in the intellectual milieu of the Left’s own global ‘theoryworld’,² there is near universal agreement that any idea of the party as the privileged organizational form of militant activism has long since outlived its moment.

Unavoidable as it may well be, then, the very question ‘What is to be done?’ can seem somewhat quaint under present circumstances. It implies a sense of collective political power and purpose that few can currently muster. Which begs the question of what it means that it should be asked again today, not in the troubled context of ‘the socialist project’ – as even Adorno might still have understood the promise embodied in that phrase – but in that of an art event, itself conceived under the sign of a certain ‘radicality’? What does this mean for politics and for art, and for the current relationship between them? In what sense might it be ‘in art and its mediation’ that we would find ‘embedded’ a ‘global complex of cultural translation’, which, so Roger Buergel claims, ‘sets the stage for a

potentially all-inclusive public debate’? And what does this suggest about the role played by cultural forms within current reconfigurations of political identities, desires, and conditions of possibility in an emergent global capitalist modernity?

These are not, in themselves, unfamiliar issues. Indeed they have been much debated within the pages of *Radical Philosophy*, as elsewhere, over the last few years. The whole question of the dual contemporary legacy of the concept of the ‘avant-garde’, as historically operative in both politics and art, and the glue that once promised to bind them together, suggests one obvious starting point here. For it is this term that Lenin, in *What is to be Done?*, borrows from the French radical lexicon of the nineteenth century to define the Communist Party’s revolutionary role as ‘vanguard’ (*avangard*). Much once rested upon the precarious intersection this seemed to invite between the Party and the various cultural avant-gardes that flourished during the first decade after 1917 – between the Bolsheviks and those who ‘heard and understood the Revolution’, above all, because ‘its present was dependent on a future’.³

The story has been told often enough, and it finds itself repeated, in less overtly dramatic situations, within the histories of various ‘Western’ avant-gardes such as surrealism. Moreover, it is the loss or failure of this conjunction that constitutes at least one motive for the obituary notices for the avant-garde, constantly announced from the early 1960s onwards. Yet the ‘defeat’ of an ‘originary’ instance here does not thereby negate the problematic of the avant-garde, as is too often supposed. (If nothing else, events like Documenta continue to attest to this.⁴) Nor is it clear that it could do so, to the degree that, politically, it is still the artwork’s capacity to be ‘vibrated by the reflexes of the future’ (in Breton’s evocative phrase) that provides its essential criteria of value, and critical meaning, in a global capitalist culture.⁵ Indeed, the whole question of contemporary art’s capacity to institute some future space for ‘advanced, open and autonomous working practices’, as the Documenta working paper imagines it, is dependent on this.

Nonetheless, and precisely to the extent that the question of the avant-garde ‘continues inexorably to exert its demands and responsibilities’ upon the present, the social and political context within which this happens has patently changed.⁶ Vibrated by the reflexes of those demands and responsibilities that constitute the avant-garde’s persistence, at its most productive, this creates an obligation, for what Walter Benjamin called an art that would be ‘based on politics’ to rethink its critical work and social functions under the changed conditions of ‘our’ present. Yet, given this, the desire for a concrete politicization of art, as yet another counter-move to the aestheticization of politics within commodity culture, entails the question of just exactly what ‘politicization’ might *mean* at a historical moment in which the narrative horizons that have hitherto sustained the Left have come to seem untenable. And if this is the point at which artistic questions ‘collide with social questions such as the existence or non-existence of a collective social subject’, then it is the seeming *lack* of such a subject, at least as it was largely taken for granted by the avant-gardes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that thus must frame the question of what it means for a practice to be political today.⁷

It is, in fact, precisely in this light that what is most distinctive about contemporary criticism of the broadly Leninist model of the avant-garde becomes clear. For, necessary as it may be, this criticism often appears to entail that issues of organizational form – the theoretical elaboration of abstract conceptual figures of networks, rhizomes, and so on – run far ahead of any attempt to articulate identifiable political content to such forms, in a determinate sense. No doubt inevitably so. To note as much is not to question the importance of ‘new forms of organization and self-organization’ as themselves a political issue. For it is of course true that, in some fundamental way, political form simply *is* its content; always, but perhaps particularly so for any politics operating under the sign of some radical democracy to come. (Indeed, Leninism might precisely be said to have failed because of its fatal incapacity to come to terms with this.) Yet it can hardly be ignored that where the question of determinate political *possibility* emerges – the basis, once, for the Marxian Left’s rigorous delineation of its difference from all utopianism, for its belief in ‘the real movement which abolishes the present state of things’ – the issue of the concrete contents and processes at stake in contemporary opposition, protest and resistance remains (like Iraq for Tony Blair) the unmentioned elephant in the room.

In practical terms, a tacit agreement to disagree, as the only basis for both coalition and diversity (as manifested in the various metropolitan, national, continental and global social forums), is undoubtedly unavoidable. In fact, it is desirable, on some level, as a democratic ‘good’ in itself. But, as Martin Ryle noted in *Radical Philosophy* 114, it can also amount to an effective agreement to *evade* or *suppress* the question of what is thereby actually at stake in the oppositional endeavours of contemporary anti-capitalism.⁸ At the very least, this indeterminacy or self-defining absence – which makes the emphatically futural character of the question ‘What is to be done?’ such a source of anxiety – needs to be made explicit and its implications thought through. (Ironically, this may well be the unintended critical function of Hardt and Negri’s celebrated intervention – its *essential* failure to substantiate the Multitude as a political or social category, in comparison to the analysis of Empire.) Certainly, contemporary political and art theory have something in common at this point. Indeed, from the perspective of the artworld, they can often seem to overlap, in so far as art’s intrinsic relevance is now seen to be located not so much in the critical value accorded to art-specific judgements or forms of experience, as in the wider formal problems of the ‘global complex of cultural translation’ that the artworld engenders.

Trafficking the avant-garde

Why, then, as Buerger presents it in his third Documenta 12 question, might such a question situate itself today within a global problematic organized around an idea of *education*? Why, indeed, to put it in a rather different way, should it be in redefining art’s vocation in terms of some educative process that an apparently utopian (if not utopianist) spark might be located?

Such an idea is hardly foreign to the history of the avant-garde. Using ‘ode or song, story or novel’, writes the utopian socialist Olinde Rodriguez in 1825, ‘we’ the ‘avant-garde’ will ‘spread new ideas amongst men’, staging the basis for art’s recovery of ‘a great political role’ akin to that it played for the ‘peoples of antiquity’.⁹ Such general sentiments were familiar for a good hundred years or more to follow. In a more directly political register, they find one echo in the Leninist conception of the party’s vanguard/avant-garde role itself, which establishes the foundation for a distinctive pedagogical determination of the political operativity of both theory and culture. At the same time, they connect with a somewhat different tradition, to be found most clearly in Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* – a text that Jacques

DOCUMENTA KASSEL 16/06 — 23/09 2007



Rancière has recently claimed as an inaugural moment for both the avant-garde and a modern aesthetic regime more generally. Mediating between alienated present and de-alienated future, it is art's 'promise of equality, the promise of a new way of sharing a common world', that provides the basis for an aesthetic education and self-education of humanity as a process of learning to live in a future free political community. For Rancière, it thus 'clears a path to the [romantic] idea of an aesthetic revolution ... fostering the Marxian idea of the "human revolution" by contrast to the merely political revolution, and culminating in the Futurist and Constructivist programmes in the first quarter of the twentieth century'.¹⁰

Yet it's fairly hard to see this as a plausible model for whatever new *Bildung* might be at stake in the international artworld today. Rather, it threatens simply to repeat the impasses of the romantic linkage of art to politics, through a failure to engage the actual workings of capitalism that condition it at every point. Certainly, to conceive of the artworld's developing and (at least partially) decentralized network of sites, even speculatively, as the generation of some genuinely global *public* space – in which the emergence of an immediate form of de-alienated non-capitalist life and cultural exchange might somehow be visible on the horizon – is sheer romanticism, an abstract utopianism of organizational form. One person's heterotopic enclave is another's gated community (however globally dispersed).¹¹ At best, only as constituted through some immanent *critique* of the capitalist formation of the social, of its abstraction by the value form – as the production of some reflective form of critical knowledge of that abstraction¹² – would what Buergel envisages as the staging of some politicized 'public debate' around art and its mediation seem to be remotely imaginable or tenable today, given the inherent limitations to any constitution of a 'public' that are all too obviously apparent here. At stake here would not be yet another passage through the consolations of romantic anti-capitalism, but a critical articulation of

the violences of art's own social condition, the larger social divisions and inequalities that determine the division between art and politics themselves.

If, then, it is true that '[a]rtists educate themselves by working through form and subject matter', and 'audiences educate themselves by experiencing things aesthetically',¹³ perhaps we still need to think, in a fairly sober and straightforward fashion, about what is entailed by 'education' in some of its most basic senses – that is, as a question, ultimately, about the social relations (and spaces) through which different forms of knowledge are produced. What is, or might be, specifically educational, in any politically productive sense, in the contemporary production and dissemination of forms of knowledge globally? How is access to such forms determined? And how do these relate to the circulation and accumulation of forms of capital in what, as we have long been told, is (at its 'cutting edge' at least) a developing knowledge economy?

The complex relations established in some contemporary art to a social documentary tradition provide one possible case study here. A work like Allan Sekula's photographic sequence *Fish Story* (1995), exhibited at Documenta 11, intrinsically involves, as part of its production and reception, 'practices of research in cultural, economic and social history'. At the level of 'subject matter', these engage, in Buchloh's words, 'the fallen facticity of the world ... [the] sites of cover-ups and myths, of clandestine and concealed "public" operations ... the operations of capital'. This clearly implies an educational (and self-educational) dimension to the piece, a kind of critical revelation and articulation of widening differences of wealth, power, and of relative *inclusion* in a globally networked capitalist modernity, via knowledge of its uneven local manifestations. At the same time, however, formally, as Andrew Fisher puts it, meaning in such a work is conceived as being itself 'produced in exchanges of information that are located in [already existing] systems of communicative practice'. To the extent that this is a 'fundamentally social characteristic', it is 'only ever *actualised* in the form of socially instituted relations of exchange'.¹⁴ What Sekula calls the 'traffic in photographs', in a society organized around commodity production and exchange, cannot be separated from the institutional spaces in which art's production of meaning takes place. The success of a piece like *Fish Story* is predicated on the degree to which it engages *immanently*, in critical fashion, the mechanisms of a 'global complex of cultural translation', inextricably connected to the operations of capital, at the level of both form and subject matter.

Yet, in an important sense, current art-theoretical concerns are less focused on such critical potentials of the individual artwork than, as I have already argued, on the various broader networks of cultural translation, communication and exchange internal to the operations of the artworld itself. The present pre-eminence accorded to the job of the master curator – as ‘an act of presentation that presents itself’, in Boris Groys’s words – over and above that of the individual artist or movement would be, in part, a function of this. More crucially, and more generally, (and not without irony, given the context), it is what appears to be most immediately political about the issues of cultural ‘transfer’ and ‘relationality’ intrinsic to the contemporary art system that would today invite speculation upon the possibility of some new conjoining of art to radical politics, such as Groys suggests in a recent article in this journal. An apparent structural homology, precisely at the level of organizational form, between the international art biennale and the social forum might itself appear as a kind of testimony to this.

Groys’s own choice of example is telling: the exhibition ‘Utopia Station’ curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija for the 2003 Venice Biennale; an exhibition which ‘employed artworks as illustrations, as documents of the search for a social utopia, without emphasizing their autonomous value’.¹⁵ If there is a utopian moment in the form of such phenomena themselves, then one can only presume that it lies in certain formal possibilities immanent to the speculatively ‘global complex of cultural translation’ contemporary art generates at such points; its productive power, in Benjamin’s famous terms, is to create new, always different if connected, significances. It is in this sense that ‘translation’ *produces* new forms of knowledge in a way that might indeed be ‘educational’ in a strong, and at least potentially political, manner. Yet, while, as Barry Schwabsky puts it, the ‘democratic thrust of art emerges where artist and public engage on equal terms’, the curator’s assumption of the job of translator-in-chief can easily construct a ‘position of childlike dependency’ for art’s putative public, who (subject to an instrumentalized model of ‘social inclusion’) apparently still need things translating *for* them.¹⁶

More than an analogy?

Does some genuine connection with politics, an analogy that is more than an analogy, hold here? ‘The power of art to change life is indirect’, writes Susan Buck-Morss, ‘But so is (or ought to be) the power of political sovereignty.’ Once *any* ‘work’ enters ‘the interactive

world of the everyday, its use should be allowed and indeed encouraged to transcend the constraints of the creator’s intent’. This is surely the utopian moment in all complexes of translation. And as a model of ‘aesthetic analogy’ rather than ‘instrumental domination’, it might indeed provide one experimental basis for the kind of global public sphere that Buck-Morss herself has perhaps most lucidly and winningly sought to articulate.¹⁷ Nonetheless, we can hardly afford to ignore what T.J. Clark has called the bad dream of modernism that may accompany it. In such a dream, associated in particular with the readings of architectural and art history in the work of the great Italian theorist Manfredo Tafuri, the avant-garde is perpetually haunted by the possibility that every opposition to the logics of capital ‘comes to seem, in retrospect ... not much more than an idealization of capitalism and its representations’.¹⁸ What if the aesthetic education of modern art has always been the basis not for some learning to inhabit a future de-alienated state, but precisely the production of new forms of subjectivity capable of inhabiting smoothly the alienated spaces of a metropolitan capitalist world? Today perhaps this is the troubled dream of the culturally productive forms of ‘interface’ experience that would educate us to live in an emergent infomatic globality – one open to ever-more-transitory and fugitive flows of capital and commodities, and from which the contemporary art world can hardly be separated.

If so, it’s probably an unavoidable condition of art’s critical articulation of the experiences of capitalist modernity and its capacity to locate, however precariously, latent potentialities within its social formations. Art’s contemporary mediation by and of what Hardt and Negri call the currently ‘hegemonic figure’ of the network itself, as a figure of organizational and spatial form, is exemplary of this. Subject to a utopian construction (that stretches back to Buckminster Fuller at least), which may project it as an expression of ‘the demands of a collective life to come’, it may also, in its openness as form, serve as an ideological veil for capitalist development, helping to ensure, in Tafuri’s words, that ‘the real laws’ of its universe remain unknown. Past utopian projects, like Constant’s *New Babylon*, included in Documenta 11, with its emancipatory visions of absolute flexibility, nomadism and transitoriness, can easily come to seem, in retrospect, as much an ‘aesthetic education’ in what one critic calls free-market ‘dreams of hypermobile and flexible capitalism’ as any speculative transcendence of them.¹⁹

There is no doubt that new forms of social connectivity on a potentially planetary scale have both

transformed the possibilities and conditions of ‘grass-roots’ politics, and created new kinds of transnational subjectivities, which promise a potential renewal of political imagination. There is every reason to think that art, at least in some both altered and expanded sense, might have a role to play in aspects of its materialization. Yet, as Buck-Morss herself says, it will have to make productive the contradictions inherent in the formation of a public space around it, the antagonisms and divisions that condition and traverse it.²⁰ Moreover, if the Left ‘project’ is itself a struggle for ‘open communication’, democratic and educational at its core, only a ‘debate’ concerning the relationship of emancipatory praxis to the existing regimes of economic development will make possible a space in which the very question ‘What is to be done?’ might be effectively asked today.

Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Taboos on the Teaching Profession’ (1965), in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, pp. 187–8.
2. I take this suggestive term ‘theoryworld’, to be conceived in conjunction with the more familiar idea of an ‘artworld’ (with which it often overlaps), from Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror*, Verso, London and New York, 2003, p. 8.
3. Julia Kristeva, ‘The Ethics of Linguistics’, in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, p. 32.
4. As my colleague Stewart Martin noted in his review of Documenta 11 in this journal, in considering its ‘political positioning ... as an agenda for a new form of radical art, it becomes apparent that it indicates transformations of a number of fundamental conceptions of the radical avant-garde’. ‘A New World Art? Documenting Documenta 11’, *Radical Philosophy* 122, November/December 2003, p. 9.
5. See David Cunningham, ‘The Futures of Surrealism: Hegelianism, Romanticism and the Avant-Garde’, *Substance* 107, vol. 34, no. 2, 2005, pp. 47–65.
6. John Roberts, ‘On Autonomy and the Avant-Garde’, *Radical Philosophy* 103, September/October 2000, pp. 25–8.
7. See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Functionalism Today’, in Neil Leach, ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, p. 18.
8. Martin Ryle, ‘Oppositional Mentalities: Intellectuals, Protest and the Left’, *Radical Philosophy* 114, July/August 2002, pp. 2–6.
9. Comte de St Simon [actually Olinde Rodriguez], ‘The Artist, the Savant and the Industrialist’, from *Opinions Littéraires, Philosophiques et Industrielles* (1825), in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Geiger, eds, *Art in Theory 1815–1900*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998, pp. 40–41.
10. Jacques Rancière, ‘The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller’, *Radical Philosophy* 126, July/August 2004, p. 13.
11. In the light of Rancière’s intervention, it would be worthwhile rereading the conclusion to Schiller’s final letter (27), which, arriving at the point of a necessary absolute separation between the ‘aesthetic state’ and any actually existing social and political institutions, *for the present*, can end only with the location of the former in ‘some few chosen circles, where conduct is governed ... by the aesthetic nature we have made our own’. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967, p. 219.
12. See David Cunningham, ‘Architecture as Critical Knowledge’, in Mark Dorrian, Murray Fraser, Jonathan Hill and Jane Rendell, eds, *Critical Architecture*, Routledge, London and New York, forthcoming 2007.
13. In fact, it’s far from clear that the forms of experience at stake in most recent art are strictly ‘aesthetic’ (as opposed to post-conceptual) in character. See Peter Osborne, ‘Art Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Criticism, Art History and Contemporary Art’, *Art History*, vol. 27, no. 4, September 2004, pp. 651–70; reprinted in Deborah Cherry, ed., *Art: History: Visual: Culture*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005, pp. 171–90.
14. Andrew Fisher, ‘Anti-Modernism and Narrativity in the Work of Allan Sekula’, in David Cunningham, Andrew Fisher and Sas Mays, eds, *Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle, 2005, pp. 169, 163. Buchloh is cited on p. 172. This is not restricted to photography or film. There would be an interesting comparison to be made at this point with the intrinsic ‘practices of research in cultural, economic and social history’ manifested in the form of much recent literature, for example in the poetry of Jeremy Prynne and Allen Fisher or in the novels of W.G. Sebald and Iain Sinclair.
15. Boris Groys, ‘The Politics of Equal Aesthetic Rights’, *Radical Philosophy* 137, May/June 2006, pp. 33, 34.
16. Barry Schwabsky, ‘Patriotism as Paranoia: Steve Kurtz and the Critical Art Ensemble’, *Radical Philosophy* 129, January/February 2005, p. 8.
17. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, MIT Press, 2000, Cambridge, MA, pp. 65–6; Susan Buck-Morss, ‘A Global Public Sphere?’, *Radical Philosophy* 111, January/February 2002, pp. 2–10.
18. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 1999, p. 306.
19. Fredric Jameson, ‘Globalization and Political Strategy’, *New Left Review* 4, July/August 2000, p. 68; Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture/2*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf, Rizzoli, New York, 1986, p. 357; David Pinder, *Visions of the City*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005, p. 255. For further elaboration of this point, see David Cunningham, ‘Architecture in an Age of Global Modernity: Tafuri, Jameson and Enclave Theory’, in Matthew Beaumont, Andrew Hemingway, Esther Leslie and John Roberts, eds, *As Radical as Reality Itself: Marxism and the Visual Arts*, Peter Lang, forthcoming 2007. The ambiguous homology of form of Empire and Multitude in Hardt and Negri would also seem to be a function of some of these difficulties.
20. Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror*, pp. 10–11, 7–8.

An aesthetic education against aesthetic education

Stewart Martin

Documenta 12's commitment to the question of what is to be done in education is to be welcomed from an institution that has sought to sustain itself as an autonomous cultural realm, a public sphere, in the face of its fabulous state sponsorship and relations to the art market. The articulation of the question in terms of the self-education of artists and audiences and a globalized cultural translation of localized forms of self-organization broadens its address. In the context of the uneven globalization of cultural centres, manifest in the blossoming of biennales from Istanbul to Johannesburg and Seoul, the old school of international art exhibitions is obliged to respond not only to one or other of these newcomers, but to the fact of their profusion and their representation as the authentically subaltern. In this respect, Documenta 12's proposal of itself as the stage for exchanging local, self-organized projects is a way of sustaining its global significance as an organizational centre in an artworld that has become increasingly decentred. Its benevolence is thus liable to a quasi-imperial perversion, the irony of multitude and empire.

The conservative reaction to Documenta 11's commitment to postcoloniality was more parochial and short-sighted – 'Documenta' has subsequently become an answer in Germany's citizenship test for immigrants. Documenta 12's project of a 'journal of journals' is itself liable to this colonizing function. Journals are invited to a global exchange and translation of their 'position', hosted in a virtual but no less codified space. But an intranet and copyfree rights are hardly enough to retain the dream of a republic of letters here. Participation in the best intentions of this project therefore needs to question its terms of exchange. Having been offered citizenship of Documenta 12, one is perhaps obliged to try to fail its test and answer its question by criticizing it.

The devil in the deep blue sea

To say that education is a constitutive issue of contemporary culture is to risk tautology, especially in German. The implicit claim that 'culture is education' only sounds true when it is heard not as a translation but

as a speculative proposition, determined by an antagonism between the terms that is also within each of them. These antagonisms have become familiar within modernism, the culture of the new. The dissolution of traditional, dogmatic or externally imposed authority problematizes the idea of education – how can freedom be taught? – orienting it towards autonomy and self-organization. But the contradictions harboured by the idea of an education in freedom manifest themselves in the ironic formation of new modes of dogmatism, above all the neo-dogmatism of the law of value. These issues have not become antiquated by the globalized scenario emphasized by Documenta, except in so far as one might characterize the present as a classicism of antagonism. The artistic director of Documenta 12 claims: 'Today, education seems to offer one viable alternative to the devil (didacticism, academia) and the deep blue sea (commodity fetishism).' This is wishful thinking. It is difficult not to be struck by a certain educationalization of contemporary culture that is characterized above all by the *fusion* of didacticism and commodification.

Meritocracy – certainly among the neoliberalized social democracies of Europe – is among the preferred means of mediating democracy and capitalism. British prime minister Tony Blair's trinity is 'education, education, education'. 'Lifelong learning' is a phrase that oscillates between the dream of fulfilling self-transformation beyond the privileges of youth, and the nightmare of indiscriminate de-skilling and re-skilling according to the dictates of a 'flexible' labour market. Many are left dumbfounded by the breathless, exponential pace at which education at all levels is being commodified. The liberation of 'choice' and 'opportunity' is the carrot; the stick is the threat of deserved poverty, whether of the nation or the individual. This threat infuses the political discipline of states seeking technological sovereignty, but the de-nationalization of labour markets has added a further dictate: your nationality will no longer save you from poverty, only your education will. The expansion of postgraduate degrees – note the contradiction in terms – is fraught with tensions between widened accessibility to more

self-directed study and the instrumentalization of higher education into training or research guided by state- or corporate-funded interests, if not its indiscriminate commodification as a leisure industry, often misrecognized by those seeking a job in academia. Qualification is a receding horizon; its promise of maturity takes the form of infantilization.

Art education is not exempt from these phenomena, despite its exemplary resistance to them in many ways. Often it is an exception and derided as such, as not 'an education', or as an 'education for failures', the uneducated and the ineducable. But what appears to be infantile to the schoolmarmish can be, at its best, an assumption of autonomy, rather than its deferral or evasion: one begins as already an artist in a way that few other disciplines can even comprehend, let alone match. This infuses the auto-didacticism of the art-school intellectual. It might be difficult to recognize among the fat-and-felt mythology, but Beuys's thesis that 'everyone is an artist' remains a pivotal contention of modern art education, the self-critical and even self-negating task of the art school. Of course, the irony of this educational radicalism has frequently been an undisciplined demagogy. Few manifest this more powerfully than Beuys himself. And while the public fascination and scandal with contemporary art is infused by the idea that 'I could do that', the artworld remains dominated by graduates from select academies. Art schools are certainly brand names in the market for young artists.

The dismantling of academicism within the art academy – the undermining of the strict observance of genres and arts, of artistic competence and authorship, indeed, of what art should be – mimics, albeit at times critically, the nominalism of new processes of the commodification of labour and their protocols. A neo-academic tendency is also apparent in the pervasive criticism of the supposedly 'uneducated' capacities of taste and genius – of their actual education by social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or other determinations – which is indifferent to how taste and genius contribute to the cultivation of non-dogmatic forms of authority and self-determination. If they can be seen as effects of commodity fetishism, their dissolution into the determinability of social space and identity is no less symptomatic of the calculation of consumer markets. The theoreticization of art practice and education that has accompanied this sociologically reductive tendency is frequently entranced with academicism. 'Theory' has proven to make just as good packaging as the connoisseurial puff. Criticism is the antidote to both.

Exhibition space has been widely transformed over the recent period according to a similarly ambivalent pedagogy, with various 'aids' to mediate the audience's experience of the artwork, from ubiquitous and expanded catalogues, to orienting wall texts and audio guides, audience-response forms and posting boards. The whitewashing of artspace for the unaided exercise of taste is being reversed. Even where art is sold as an experience, an encounter with something unknown, there is usually a guide on hand. Within underresourced public spaces, education offers a respectable merchandising opportunity.

Documenta 12's appeal to self-organized educational projects that offer an alternative to academicism/didacticism and commodity fetishism suppresses the extent to which the modern idea of education is embedded within these terms. Indeed, they infuse the contradictions in the very idea of education as emancipation. Commitment to this idea thus requires its immanent critique. How else could an injunction to education today be formulated?

Lessons in autonomy

It was perhaps above all the modern political-philosophical idea of autonomy, codified by the French Revolution and its German *philosophes*, which induced the crisis and reinvention of the idea of education that continues into the present. The French Revolution grounded freedom on equality, as an inalienable right, introduced in the form or guise of 'man'. Equality is not derived from freedom in the manner of the aristocratic democracies of antiquity, in which equality is a category of distinction, of an elite. Rather, the modern idea of autonomy requires a coincidence of freedom and equality: equality without freedom is subordination; freedom without equality is privileged, particular and therefore constrained. This mediation infuses a non-dogmatic idea of law: freedom must be subject to universal law as a guarantor of its equality, but law must also be subject to freedom; it cannot be unchallengeable by the individual. The idea of autonomy resolves this tension into the idea of individuals determining themselves according to universal laws to which they subject themselves with the inalienable or natural capacity they have as subjects. Thus Kant argues that the moral law expresses nothing other than the autonomy of pure practical reason – that is, freedom. One is not subjected to dogmatic or externally imposed rules – heteronomy – but to the rules one gives to oneself as a subject. Autonomy is therefore a unity of subjection and subjectivity.

This idea of autonomy produces a crisis and reinvention of the idea of education. For if education is essentially a relation of subjection – of student by master – then it is incompatible with the constitution of autonomy. Even if education means merely the transmission of something from those who have it to those who do not, how can there be an education in autonomy? Autonomy is not owned or understood by certain beings such that it can be transmitted to others who do not possess it. It is an egalitarian presupposition of any such exchange. As such, education is best left behind in the seminary or reduced to a minor or subordinate cultural function incidental to forging a culture of autonomy. These problems justify various forms of anti-education, attached to the natural, the naïve and the untrained or perhaps self-trained, for which Rousseau provides the slogan: ‘Man was born free, and yet everywhere he is in chains.’ And yet this idea of anti-education also induced ideas of an education against education, proposals for the paradoxical task of an education in autonomy. Rousseau’s *Émile, or On Education* has his Savoyard vicar profess a faith in ‘common reason’ to his young companion rather than conduct ‘learned speeches or profound reasonings’: ‘I do not want to argue with you or even convince you... Reason is common to us, and we have the same interest in listening to it.’¹ Kant, famously enthused by this peculiar education, conceived of enlightenment as a matter of courage: ‘Have courage to use your own understanding!’² Finally, Joseph Jacotot’s universal teaching, cited by Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, articulates the paradoxical principle of an education against education most succinctly: ‘I must teach you that I have nothing to teach you.’³

Socrates’ insistence that he knew nothing more than his interlocutors and that they should enter into the search for truth together, as equals, established a pedagogic precedent for education in autonomy to become essential to the idea of philosophy, opposed not only to sophistry but also to the inculcation of doctrine. But Socrates remains the master, followed and admired, contradicted by his pupils on pain of misleading themselves, the hero or sovereign of Plato’s dialogues. His students remain students. Meno’s slave is brought to know what is forgotten within him, what appears to be a capacity above his rank, but in being brought to that point he remains subjected in reaching it. He remains a slave. The lesson to Socrates’ select pupils, certainly to Plato, is to establish them in their superiority, as those ‘golden’ boys, philosophers and thereby rulers, of the serried ranks beneath them. It is the promise of sovereignty through subjection. But

subjection remains subjection, if not to Socrates then to ‘the forms’. Sovereignty is reduced to compensation for one’s subjection by the subjection of others. If the idea of philosophy is intrinsically tied to this education in subjection, then we need to think of an education in autonomy as forging an alternative discipline or anti-discipline.

The contradictoriness of an education in autonomy should not be overstated, in so far as if freedom is subject to equality – albeit as much as equality is to freedom – then the subjecting function of education might be conceived according to the discipline required of freedom. But this only extends the crisis of education to the idea of autonomy itself, exposing an essentially disciplinary sense of autonomy as a concept of rule or domination. Freedom is conceived as the domination of oneself. One becomes free through subjecting oneself to oneself, as if two subjections emancipate a subject. The educational hero of autonomy names this well, the autodidact. Thus, the unity of equality and freedom is rendered essentially and necessarily antagonistic, as the unity of competing rules. It is as an alternative to this dominative and antagonistic conception of autonomy, and its education, that the idea of an aesthetic education acquires a decisive significance. The rule-like but non-ruling character of various features of making and experiencing art renders them exemplary for thinking of a non-dominative, non-antagonistic unity of freedom and equality – for instance, the extent to which taste can be agreed upon despite not resulting from obedience to a rule. Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* is the most conspicuous attempt to draw out the significance of the eighteenth-century discourse on taste and the beautiful for an education in autonomy.

Freedom with sense

Schiller maintains the idea that freedom cannot be learnt. Aesthetic education teaches the already free, although what is at issue here is not courage but the ‘realization’ of freedom in another sense, its actualization. This involves a disciplining of sorts, but through beauty, not law, and through harmony or affinity, not domination. An education in autonomy is reoriented towards that which follows no rules and gives no rules, and yet is not antagonistic or chaotic: the beautiful artwork. Autonomy is not thought in terms of self-government or self-ruling, so much as the suspension of rules. The inculcation or giving of rules, indeed the whole ethos of discipline, is displaced by play. The modern anthropology of autonomy becomes a discourse of play: ‘man only plays when he is in the

fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays'. *Homo ludens*. It is as such that the beautiful provides the model for a free community, the 'aesthetic state'. Aesthetic education is conceived as an antidote to the pathologies of the neo-dogmatism of reason and its idea of freedom, principally its abstractness or indifference to sensuous particularity, and the splits and alienations this generates – in short, the formalism, mechanism and alienating specialization of the modern state, as opposed to the polypoid state that Schiller derives from Greek antiquity, in which 'every individual enjoyed an independent existence but could, when need arose, grow into the whole organism'.⁴ Objections to Schiller's bourgeois classicism are familiar but reductive. Schiller does not propose that the 'aesthetic state' simply returns the 'moral state' to a 'natural state', but that it realizes a free community by overcoming the opposition of morality to nature. Nor does Schiller abandon a commitment to equality in his insistence of the mediation of freedom with sense. Rather the sensuous manifold becomes a radicalization of the determination of freedom by equality: that all are free in their particularity rather than just in their universality. Schiller emphasizes a latent dogmatism in freedom's domination of nature, sensibility, felt at the heart of self-determination. Despite the consensual impression of this politics of beauty, the category of the beautiful proposes a far more challenging unity of freedom and sensibility than does the sublime, which – at least in Kant – is the experience of freedom from sense.

With Schiller, the modern political ontology of autonomy comes to rest on an education in beautiful or fine art. He provides a manifesto for the historical avant-gardes, and not only with respect to what they seek to overcome. And through them, such an education is extended into the terms of contemporary art. But our distance from Schiller is measured by his naivety with respect to the commodification of culture. This is not to say that the idea of aesthetic education does not infuse the critique of capitalism. Indeed, Marx's critique of the value form – its abstraction from the particularity of use – can be understood as transposing Schiller's critique of the dominance of form over sense. Marx's recovery of living labour from capital, as dead labour, reiterates Schiller's conception of the beautiful as living form, as opposed to the lifeless form of 'modern man'. Communism is an aesthetic state for Marx, also modelled in the artwork. Capitalism is a pathological rationalism, a dominative mode of autonomy, in which humanity's autonomy is alienated. The law of value is precisely a neo-dogmatic authority,

emerging from within the project to overcome natural or feudal forms of subjection, to which aesthetic education offers an alternative model.

But the attempt to conceive of the critique of capitalism in terms of an aesthetic education is complicated in so far as capitalist culture itself has affinities with the 'aesthetic state'. The value form may abstract from the particularity of labour and its products, but in so doing it also forms them according to the accumulation of surplus value, generating not only value or money, or even an economy, but a capitalist society: capitalism as a whole way of life. This induces a new anthropology of autonomy. The supersensuous sensibility of beauty is reproduced in the supersensuous sensibility of the commodity fetish together with its apprehension through taste. For Schiller, beauty is sense apprehended from the standpoint of the moral law; for Marx, commodity fetishism is sense apprehended from the standpoint of the law of value. The idea of aesthetic education appears to have turned against itself, as if it were an antidote that produced its own poison.

The contention here is not that Schiller or Marx offers a forgotten answer to the question of education today, but rather that they introduce the problem that still needs to be addressed: namely, the constitution of aesthetic education as both the critique and the embodiment of a neo-dogmatism of the law of value. This problem infuses, more or less consciously, current debates about the ontology of art, in particular the conflict between the anti-aestheticism generated by conceptualism and the neo-aestheticism that has emerged in reaction to it. Contemporary art's constitution by this conflict over aesthetics enables it to reflect the profound ambivalence of an aesthetic education in a way that it could not do if it were limited to the aesthetic or, for that matter, to taste and the beautiful. As such, art becomes the location of an immanent critique of aesthetic education, an aesthetic education against aesthetic education. This would form a lesson in emancipation.

Notes

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or On Education* (1762), trans. Allan Bloom, Basic Books, New York, 1979, p. 266.
2. Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (1784), in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey, Hackett, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1983, p. 41.
3. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1991, p. 15.
4. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), trans. E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967, 1982, pp. 107, 35.

Doing something and doing nothing

Esther Leslie

Culture is put busily to work these days. In Europe, certainly, culture is made the bearer of promises – the promise of a better quality of life, of a more educated public, of a more efficient and value-added cultural sphere, and, not least, the promise of regenerated economies. These promises are expressed in cultural policy initiatives that have been rolled out across Europe in emulation of the initiatives of the British Department for Culture, Media and Sport at the turn of the millennium, when culture was lauded as an economic and moral salvation.¹

Cultural policy makes efforts to shape the future through art, or rather through the assumed side effects of exposure to culture, its ‘value-added’ benefits. The association of art and better living may derive from faintly heard echoes of the historical avant-garde, the New World promoters such as Malevich, Tatlin, Popova, Matiushin and El Lissitzky, who saw art as blueprints for the future. However, by this they did not mean that art boosted confidence under current conditions or imposed a sense of collectivity on a disparate and alienated community. Their blueprints did not even push art to re-present tangible images of a future worth living. Rather, they re-functioned art so that it might institute modes of non-commodified production, frequently collective and collaborative. Future-oriented art tested out transformed social relations of knowing, specifically by enlivening audiences, rattling their existence out of the habitual, appealing to a consciousness that re-apprehends the world and itself as new.

Contemporary cultural policy’s vision of the better life is not one that imagines a fundamental newness in the world. Instead culture is deployed as the little bit that makes a difference. What cultural policy wants to be done is the work of social improvement. In Britain it relies on a language of acronyms and jargon: of art parsed through tags such as ‘social exclusion’ or bodies such as Social Inclusion Partnerships (SIPs), deployed ‘as a means of tackling exclusion’ by ‘mobilizing community stakeholders’ and ‘identifying target groups’.² Bureaucratic structures of ‘evaluation’ and ‘implementation’ exist to administer the ‘objectives’ and ‘measure’ the ‘outcomes and outputs’ of

funded projects in ‘creating a dynamic environment for the arts’ and ‘improving the quality of life’ of ‘hard to reach social groups’. Cultural policy mobilizes art as a plus, an ameliorative measure recruited to lighten blighted lives and neutralize zones of anti-social behaviour. Culture is set to promote ‘satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence’, and allow ‘groups, communities and nations to define their futures in an integrated manner’.³ This is what cultural policy wants done. What culture actually does is largely more practical. Culture boosts economies and generates wealth, displaying a talent for regeneration, through raising house prices and introducing new business, which is largely service-based.⁴ The very future of urban areas in the Europe of today is pinned on the ‘regenerative powers’ of ‘City of Culture’ bids, with culture as the magic elixir that bestows new life. Culture is heralded as the universal grease relied upon to make the cogs of business revolve better and the joints of society interconnect more smoothly.

Creative activity is widely re-described as ‘cultural industry’ (or creative, sunrise or ‘future oriented’ industry) in the jargon of contemporary ‘development’ initiatives, and the same discourse is championed at a global level by supra-governmental bodies such as UNESCO. The ‘culture industry’, about which Adorno wrote scathingly, which in his day was associated with highly capitalized media forms such as film and radio, has been promoted with redoubled force. Cultural industries are any type of creative endeavour that can be measured according to its value-added economic outputs, direct or otherwise, even as they claim to be about a measurable productivity in the spiritual realm of values. As UNESCO puts it: ‘Cultural industries add value to contents and generate values for individuals and societies.’ The ‘intangible’ contents of the cultural industries are property, in the normal sense, for they ‘are typically protected by copyright’. Some forces may worry that a few large culture providers will dominate these industries. The development of capitalism shows again and again that conglomeration is the very movement of its industry, and use of the term signals acceptance of capitalism’s logic. Under

this sentence, culture becomes the ultimate in busy productivity, the most generative in financial and moral ('educative') terms.

Utopia of nothing

Adorno, of course, came at all this from the contrary direction, asserting not what must be done, but what not be done, what be undone or left undone, if hope was to persist within the ruins of a postwar Europe. In relation to the endless outputs of the culture industry Adorno sought an antidote that is a non-effect. 'Transformational praxis', he noted, would consist in inoculating people against the idiocy that every film, TV programme and magazine presupposes.⁵ Adorno's Utopia – in which art is inextricably enmeshed – is directed towards undoing. His utopia eschews productivity. Utopia is glimpsed instead, in a sliver of languid experience. Future-dreaming is indolence. *Rien faire comme une bête*, lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, 'being, nothing else, without any further definition and fulfilment'.⁶ What is to be done? Nothing. This is to take the energies of negation seriously. We do not know who we are, or what we want. Or we know only negatively:

We may not know what the human is or what the correct shape of human things is, but what it is not and what form of human things is wrong, that we do know, and only in this specific and concrete knowledge is something else, something positive, open to us.⁷

Adorno's utopia is a place for indolence, non-productivity, uselessness. Art likewise is not about ceaseless production, an industrial manufacturing of artefacts, values, by-products, outputs, outcomes and objectives – all necessary for grant applications and monitoring reports. 'It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives.'⁸ Art cannot tell us 'what is to be done'. Our imaginations are stunted by the very alienation and social deformation that make art possible – if perpetually inadequate – in class society.

Under this sentence, art refuses to provide ameliorating solutions, but rather exposes the contradictions and woundings, the split in our generic-being (*Gattungswesen*) occasioned by the division of labour. It is this split that accompanies the unequal allocation of cultural access and benefit. If art does ever signal Utopia, then it does so only perversely. Art's forms resist smooth functioning and hold open only a promise of an activity that is non-reified. Art is something (an exposure) resonating in relation to nothing (social negativity).

Into life

In 1967 the situationist group at Strasbourg University began the pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life* with the following line: 'It is pretty safe to say that the student is the most universally despised creature in France, apart from the policeman and the priest.'⁹ This hatred has not abated, though it may be more specifically focused today on the 'art student' who does nothing, enjoying for several funded years an idle period of play and experiment. And worse, the art student is in training to become something to be all the more envied – idle *and* possibly wealthy – an artist. The character Henry Carr, British consul in Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* (1975), voices a widespread resentment, speaking to the dadaist Tristan Tzara:

When I was at school, on certain afternoons we all had to do what was called Labour – weeding, sweeping, sawing logs for the boiler-room, that kind of thing; but if you had a chit from Matron you were let off to spend the afternoon messing about in the Art Room. Labour or Art. And you've got a chit for life? (passionately) Where did you get it? What is an artist? For every thousand people there's nine hundred doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good, and one lucky bastard who's the artist.

For the sceptic, art education consists in learning to conjure up rubbish that any child or psychotic could have thrown together.

These sentiments came to voice recently on early evening television in the UK in Endemol's celebrity-reality series *Art School*. Week after week minor celebrities went through the motions of a contemporary art-school training, with its emphasis not on life drawing, but rather on formalist tricks to rattle and rejuvenate perception: using blindfolds, left-hand drawing, chance and error, loosely grasped techniques for experimentation. What was unleashed in the wannabe artists was gruesome – anger, miscomprehension, hatred, arrogance, pity and embarrassing sentiment in the name of self-exploration. Radio presenter John Humphrys thundered with rage as he failed to 'learn something' and uttered the phrase of choice for today's anti-artists: contemporary art is a case of 'the emperor's new clothes'. And the talking heads of celebrity hobby-artists such as Anneka Rice or Vic Reeves reassured us that art critics and art tutors were all frauds: art is nothing but a mode of relaxation for the artists and a tool for generating pleasure in viewers. Any other claims are pretension. Art is a delight for the eye, produced by safely dead people from long ago, before the avant-garde arrived on the scene, or it is a hobby for the living and there is nothing to say

about it but banalities. Art means nothing today. To this end of meaning nothing, it must – as its something – be representational. The programme did what most programmes on art do. It made those who talk about art look pretentious. For there is no popular language of modern art criticism, except for the line: ‘I could have done that.’ This seeming self-assertion masks a fundamental alienation: in the desire to witness a reified form of skill, the viewer longs to have his or her own abilities and potentialities negated.

Alienation sets in specifically and crucially in relation to contemporary art. Contemporary audiences – that is mass-mediated contemporary observers – are recipients of the contradictions of contemporary culture, which continues to be a divided culture sustained by social division. People learn to love their separation, their specific identities that compete with other identities. There is a widespread appeal nowadays to specific identities (ethnic, religious, sexual) as cultures that are cherished for their differences and separation. Art production needs to be faced as one part of a totality – held up as separate because its separateness is part of that totality, which needs art to present its values as eternal. A critical approach acknowledges artistic autonomy, and yet also perceives art as slashed by, negatively formed by, or located in relation to social division.

What is to be done? If something, rather than nothing, then let it at least be worthwhile, which is to say truly *bouleversing*. The reification of human activity into the separate realms of work and play, of aesthetics and politics, must yet be overcome. The aesthetic has to be rescued from the ghetto of art and set at the centre of life. Such slogans common to the avant-garde of old have not lost their pertinence, because efforts for the better life have never yet been socially instituted. While Adorno may be right that art is a special type of labour, which reveals the critical pressure points of the system, in so far as it is industrialized as ‘culture’, it has become effectively like all other labour: alienated and boring. This is where we should start: with the conditions of labour wherever they occur. This means asking why cultural policies of ‘social inclusion’ are deemed necessary in the first place, and why class society both needs and doesn’t need creativity.

Undoing and redoing

Walter Benjamin’s closing statements to his ‘Artwork’ essay, on ‘the aestheticization of politics’ and the ‘politicization of art’, continue to reverberate in the present. We live in a world of mediated political spec-

tacle that enforces passivity and knee-jerk reactions. Politics is a show that we are compelled to watch and where the ‘sides’ on offer are simply divisions within the same. Benjamin’s phrase indicates that beyond the aestheticization of political systems, figures and events is a more fundamental aestheticization (or alienation): the aestheticization of human practice. This amounts to an alienation from our generic-being, to the extent that we accept and enjoy viewing our own destruction. Benjamin discussed the issue of art’s politicization in the context of human annihilation: war becomes the ultimate artistic event, because it satisfies the new needs of the human sensorium, which have been remoulded technologically. This was the completion of *l’art pour l’art*, or aestheticism, as seen in 1936, which means that everything is an aesthetic experience now, even war. Humanity watches a techno-display of ever greater ‘shock and awe’ proportions, which amounts to its own torture.

It might appear on the surface as if, in response, the politicization of art has indeed been adopted in a widespread manner within the ‘artistic community’. Exhibitions frequently draw attention to ‘political’ questions of poverty, gender, ethnicity, globalization and war. Art fairs, biennials, triennials, quintennials (such as *Documenta*) and cities of culture present themselves formally – as well, frequently, in their contents – as global enablers, reinvigorated new public spaces of enfranchisement and change. But this is not the victory of the Benjaminian idea of art’s politicization. In fact, it is a further symptom of the aestheticization of politics. For what is produced by the real politicization of art is not that to which we have become accustomed in galleries – politically correct art that largely satisfies itself with and within the gallery and grant system, competing within the terms of the creative and cultural industries. The new art fair as global public space indicates how the forum of internationalist exchange (manifest in the First–Third Internationals) has reverted to that from which it took its model, or constituted its capitalist mirror-image: the world exhibition or trade fair. It is equally lathered in a good dose of boosting, even as the feel-good rhetoric reminds us to feel bad. Its globally exported format and critical discourses parallel the global mobility of capital and its economic ideology alike.

Cultural policy insists on the busy activity of generating values from culture, with ranks of artists, educators, arts managers and gallerists constantly ‘doing something’ with target groups. While Adorno indicated that ‘doing nothing’ was the sign of utopia achieved, a Benjaminian perspective might contend

that there is something to be done and something to be undone. Alienation is to be undone through the passing of the 'curative' technological aesthetics of reproducible art before the 'politically educated gaze'.¹⁰ This represents an undoing of culture's traditional forms. The something to be done involves a correspondingly new type of activity, and not one to be directed and monitored from without. The real politicization of art means a thorough rejection of systems of display, production and consumption, monitoring and inclusion as well as elitism and exclusion, as art disperses into everyday practice and becomes political – that is, democratically available to all as practice and matter for critique. For Benjamin genuine politics – the rational management of technologies, the democratic incorporation of the users of those technologies, revelations about the property-stakes that drive the system – requires self-activity: authors as producers, audiences as critics, as he put it.¹¹ Likewise the art that a new 'communism' politicizes is not art as known and inherited (and reified for consumption), but rather, again, an opportunity for self-activity and self-constitution.

Notes

1. Two places where European cultural policy is fervently debated are the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (<http://eipcp.net/>) and the Scottish journal *Variant* (www.variant.randomstate.org/).
2. For just one example, see www.culturalpolicy.arts.gla.ac.uk/Research%20documents/SIP_toolkit_01.pdf.
3. See UNESCO website.
4. See Chris Smith's contribution to *Tate Modern: The First Five Years* (2005) online at http://tate.org.uk/modern/tm_5yearspublication.pdf. Chris Smith was the first British Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in 1997.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Individuum und Organization' [1953], *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VIII, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1986, p. 456.
6. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, New Left Books, London, 1974, p. 156.
7. Adorno, 'Individuum und Organization', p. 456.
8. T.W. Adorno, 'Commitment', in E.Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, New Left Books, London, 1977, p. 180.
9. Widely available on the web, e.g. <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/4>.
10. See Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, New Left Books, London, 1979, p. 251.
11. See 'The Author as Producer' (1934) in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, Part 1, 1927–1930, Belknap/Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2005.

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Bluffer's guide

Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005. 360 pp., £19.00 hb., 0 231 13730 3.

It's the evening of 8 August 1974, and I'm watching Richard Nixon resign from the US presidency with the lack of grace that distinguished his entire political career. Just after Nixon has uttered his fateful words, grim-faced news reporters tour a traumatized nation, striking gravitas-laden poses next to eerily quiet scenes in the West, the South, the Midwest, and so on, until they arrive finally in Harvard Square, a few miles from my home, where they are dancing in the streets. Bliss was it to be alive in what turned out to be not political dawn, but political dusk. For today Nixon's policies would place him on the leftward reaches of the Democratic Party. The 1970s turned out to be the moment when the forward march of social democracy was halted, when the Right took over the reins of ideological leadership and led popular debate into reactionary territory that had remained unvisited for decades. Colloquially known as the 'Me Decade' at the time – who could have predicted how shallow its narcissism would look compared to what followed? – the 1970s witnessed the onset of the hegemony that has rendered much of the Left helpless and disorientated.

Helpless, but not speechless. While the poor have starved and the weak have been pummelled, intellectuals in the humanities have laid waste to countless forests in their attempts to think through the political meaning of the long post-1960s moment. One of the most striking products of this meditation has been 'theory', which Timothy Brennan claims coalesced as a discursive formation at precisely this moment of the 'turn', 1975–80. According to Brennan, these are the years when 'theory' acquired its typical style, its defining interests and topoi and its lasting political orientation, an odd combination of left-wing braggadocio and actual conservatism. 'Theory' is the moment when intellectuals in the humanities make all the wrong choices and abandon the social-democratic politics of the 1960s for the identity politics to come.

I therefore ought to like Brennan's book, but I don't. There are two principal reasons. First, it is sloppy in its argument and is willing to cut far too many corners to score a political point. If this were a short political text, when time was of the essence and the immediate

stakes high, it would be fair enough; but in a glossy, beautifully produced book from Columbia University Press, there are no excuses. Just a few examples should suffice. Faced with the fact that Judith Butler, a figure unquestionably central to 'theory' today, doesn't fit the model of identity politics Brennan ascribes to 'theory' as such (indeed, makes a point of doubting it), Brennan reverts to the argument that 'her work still permits the notion, certainly adhered to by her followers, that the critic must be of a certain race, gender or sexual articulation in order to comment authoritatively on political issues pertaining to the same'. 'Permits the notion' is a weak way of admitting that what Butler actually says is inconvenient for his argument.

One chapter later, Brennan needs to demonstrate that contemporary theory doesn't take socialist culture seriously. The 'scorn' with which it treats socialist realism must therefore be unmasked as mere prejudice: 'socialist realism turns out to be a rupture in taste between those whose hands are calloused and those who take their literary agents out to lunch at expensive restaurants'. A little research would have revealed, however, that in fact 'those whose hands were calloused' in the Soviet Union belonged to the Proletkult movement that Stalin ditched, with all his customary delicacy, in favour of an aesthetic, socialist realism that put Russia's traditional intelligentsia (Gorky, Aleksei Tolstoi) back in the driver's seat.

One last example: in order to seal his political polemic, Brennan claims to have found common ground between the New Left movements of the 1960s and the New Christian Right that arose in response. To do so, he reverts to the use of vague, merely formal parallels: 'The NCR [New Christian Right] and 1960s youth both built their first underground constituencies on AM radio, both distrust secular government, both attempt to legislate morality and both exist in a 'vigorous yet marginalized subculture, strong in the faith'. One page later, he will himself make the point that vitiates this argument: 'in politics *formal* similarities are ethically irrelevant', but will not, in the interest of argumentative consistency, allow it press on the absurd comparison hazarded a page earlier.

These shortcuts, and a strange habit of referring to the naivety of today's graduate students as evidence (you get the impression Brennan has been scarred by some very uncomfortable seminars) make otherwise excusable errors stand out: 'Honneker' as leader of the GDR, a strange creature called 'Orthodox Catholicism', the description of Routledge as 'quasi-commercial' (which will be sad news for the shareholders at Taylor & Francis) and the inclusion of Walter Benjamin in an already overgenerous list of 'left Hegelians'. (As if to ensure the errors are harder to find, the book also features the worst index to have graced an academic book for many years.)

The other reason for not trusting this book is that while Brennan continually upbraids cultural theory for political views that are lightweight and self-deceiving, what he offers us in exchange is one-dimensional and equally insubstantial. If you are going to harangue the opposition for their lack of political savvy and 'worldliness', you set a high standard for yourself, and nowhere in the text does Brennan meet that standard.

Despite these faults, Brennan offers two substantial arguments in support of his polemic, which, though I think they are wrong, are made seriously and in good faith. The first is that cultural theory has displaced what Brennan calls 'cultures of belief' (political movements based on shared commitments and positions) with 'cultures of being' (politics based on received, or supposedly received, identities). The second is that cultural theory has an intrinsic hostility to the state and to state power, and as a result it has not only vacated the field of responsible political action, but has strengthened the right-wing assault on social democracy. Each argument occupies roughly half of the book, and each is pursued not directly but in a series of related case studies. Some of these case studies are devoted to the use cultural theory makes of concepts like 'cosmopolitanism' or 'globalization'. The focus is on postcolonial studies throughout, which is reasonable given Brennan's own expertise. One is a critique of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*. And each half of the book features an extended recuperation of an iconic figure who has been made into a pillar of postcolonial cultural theory – Edward Said in the first, Gramsci in the second. The upside of this less systematic approach is that one can learn a good deal from the studies while remaining unconvinced by the larger argument.

The first part, 'Belief and Its Discontents', tilts at identity politics and its fixation on ethnicity. It's in

many respects a shrewd move: Brennan senses that so long as the political commitments of the Left are deemed the product of disembodied reason, they will always lose out to the apparently thicker, more elaborate commitments that, we have been assured, flow easily from subaltern or subcultural identities. But he doesn't elaborate on what a culture of belief looks like, or refer us to the excellent social histories that have described actually existing socialist cultures (in the manner of Raphael Samuel or Geoff Eley). Instead, he points to the achievements of social-democratic intellectuals, motivated by 'beliefs' not 'being', and to their persistent misrepresentation in public and critical discourse. One such is Salman Rushdie, whose critique of Thatcher's Britain gets lost in attempts to place him as Indian, Muslim or Western. But Brennan is at his best when recapturing the intellectual trajectory of Edward Said, whom he slowly and persuasively detaches from the role assigned to him in later post-colonial studies, that of the Foucauldian scourge of Western reason.

What attracts Brennan in particular is Said's insistence on the priority of 'affiliation' – political commitments made on the basis of moral and political judgement – over 'filiation' – the sense of ethnic belonging. That said, 'belief' seems an odd choice of words. Not least because the most dramatic, wide-



spread and historically impressive cultures of belief are arguably the great world religions, which distinguished themselves from local ethnic devotion by requiring only belief from their adherents, but at the same time comprehensively informed art, culture, diet and in general 'a whole way of life'. Yet religion figures for Brennan as only one more mode of being, as if 'being' stood for a certain brittleness of conviction, rather than a characterization of its origin or nature.

And doesn't Marxist argument, for Brennan the paradigm of belief, ground left-wing positions in being;

isn't this what distinguished it from the utopian socialisms of its (and our) day? But this is very much beside the point here, because in the end Brennan isn't interested in elucidating the conceptual difference between a culture of belief and a culture of being. The former serves merely as a code word for an older Left, the latter a marker of what has displaced it. '[T]argeted identities have been enlisted to crush social democratic belief cultures': why anyone believes in social democracy is not really the point.

Which brings us to the second half of Brennan's book, 'The Anarchist Sublime', in which the political case against cultural theory is made more directly. A chapter on the 'cosmopolitanism' debate intimates that cultural theorists are not thinking carefully about how their discourse intersects with the interests and activities of the American state, and the long chapter devoted to *Empire* accuses it of an infantile anti-statism, derived in large part from the Autonomia movement. Yet in many respects the crucial chapter of the whole book is neither these nor the final, lengthy discussion of Gramsci's heritage. It's the relatively brief opening to the second half, entitled 'The Organizational Imaginary', where Brennan comes closest to laying his cards on the table.

Admittedly, a couple of those cards have been sitting there for a while. We've known right from the start that it's the Marxist tradition that's suffered the most grievously from cultural theory, and Brennan asks us to agree 'for the moment' that Marxism means 'social democratic politics and left Hegelian critique'. It turns out to be a rather long moment, particularly as most of us will have spent the time wondering why anyone would equate Marxism with social democracy (or, for that matter, narrow its intellectual legacy to left Hegelianism). 'The Organizational Imaginary' promises to end the suspense, telling us why 'theory' is, in fact, right-wing in its politics, and how it emerged in the dreaded 'turn' of 1975–80.

Does Brennan hold a winning hand, or is he just bluffing? Interestingly, he opens with a critique of the campaign against sexual harassment, a moment when 'culturalist political theory' has taken the road he's suggesting, harnessing the power of the state for political ends. Needless to say, they have got it all wrong. Theory's progressive ideals have produced reactionary outcomes because the problem is not really anti-statism, but an aversion to politics as such, which means 'taking responsibility' for Brennan in a Weberian sense: surveying the field of battle, calculating the consequences of different courses of action, using the means that contradict the ends when

things get dirty. And why is theory averse to politics, conceived of in this sense? The years 1975–80 will not answer this question. For this, we have to go back, of course, to the 1960s.

Brennan's genealogy of cultural theory, on which arguably the whole book depends, occupies a page and a half, but it is nonetheless revealing. The youth of the 1960s, we're told, 'borrowed from the language of the pre- and postwar avant-gardes at the same time that [they] borrowed from the party solidarities of international communism'; given that they were, as Brennan calls them a chapter later, 'Dissident youth, sick and tired of the world', the former tendency won out, crippling cultural theory to this day.

Let's assume that by 1960s youth Brennan is thinking of the American New Left. Very little of it will fit the description. Were the youth who ran the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the civil rights movement merely dissidents, sick and tired of constant humiliation, legally enforced poverty and state violence? Weren't the women who led feminism sick and tired of their continuous exploitation? Weren't those who organized against the war in Vietnam sick and tired of the colonial arrogance and mass slaughter they witnessed every day? For none of these movements can be explained by the 'party solidarities of international communism'. They stood for new solidarities, even if the problems they addressed had been a topic of concern in the existing Left.

Yet the other half of Brennan's equation, celebrating the traditional solidarities, is, in fact, the more disturbing one. The tradition abandoned by cultural theory is indeed protean. First described as 'social democracy and left Hegelianism', it acquires more substance when we learn that it includes not only the thinkers commonly known as 'Western Marxism' but also the 'Third International Marxists', of whom only a couple are named, and all except Gramsci mentioned only fleetingly. But one element of the 'left traditions of the interwar period' is mentioned once, in an offhand manner, but never even named: that is the tradition of murdering one's own citizens and comrades, suppressing political debate, invading other socialist countries and the rest of it – in short, Stalinism.

Brennan was thinking of the French, British and the Italian 1960s as well as the American variant, and we can only wonder at an account that ignores the degree to which those New Lefts were formed in reaction to the betrayals of actually existing Communism and the actually existing Communist parties. The latter's 'party solidarities' weren't rejected because young leftists were bored, and the resulting movements neither

rejected political organization as such, nor simply mimicked the forms bequeathed to them by historical Communism. If they did not limit themselves to thinking about how the Left should deploy state power, they had very good reasons for doing so.

Brennan wants cultural theory to return to the party solidarities and focus its attention on the acquisition and use of state power. If this is because he hasn't thought through the history of these solidarities, then his appeal to an 'organizational imaginary' is as vapid

and rhetorical as the culturalist 'anarchism' (his word, not mine) it supposedly opposes. Words like 'solidarity', 'discipline' and 'action' don't add up to a politics, any more than 'subaltern' and 'dispersal' do. If he has thought through the history, and he really thinks the 1960s are about bored youth dissing the inherited solidarities, then we know a little more about the game he's playing: it's one where the rules are made to be broken, and the pot isn't worth winning.

Ken Hirschkop

Mobilizing globalizing

Tony Smith, *Globalisation: A Systematic Marxian Account*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2006. vii + 358pp., €89.00 hb., 90 04 14727 6.

At the heart of this book there is a tour de force of analysis and presentation. It consists in Tony Smith's 'rational reconstruction' of the 'most significant positions' in the globalization debate. These positions are expressed successively in what he calls the 'social-state', 'neoliberal', 'catalytic-state', 'democratic-cosmopolitan' and 'Marxian' models of globalization. The models have both an explanatory and a prescriptive dimension. On the one hand they claim to 'capture the essential features of the contemporary global order'. On the other they 'call for', 'advocate', 'insist' on or 'propose' various changes to bring that order more into line with the picture they project. The methodological framework for Smith's reconstruction is provided by what he calls 'systematic dialectics', a procedure he finds classically exemplified in Hegel and Marx. The twin pillars of this framework are the notions of 'immanent contradiction' and of 'determinate negation'. Thus, each model in turn succumbs to its own immanent contradictions and is negated by another that promises to resolve them. Their negation is determinate in the sense of being shaped by the specific character of the problems to be overcome. The series is brought to an end by the Marxian model, which is free of immanent contradictions and so does not need to be determinately negated. In the final chapter Smith switches his attention from models of capitalist globalization to the task of presenting and defending 'a Marxian model of socialist globalization'.

It is impossible to convey the character of Smith's account without looking in a little detail at the way the notions of 'immanent contradiction' and 'determinate negation' are put to work in it. His choice of a starting point is, however, fixed by another

methodological principle he derives from Hegel and Marx. This is the principle of moving from more abstract and simple to more concrete and complex determinations. The 'social state', of which Rawls's theory is the paradigm, is, in Smith's view, the most abstract and simple model of globalization. Indeed it is only, as he admits, in a very wide sense that it counts as a model of globalization at all. For it conceives the global order 'as an aggregate of more-or-less-independent states and national economies, externally connected to each other in ways that do not substantively affect domestic structures and practices'. The main contradiction Smith detects here arises from the acceptance in the model of international trade and the freedom of economic agents. For cross-border transactions and the exercise of exit options by capital must, he suggests, undermine the capacity of the social state to discharge its key function of managing domestic markets. Smith recognizes that a number of alternative models may be seen as addressing this contradiction, and so determinate negation alone will not uniquely identify its successor. In this situation the principle of 'from abstract to concrete' has to be invoked once again. Thus, the choice falls on the simplest and most abstract of all relevant alternatives, the neoliberal model.

In this model the assumption of more-or-less independent national economies is dropped and the world market is placed at a centre of the picture. Smith identifies a number of immanent contradictions that now ensue. It will suffice for present purposes to note the two that yield a determinate negation in the sense of motivating the shift to the next model in his sequence. The first arises from the fact that, while the model

stresses the importance of technological dynamism, there must, in a neoliberal world, be systematic underinvestment in the scientific research and development that underpins it. The market will not generate what is socially optimal in this regard and the minimal state is powerless to provide. The second contradiction is that while neoliberals claim to speak in the name of certain normative principles, such as global justice, the implementation of their ideas must yield results that are normatively unacceptable. In particular, it must generate economic insecurity and a loss of social cohesion and stability. What is specifically called for in these circumstances is a strong state that will pursue aggressive industrial and technology policies and impose controls to ensure that the functioning of markets is compatible with flourishing communities. These needs are addressed by the catalytic-state model, of which John Gray is taken by Smith to be the leading defender.

Gray is, however, in Smith's view, 'caught in a trap', in the incoherent position of accepting certain features of the neoliberal global order while denying their inevitable consequences. In particular, Gray acknowledges, and indeed stresses in his critique of Rawlsian social democracy, the reality of international capital mobility and the dependence of governments on international capital markets. The 'continuous plebiscites' these markets conduct on policy must, however, erode the ability of any particular government to fulfil its communitarian role. This process is, in Smith's view, already well advanced even in the case of Gray's best exemplars, Germany and Japan. What the dialectic now requires is a regime of global governance that subjects the world market to effective social regulation. This requirement is addressed in the democratic-cosmopolitan model of globalization, whose most effective defence is, Smith maintains, to be found in David Held's work. Held advocates a 'Charter of Rights and Obligations' which would, among other things, guarantee, throughout the global economy, rights to a basic income and to access to economic decision-making, together with social control of investment and controls on short-term flows of finance capital. Smith discusses these proposals in turn and argues that each comes to grief on the same rock, the continuing reality, accepted but downplayed by Held, of capitalist property and production relations. The fact that these relations are fatal for Held's project leaves the dialectic with no alternative but to envisage their abolition, a step explicitly taken in the culminating stage of the sequence, the Marxian model of globalization.

This is, in Smith's view, the only model that can give a coherent account of the central issue of the systematic relations between states and global markets. Indeed, with its arrival the immanent contradictions are displaced from models of globalization on to the object, the global order itself. These contradictions are expounded by Smith in terms of such concepts and theses derived from Marx as the law of value, the necessarily antagonistic relation of capital and wage-labour, the drive to appropriate surplus profit by technical innovation, and the tendency of the system to generate financial crises and crises of over-accumulation together with uneven development on a global scale. Smith argues that no conceivable form of capitalist state can overcome the effects of these factors. He is also at pains to deny that they can be overcome by post-Keynesian proposals, such as those of Paul Davidson, focused on the idea of a new form of world money. Davidson's case must, in Smith's view, founder on his continued attachment to the production and property relation of capitalism. This reinforces Smith's conclusion that the contradictions of the existing global order can be overcome only by a 'revolutionary rupture from the capital form'. In his final chapter he defends the feasibility and normative attractiveness of a form of socialist globalization founded on such a rupture. The account, drawn in essentials from the work of David Schweickart, provides for producer and consumer, but not capital or labour, markets. In addition, Smith suggests versions of Davidson's proposals for a world money and of Held's proposals for democratic cosmopolitan law and global social investment funds. These measures, though incompatible with capitalist social relations, would, Smith argues, prove their worth under socialism.

It should be clear, even from this summary, that Smith has found a most effective principle of organization for his material. His systematic dialectics of immanent contradiction and determinate negation serves, so to speak, as a spinal column along which the various models of globalization are perspicuously and comprehensively arranged. This gives his work a strikingly self-aware, architectonic character. Moreover, in dealing with specific opponents he is always a civil interlocutor, constantly seeking to meet them, in best dialectical fashion, on the ground of their strength. Hence, his verdicts, when they come, carry all the greater force and conviction. His account of a Marxian model of capitalist globalization is valuable in itself as an incisive updating of Marx's own analysis of capitalism. Finally, Smith's model of a socialist global order is as sophisticated and persuasive an attempt as one will find in the literature to deal with the central

question of the relationship between states and markets under socialism. Any moderately sympathetic reader is likely to think that he has, while fully acknowledging uncertainties and difficulties, shown that the balance of rational argument favours the view that such an order would be viable. This is in effect to say that it could sustain itself indefinitely if it could once be instituted. The question that now arises starkly is how it is to be instituted, how to get from here to there. It is not asked here in order to saddle Smith gratuitously with a vast problem to which, it may be, no one has at present any very convincing idea of the solution. The question surfaces at various points in his own discussion, and



that discussion offers at least some clues as to how it might be taken a little further.

It is true that a dialectic of models of globalization can offer little help directly. What is needed here, one might rather suppose, is a dialectic of the object of investigation, of the global reality itself. Yet the primacy of what is being modelled shows itself at various points in Smith's argument. It does so in the general formula for the contradictions he detects in every model of globalization short of the Marxian. For what he argues, to speak somewhat schematically, is that each of them accepts, indeed welcomes, dynamic features of capitalism, such as capital mobility or the drive for surplus profits through technical innovation, which, once given their head in the real world, are destructive of the normative appeal of the model in question and of its claim to represent a world that could reproduce itself over time. This is, however, to concede that the dialectic of the object, so far as it functions strategically in Smith's account, is the dialectic of capital. Indeed, with his usual objectivity he acknowledges as much. Thus, at the end of his book he asks whether his model of socialist globalization captures what Rawls called 'the deep tendencies and inclinations of the social world', and answers that it does not. For these continue 'to be defined by the

social forms of global capitalism, best formulated in the Marxian model of capitalist globalization'.

Smith does not, however, leave us with this gloomy verdict. Instead he goes on to repeat a point he had argued for earlier, the somewhat abstract assurance that 'resistance to capital is part of the concept of capital'. More concretely, he suggests that in the contemporary world such resistance may take the form of an 'extended historical process whereby a transnational class "in itself" is transformed into a transnational class "for itself"'. This too is to take up a theme introduced earlier in the remark that the dynamic of capital 'creates the material conditions for new forms of collective transnational identities'. Moreover, at the beginning of the book Smith had signalled the crucial significance of the question of whether there will emerge 'social agents with the interests and capacities to engage effectively' in furthering a socialist global order. These are, of course, only hints and conjectures in need of systematic elaboration and defence. To provide that would in effect be to provide a dialectic of the object whose logic runs counter to the logic of capital. It is a large undertaking, not least because, as Smith also acknowledges with typical realism, 'At the present moment, new transnational capitalist class identities are undoubtedly being forged.'

Nevertheless, the Marxist tradition can provide some inspiration and motivation here. For one thing, it now seems quite generally acknowledged that what is truly living in Marx's own thought is his vision, most vividly expressed in *The Communist Manifesto*, of capitalism as a never-resting, world-transforming force, melting everything solid into air. To discern and articulate a socialist dialectic of reality against this background would amount in effect to providing the work on 'the world market and crises' that Marx projected in *Grundrisse* but never seriously embarked on, the work that was to exhibit the world market as the indispensable setting in which, for the first time, 'all the contradictions come into play'. It seems essential to have some functional equivalent for it if the tradition of thought Marx founded is ever to go beyond providing the best analysis of capitalism to making a practical contribution to an alternative global future. It may slightly ease one's sense of the enormity of the task to recognize that this could not possibly be the achievement of any single individual of whatever degree of genius but only of the work of many hands. Exercising the traditional prerogative of reviewers to say in which direction their author should turn next, it would surely be hard to better this one in Smith's case.

Joseph McCartney

Linguists of the world, unite!

Boris Groys and Michael Hagemester, eds, *Die Neue Menschheit: Biopolitische Utopien in Russland zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts*, trans. Dagmar Kasse, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 2005. 688 pp., €20.00 pb., 3 5182 9363 X.

Boris Groys and Aage Hansen-Löve, eds, *Am Nullpunkt: Positionen der russischen Avantgarde*, trans. Gabriele Leupold, Annelore Nitschke and Olga Radetzkaja, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 2005. 777 pp., €20.00 pb., 3 5182 9364 8.

Boris Groys, Anne von der Heiden and Peter Weibel, eds, *Zurück aus der Zukunft: Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter des Postkommunismus*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 2005. 892 pp., €16.00 pb., 3 5181 2452 8.

Boris Groys, *Das kommunistische Postskriptum*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 2006. 96 pp., €8.50 pb., 3 5181 2403 X.

The international research project 'The Postcommunist Condition' was launched at the ZKM (Karlsruhe/Germany) in 2003 by Boris Groys. In collaboration with the German publisher Suhrkamp, the project has so far resulted in three books. These two anthologies and one volume of essays (re)construct a historical tableau of the origins of the revolutionary Russian avant-garde and its current reassessments in Eastern Europe. Through this initiative, as well as its spin-offs, like the temporarily established 'United Nations Plaza' – a one-year exhibition-as-school in Berlin – Groys has claimed a defining role in the reception of the Russian avant-garde in the German-speaking context. The question of what premisses guide these influential interventions into the communist heritage is of central political as well as philosophical interest.

The publications comprise a collection of philosophically charged utopianism (*Die Neue Menschheit/The New Mankind*), programmatic texts of the Russian artistic avant-gardes (*Am Nullpunkt/At Zero-Point*), and essays representing the research project's own investigations into the current state of postcommunist culture (*Zurück aus der Zukunft/Back from the Future*). The last volume sets out to define the present political and cultural status of the postcommunist countries of the East. The first two volumes redefine their revolutionary roots between 1880 and 1930, via a rich but thoroughly tendentious collection of newly translated documents. These are now followed by Groys's own theoretical account of communism. *Das kommunistische Postskriptum* completes the picture, presenting Groys's attempt to advocate the communist idea against its own historic assumptions. His introductory statement, reproduced on the book's back cover, opens as follows: 'The communist revolution is the transcription of society from the medium of money to the medium of language. It is itself the *linguistic turn* on the level of social praxis.' For Groys, com-

munist is – and, more importantly, was – linguism, rather than materialism. These four publications give a well-structured insight into the repercussions of this dematerializing but sympathetic perspective.

Zurück aus der Zukunft brings together essays by guest scholars, like Chantal Mouffe and Boris Kagarlitsky, with the work of participants in the Postcommunist Project, such as Boris Buden, Pavel Peperstejn and Igor Zabel. With introductory overviews by the project's three leaders – Groys, Peter Weibel and Anne von der Heiden – this monumental collection of over thirty essays explores different aspects of contemporary postcommunist culture in Eastern Europe. Most aim at using the postcommunist condition as a means to resituate the capitalist present, exploring the capacities of the 'we' and various reformulations of a diverted utopia. They follow up individual desire and its relation to the changing status of the objects of production (as in Ivaylo Diotchev's text '*Die Konsumentenschmiede*'/'Forging Consumerism'), or look more specifically at national regimes and their disparate attempts to find alternatives to Western models of production and consumption (as in August Ioan's examination of the city of Bucharest in his essay 'ScarCity'). The collection is indebted neither to melancholic accounts of lost chances nor to apocalyptic descriptions of the present national constitutions of the East, and this certainly makes it a very productive introduction to postcommunist thought. Here, the 'post' does not exist in a position of retrospective denial, but, by bringing together a large group of scholars, mostly from Eastern Europe, succeeds in opening up new dimensions of thought. Groys in his introductory essay argues that communism always presented itself as a transitional stage and that its demonization as a betrayal of the ideal of communism was always guided more by the Western desire to present capitalism as the realization of an ideal than by Soviet claims of purified

political relations. His argument, however, goes on to present Communism as the 'first postnational model of society', now followed not only by a previously national capitalism's own globalization, but also by Islamism. Communism, for Groys, opened the *Markt der Möglichkeiten* – the market of possibilities. Groys's own argument, however, leads to a partial dissolution of the material specificity of the Russian experience in order to distribute its traits among other traditions of thought and praxis, mainly in contemporary Western discourse.

The other two publications, the anthologies *Die Neue Menschheit*, edited by Groys and Michael Hagemeister, and *Am Nullpunkt*, edited by Groys and Aage Hansen-Löve, present a large number of newly translated texts from between 1890 and 1934, ranging from Russian mystics like Nikolai Fedorov to central figures of the artistic avant-gardes like the painter Kazimir Malevich or the absurdist poet Daniil Charms. They are also an invaluable bibliographical resource.

Die Neue Menschheit is devoted to biopolitical utopias, which proliferated not only in the mystic religiosity of tsarist Russia, but also in the constitution of revolutionary Russia after 1917. These include Konstantin Ciolkowskij's invention of astronautics in the last decade of the nineteenth century and Alexander Bogdanov's Tectology, dedicated to the defeat of human mortality through blood transfusion. Groys's introduction links those utopian visions of eternal life to Foucault's concept of biopower, which enables a contemporary reinterpretation, but mostly neglects the political role of its protagonists. Groys differentiates between tsarist Russia and Communist Russia but not

between revolutionary Russia, Leninism and Stalinism. This first volume offers a view of early modernist philosophy in Russia, which does not distinguish its authors in accordance with their role in the Russian Revolution, but rather with regard to their metaphysical – and in that sense amaterial – conceptualizations of a future society.

Am Nullpunkt follows that same procedure in bringing together a seemingly comprehensive overview of mostly newly translated texts of Russian revolutionary art. Starting with Futurist texts of the 1910s and ending with absurdist writings from the early 1930s, Groys and Hansen-Löve collect essays from differing if not opposed positions of the Russian avant-garde. These include major texts of productivist theoretician Nicolai Tarabukin and constructivist avant-gardists like Aleksei Gan and Aleksandr Rodchenko. But this chapter is an exception. As a whole, the anthology is dominated by Groys's enthusiastic affirmation of Kazimir Malevich's concept of Suprematism. In his introduction, Groys positions Malevich at the turning point of the revolution in the arts, whereas Malevich's most potent counterpart, Vladimir Tatlin, is mentioned only in notes throughout the book. Malevich's metaphysical concept of non-objective art allows Groys to distance his own appreciations of Communist Russia from Russian Communism. He thus quotes Malevich, the anti-materialist, attacking his constructivist counterparts for equating matter with material, while himself stressing its fleeing, non-objective qualities. Groys sees this as the 'most radical and most consequent opposition', as it diverts the attention of avant-gardist artistic actions from the stage of political action to



that of its metaphysical extension. As such, Groys sees Malevich as countering what he calls the 'biopower' – those (pre)revolutionary attempts prevalent in Russia at that time to determine man's mortality. (This links *Am Nullpunkt* to *Die Neue Menschheit* via the aim for a 'new' dematerialized discourse.) Malevich's anarchism, expressed in his objection to any form of productivism, is valued by Groys as the only potent break with what he sees as the central pitfall of other Russian avant-gardists: the notion of progress. Together with Malevich, he seeks a communism freed from economy, freed from production. This puts him in opposition to most of the constructivist writers and artist who have a central position in other anthologies, like John E. Bowlt's now classic *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde* (1957/1988).

Groys steps into the field from a more literary basis and thus leaves out the whole field of art education, the debates at Vchutemas and Inkchuk, which were central to the move from construction to production, and to the Russian avant-garde's desire to intervene in general production. This is a significant point of difference between revolutionary Russian and other avant-gardes: historically, they were the only artistic movement which had the chance – however short-lived – to practise art as an intrinsic part of general production. In contrast, Groys's focus on 'biopower' neglects the economic and political situation in revolutionary Russia on the level of praxis while re-enacting it on the level of linguistics.

Groys's own volume, the 96-pages-short *Das kommunistische Postskriptum* (*The Communist Postscript*), while not formally a part of the Postcommunist Condition project, nonetheless extends its concerns. In it Groys reflects on the state of communism as a political project. His affirmation of communism in contrast to capitalism is, again, based on an anti-materialist approach. As quoted above, Groys argues that communism was – and still is – expressed in language, whereas capitalism is expressed in money as its main medium. In that, he favours communism because it is based on an unveiled and permanent expression of antagonism, which is veiled in capitalism's discourses of money. However, this antagonism, following Groys, is based neither on historical developments of production, nor on its material effects, but is Platonic in kind. Groys argues for a 'repetition' of communism under the premiss that 'language is the medium of equality'. He characterizes communism as the only total system, in that antagonism lies at its core and unites what capitalist society defines as its central opposition: private and public interest. However, this model of a reduction

of society to language leads Groys to an ontologization of Marx's definition of ideology. Arguing that if 'consciousness is defined by its being', then 'being' cannot mean material being but rather refers to being as such and is thus a non-material category, Groys leaves out one word from Marx's sentence: 'social'. This difference between 'social being' and 'being' is Groys's central lapse. Throughout his contributions to the four books discussed here, Groys separates the words of the Russian Revolution from its social actions, to make it available for its (formal) repetition.

Kerstin Stakemeier

American pie

Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Allen Lane, London, 2006. 464 pp., £25.00 hb., 978 0 713 99789 7.

Though the question Daniel Dennett addresses in *Breaking the Spell* is by no means novel, it remains as controversial as it has ever been: what happens when religious belief is subjected to scientific scrutiny? Dennett describes the project of his book as being an extension of Hume's in his *Natural History of Religion* (1777), with a heavy dose of evolutionary theory and a dash of James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* thrown in for good measure. Given these rich sceptical ingredients, one might have expected a heady brew, with some distasteful conclusions. And since science and religion don't seem to mix particularly well, one might at least have anticipated an unstable, combustible result.

Dennett sets himself a delicate task. He would like to distance himself from a straightforward condemnation of religion of the kind espoused by Richard Dawkins. For Dawkins, religion is merely a poisonous concoction of memes, dangerous viral parasites of the mind, which we would be better off without. Nor does Dennett want to adopt the stance proposed by the late Stephen Jay Gould, who claimed that religion and science should negotiate different, non-overlapping spheres of influence, and really are better off leaving each other well enough alone. Dennett believes that Dawkins's stance is tiresome, and intellectually incurious. And he thinks Gould's is a hopelessly half-baked fudge that satisfies neither believers nor atheists. Dennett's project is different and, he thinks, more nuanced and fair-minded. Rather than condemn religion as a set of false beliefs, or leave religion alone, Dennett wants

to see what happens when science, and specifically evolutionary theory, is allowed to look at religion itself as an object of scientific enquiry.

The organization of the book essentially poses three questions. What is the evolutionary history of religion? Is there any rational foundation for religious belief? And, given the results of these enquiries, is religion a good thing or a bad thing? As to the first question, when evolutionary biology meets the social sciences in a project of the sort Dennett is engaged in, several varieties of hypotheses are suggested, and Dennett draws upon most of them in some form. Enlisting the resources of meme theory, cultural anthropology, evolutionary psychology, rational-choice theory and philosophy of mind, Dennett proposes a sketch of how he thinks religion began, how it developed, and how and why it persists. To those who think that the application of 'reductionist' evolutionary biology to human experience is a nefarious pursuit, this aspect of the book will no doubt seem scandalous. But for a sceptic, this facet may be the most satisfying. To a scientist, however, it may simply prove confusing. Given the sheer number of hypotheses under review, Dennett's chatty style makes the topics engaging, but does not make it easy to distinguish the arguments at play.

One family of theories investigated by Dennett, which he calls 'sweet-tooth' theories, suggests that religion satisfies a craving in us which is itself a product of evolution. Just as we have evolved to find sweet things tasty (because sweet things contain sugars that we require physiologically), it might be the case that we find religion 'tasty' psychologically, because our brains have evolved in a certain way. Another way for biology to deal with religion draws on meme theory. Here, religion is composed of a set of memes that travel around with us in our minds, passed from one human mind to another; those memes that confer some benefit on humans or human societies are conserved over time. Although for Dawkins religious beliefs are bad memes that co-opt our minds for *their* benefit, for Dennett the situation is more complex. Dennett suggests that religion consists largely of memes that persist because each meme is particularly well-suited to human social organization. For example, one of the hallmarks of most religions is some type of ceremony where believers profess their belief publicly. These ceremonies can be seen as ways for groups to strengthen trust, which has distinct evolutionary advantages when cooperation is necessary to survival. Dennett even suggests that religion might be a 'pearl', an evolutionary strategy designed to protect against irritation and

friction, in the sense that religion provides a way for us to deal with uncertainty, fear and death. Dennett also discusses the possibility that religion is an evolutionary 'good trick' in the context of cultural evolution; a solution to problems of group organization so powerful that evolution finds paths towards it again and again. Just as monetary systems have evolved several times in every human culture to solve the ever-present need for exchange, religion may similarly be a strategy for organizing human societies, a way for humans to deal with themselves in the context of others.

Having offered a provisional sketch to answer the question of how religion evolved, Dennett then moves on to address the question begged by such a naturalized epistemological approach: if religion is merely a set of memetic animal behaviours that promote group organization, then what, if anything, is rational about religion? Here he makes use of both meme theory and rational-choice theory (borrowed from the field of economics). In fact, Dennett avers, it may well be rational to have religious beliefs, simply because those memes that religion is composed of might in fact make it easier for us to negotiate the world. After all, it's not unreasonable to commit oneself to a meme that provides comfort to us in times of need and doesn't cost one anything evolutionarily. Although religious memes may start out as mere mind-parasites, some of those memes will be more successful than others. The suggestion seems to be that in the marketplace of ideas, religious memes are tastier than many others on offer, and therefore it's reasonable for people to choose them. Dennett hopes to show that it is possible to give both a 'meme's-eye view' and a group-level explanation of religion. These moves will be unconvincing to those who don't accept either meme theory or the methodological individualism of neoclassical economics. But even if we do agree to these ingredients, it's startling to see just what Dennett gets from this voluble mixture: American pie.

It is here that it becomes clear why Dennett was at such pains in his introduction to address his book primarily to American readers, and here that the limitations inherent in Dennett's pragmatism become obvious. For after showing how and why religion could have evolved, and proposing that his evolutionary story suggests that religion might even be rational in the context of human society, Dennett then must answer the very normative question that his pragmatist naturalism lacks the philosophical resources to address: is religion a good thing, or a bad thing? Dennett, it turns out after all this, concludes that religion can be bad, but is not necessarily bad. The main test for

him seems to be whether you came by your religious beliefs through coercion, or through rational, reflective consideration. It is entirely unclear how this insistence on choice can be squared with memetics, so it comes off not only as inconsistent, but ultimately as rather prosaic. Furthermore, Dennett's sole criterion for assessing the merit of any particular religious belief seems to consist in asking whether it fits comfortably with beliefs in democracy, human rights and the good of society as a whole. If your religion is based on blind, slavish obedience to authority and unquestioning devotion to ignorant, outmoded systems of thought, then it's bad – though it must be remarked, it is not necessarily bad for you if you are the enslaver, or bad for the memes which encode the beliefs themselves. If your religion teaches that openness, fairness and tolerance towards others is a good thing, then your

religion is good. Here it seems that Dennett is either making normative claims that cannot be licensed by his pragmatist naturalism, or falling back on liberal truisms that render the trappings of evolutionary explanation redundant.

So what do you get when you mix science and religion? What happens when you combine the overt scepticism of Hume and the pragmatism of James with the corrosive reductionism of naturalized evolutionary epistemology? It may come as a shock to find that the scientific approach Dennett enlists yields only this concluding remark: 'My central policy recommendation is that we gently, firmly educate the people of the world so that they make truly informed choices about their lives.' Given Dennett's combination of ingredients, one might have expected a spicier dish.

Michelle Speidel

Fully Foucault

Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa, introduction by Ian Hacking, Routledge, New York and London, 2006. 725 pp., £35.00 hb., 0 415 27701 9.

The appearance of a full English translation of Foucault's *Histoire de la folie* is a welcome and long overdue event that at last brings to a happy conclusion the strange history of a book that now has classic status. First published in 1961 as *Folie et déraison: histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, it was respectfully received and reviewed by specialists (most of them historians) but did not enjoy any great success; it took three years for the initial print run of 3,000 copies to sell out. The heavily abridged *livre de poche* edition published in 1964 was much more successful and provided many readers with their first taste of Foucault, but it was the appearance of *Les Mots et les choses (The Order of Things)* in 1966 that gave him superstar status.

Foucault himself made the abridgement of *Histoire de la folie* and claimed that the new edition preserved the 'general economy of the book'. It did so at a cost: over half the text vanished, together with the illustrations, together with most of the notes and the whole of the bibliography. It was only in 1972 that the full edition (with some minor revisions) became available once more. Sadly but understandably – no publisher could have reasonably been expected to undertake and finance the translation of a dense and difficult book of 800 pages by an almost unknown author – it was the *livre de poche* edition that provided the basis for

Richard Howard's translation of 1967. Some additional material from the original was, however, included, presumably by Foucault himself. The reluctance to translate the book in its entirety was not a uniquely British failing; the only full translation was the Italian version (*Storia della follia*) published in 1972. For a long time *History of Madness* remained 'an unknown book by Michel Foucault', as Colin Gordon put it in *History of the Human Sciences* as long ago as February 1990.

The 1967 translation appeared under the title *Madness and Civilization*, which introduces a slight shift of emphasis, implying either a dichotomy or a dialectic between the two. Foucault himself speaks of 'society' and often explained in interviews that 'madness' can exist 'only in a society', implying that it is a social and not a natural phenomenon. Much more significantly, the translation appeared in a collection edited by R.D. Laing (who also reviewed it) and was prefaced by David Cooper. Laing, it now transpires, was the reader who recommended publication. His handwritten report to Tavistock, dated 29 April 1965, is reproduced as a frontispiece: 'This is quite an exceptional book of very high calibre – brilliantly written, intellectually rigorous, and with a thesis that thoroughly shakes the assumptions of traditional psychiatry.' If, as seems to be the case, that is his full

report, publishers must have been much more trusting in 1965 than they are now, and their readers better rewarded.

The perceived association of Foucault with anti-psychiatry was to have long-term effects; by the early 1970s psychiatrists who had not responded with hostility to the book published in 1961 were denouncing it as an act of 'psychiatricide'. In the aftermath of '68, anti-psychiatry became part of a general call for the 'liberation' of all minorities and could easily become a celebration of madness, as tended to happen with Deleuze and Guattari's *'schizanalyse'*. In the early 1970s, many of us would probably have rejoiced at the idea of 'psychiatricide'; now that the deinstitutionalization of mental illness has led not to liberation, but to the sinister farce of 'care' in the community, we know better.

There is a degree of wishful thinking in Laing's comment, though it is true that Foucault is reminding psychiatrists (in recognizably Nietzschean terms) that their discipline is not the product of a humanizing enlightenment, and emerges from the murky epistemological borderlands where medicine, psychiatry, psychology and the law meet – Mental Health Acts are never drafted by clinicians alone. The origins of clinical psychiatry do not lie in the gesture with which Pinel struck off the chains of the inmates of the Salpêtrière, but in the 'Great Confinement' of 1656. By royal decree, a population variously composed of vagabonds, prostitutes, sexual deviants, syphilitics was rounded up. There followed the gradual identification and isolation of a population deemed to be mad and therefore amenable to medicalization. The result was the breaking off of the tentative dialogue between reason and unreason that had continued throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The new edition is a vast improvement on the old. The translation is fluid and improves on Howard's version, particularly where technical psychiatric terminology is concerned (though *folie* – covering both 'madness' and the many senses of 'folly' remains resistant to translation). The scholarly apparatus is admirable and the appended 'critical bibliography' extremely rich and helpful. This is in fact more than a full translation of the 1972 text: the original preface has been restored and is supplemented by the 1972 preface and appendix ('My Body, This Paper, This Fire'), together with a further 'Response to Derrida' originally published in Japanese in that same year. The dispute between Foucault and Derrida, which resulted in a ten-year estrangement – neither man was particularly tolerant of criticism – centred on the

interpretation of a passage from Descartes, but its most interesting feature is perhaps Foucault's waspish comments on Derrida's pedagogy, which condemns the disciple to repeating *ad infinitum* the discourse of the master.

The quality of the new edition cannot and does not dispel certain doubts and does not deflect from the criticisms that have so often been put forward. The opening sentence of the first chapter is certainly strikingly beautiful: 'At the end of the Middle Ages, leprosy disappeared from the Western world.' Where, one cannot but wonder, does the 'Western world' begin and end? What of Greece and southern Italy, or even Ireland? Did the *Narrenschiff* or 'Ship of Fools' really drift along the rivers and canals of the Low Countries and the Rhineland with its cargo of the damned, or were its endless voyages confined to the poems of Brand and the paintings of Breughel? Did a 'great confinement' take place in Britain? Why is there so little discussion of the private 'trade in lunacy', as Roy Porter asked in *Mind-Forg'd Manacles* and elsewhere? Even in French terms, Foucault's generalizations can be disquieting and empirically dubious. Foucault tells us that equivalents to the Hôpital général were quickly established throughout the country. He gives little statistical information about their effectiveness or the scope of their operations, but it is difficult to imagine that there was any real confinement of the vagrant and the insane in, say, the forests of inland Brittany or the wilds of the Auvergne. The 'classical age' covers (roughly) the seventeenth century and much of the eighteenth and is fairly recognizable in French terms, but remains an unwieldy unit of time. The problems of agency and of the transition from one 'age' are not really clarified here, and would not be clarified by the later introduction of the concept of *episteme*.

Whilst it is perhaps not wise to take Foucault's every statement at face value or as an absolute, one of his greatest qualities has always been his ability to provoke thought and to raise questions. The prisons are filling up again. For successive home secretaries (and ministers of the interior), the only solution to the overpopulation problem is to build more jails – which will fill up in their turn. Many, if not most, of their inmates are said to be mentally ill but they are treated by a medical service that is not even part of the NHS. Informed commentators accept that most women prisoners should not be inside at all, but women continue to be jailed in growing numbers. British ministers can speak quite openly of locking up those suffering from Dangerous Severe Personality Disorder on the grounds that they are a danger to themselves and others. They

will not face trial and may not have committed any crime. As Foucault puts it elsewhere, ‘Society must be defended’, even though there is no coherently convincing definition of DSPD in clinical terms. *History of Madness* obviously does not address these issues (and gender, notoriously, was never really an issue for Foucault), but it, and *Discipline and Punish*, may help us to excavate their origins.

David Macey

The opaque world of the sensible

Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Paul B. Milan, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2006. 169 pp., £15.95, pb., 0 8047 4645 1.

In this new work Barbaras presents his phenomenology of becoming as a dialogue with Husserl whose approach to perception is identified as static, ‘presented’ and ultimately transcendental. Barbaras sees perception as action, a movement towards its object which signifies an *already existing* entanglement. Perception as activity articulates the world of everyday lived experience with our projects. As such it is rooted in the givenness of the world in experience. *Desire and Distance* draws on Merleau-Ponty’s later published and unpublished writings, and Barbaras is keen to stress the Bergsonian influence here, principally its creative evolutionist strand. This is taken up by Merleau-Ponty as the reactivation of sedimented history in the present, and also in the view that the world of objects exhibits ontological continuity in the transition from one form of being to another – that is, the nothingness which differentiates and separates stages of becoming is constitutive of the process itself, as the exterior root-ness of being. At the same time Barbaras criticizes both Bergson’s deterministic view of the potential unfolding of the past via a more radical account of historical possibility, and his failure to see negativity as a constitutive force which continues to abide in the positivity of being.

Barbaras develops the term ‘distance’ to refer to the reduction (*epoche*), the ‘bracketing’ aspect of perception which illuminates the lived experience grounding the perception/activity. The intentional structures or desire which orient practice are revealed in the act of distancing their object from its ground. Hence an

object is only given in its fullness by retreating from it, *contra* Husserl for whom a retreat to its roots would be seen as relinquishing the universal in favour of the particular and as imperfection. This bracketing is an integral part of the object in transition, its passing or ‘ageing’ into becoming something else. Reduction, by its distancing, incorporates loss/desire into the object as a *productive* moment and hence is not passive reflection but rather plays a positive role in the objectification process.

Barbaras argues that a consequence of the trajectory of a domain of objectification is that when an object is in the ascendant, hegemonic, and so on, its intentionality recedes behind it as the taken-for-granted. The object then appears as fully present, self-sufficient, ‘natural’ which then prevents a grasp of its dynamics, its dependence on distance and the negativity of its horizon or trajectory. Human agents can demystify the object world through their activity and its reductions – which are structured by the abyssal nature of horizontal roots – but Barbaras gives no account of the power manifested in the hegemony of a particular form of institution (*Stiftung*) apart from the notion of articulation. It may be that for Barbaras this is compensated by the desire revealed in the distance of the constituting/constituted object, in that the distance or reduction shows the object to be suffused by desire, providing ‘a consciousness equivalent to the object’ – but this desire is also what the object *lacks*, its non-being or negative. This lack or sense of loss entails a kind of structuralist argument in that the distance signals a displacement in which the desire for/lack of one object is expressed in its substitution by another; one thing lives (in its absence) through its surrogate – it continues to inform the thing that displaces it. Desire or regret therefore only become apparent as a given order is displaced or wanes.

Barbaras notes, following Merleau-Ponty, that the bracketing of the object world reveals its base in the otherwise opaque world of ‘the sensible’. As Lefebvre has argued, the everyday both veils and crowns the objectifying tendencies of modernity: everything appears familiar and so, via the reduction, ‘the new’ also has its intentionality revealed as ‘more of the same’. On the other hand, following Barbaras, one could argue that the familiarity which the sensible entails enables us to see the object in the context of its constitution – that is, to grasp the desire behind the object not merely as something excluded by its coming to be but as a constitutive lack; an absence that structures the emergence of the new. For example, the desire for consumer goods exists in those goods as a

lack, their desirability, and this is not conjured out of nowhere or pure subjectivity but exists in the praxis of the good as a quality. Therefore desire is not merely the non-being or emptiness produced by the waning of the old. Neither is this something assimilated to the existence of the new order as per Hegel's positive negation, but a 'something' which exceeds it as a constitutive 'nothing'. Whilst there are parallels with structural linguistics in the displacement of desire, the resemblance is partial in that for Barbaras the absent or silent is not a paradigmatic nothing/exclusion but a something intertwined with a positivity, a kind of non-identical positivity or inbetween-ness in the continuum of the trajectory of social products and their constitution. For Merleau-Ponty the lack is constituted in the intertwining (*chiasm*) of subjectivity with the object world.

However, the ongoing representation of desire/loss as ontological separation – the diminishing of one construct in the presence of another such that it signifies a lack as pure emptiness, exclusion from the ascendant object – issues in problems about just how different ontological domains are related. Urban geographers attempt to interlink the spaces of different economic activities – in David Harvey's case by the notion of relational space. Spatial interconnections echo the horizontal assimilation of idealizations – that is, one space would appear in the constitutive horizon of another as its absence. For example, the local is re-localized in the 'absent presence' of the global. In this way the local bears the horizontal features of the remainder whose lack is present in its reconstitution. Thus we can think of space as a dynamic production starting from but transcending Euclidean idealizations predicated on the separation of spaces.

Debates about the relationship between use value and exchange value raise similar issues where both are seen as representing non-being in relation to the domain of the other. Chris Arthur (*RP* 107) has rightly argued that abstract labour amounts to a void within concrete labour. It sublates its grounds in concrete labour, leaving no remainder in the valorization process. Now arguably this produces the same result as ontological separation; that is, one is left without an intelligible relation between two qualitatively different sorts of being, which clearly *are* related. The way out, using Barbaras's approach, would be to see the void in the manner of desire/loss as *a something* present in concrete labour through which valorization can take place, but also as a something which via the sensible, everyday, can enable a reversal: agents' appropriation of the valorization process for their concrete ends in

production (strikes, suggestions on efficiency) or consumption (customization of products). In other words, concrete labour as foreground or object assimilates the products and processes of capitalism as continuous with itself and thereby temporarily negates the reifying tendencies of commodity production. In this mode of perception workers and consumers can appropriate or 'distance' capitalism as 'the familiar'. The desire for consumer goods is then simply the reconstituted desire of the world of concrete labour, the desire for 'authentic' goods, freely or spontaneously produced.

For all its productiveness Barbaras's development of Merleau-Ponty is somewhat absent and the idea that *epoche* renders the human agent an object for itself with the developmental possibilities noted by Marx and others is never really elaborated. Indeed, development seems to be fired by a biologically driven desire for self-preservation rather than the self-expansion of being. Similarly, articulation of the ontogenetic world of lived experience turns out to be powered by Bergsonian *life* rather than being, which is nothing more than its articulation. This goes against Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on becoming as self-constituting – a 'stabilized explosion'. In pursuit of the riches of Barbaras's book we can no doubt bracket this.

Howard Feather

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