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# Neither theocracy nor secularism?

## Politics in Iran

**Ali Alizadeh**

**O**n Saturday 13 June this year, hours after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Ministry of the Interior announced his landslide victory as Iran's president and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the religious head of state, prematurely and unconstitutionally embraced these results, Tehran and several other major cities became the stage for spontaneous, sporadic and widespread protests. Despite the government's arrest of most senior opposition figures, campaign activists and journalists, the shutting down of mass communications, and the presence on the streets of factions of armed forces, in less than forty-eight hours these anomalous expressions of frustration evolved into a series of highly disciplined and mainly self-organized mass rallies known as the Green Movement. On Monday 15 June, up to 3 million people marched, and hundreds of thousands participated in silent demonstrations over the next three days. In the sermon of the Friday prayer on 19 June, Khamenei once again confirmed the election results, endorsed Ahmadinejad for having policies close to his own, associated the protestors with foreign meddlers and warned of violent consequences. These warnings were realized in the next day's protests: tens were killed and hundreds arrested and kidnapped in Tehran, Shiraz and Isfahan.

A crack has opened up in both the power structure and the historical consciousness of the Iranian people. Notwithstanding how deep it will go and what it will lead to, it has already reactivated the space of radical politics in Iran. The scale of the protests, their rapid formation into a popular movement, and the similarity of their tactics to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, along with the political ambiguity of Ahmadinejad and his social bases, have given rise to much speculation. But an understanding of the Green Movement and its possibilities requires an analysis of the historical matrix out of which it has arisen, whose origins date back to the early twentieth century.

### **The 'transcendental' space of politics in Iran**

In the twentieth century, Iran experienced four major political events: the constitutional revolution of 1906, the popular and democratic movement constituted around the nationalization of oil in 1951–53, the Islamic revolution of 1979 and the reform movement precipitated by the 1997 election. The main demand of the constitutional revolution (*Mashrooteh*, literally meaning 'conditioning') was to limit the absolutist rule of the monarch in Iran's pre-modern society. Alongside this anti-authoritarian tendency, the constitutional revolution aimed at democratically pursuing a modern project of nation-state building via the establishment of the rule of law, parliament and an independent judiciary. It was hoped that such a state would overcome the semi-colonial situation

in which Iran acted as a buffer between the zones of interest of Russia and Britain. The main social forces involved were nationalist feudal lords, nascent bourgeoisie and merchants, cultural elites with modernist or socialist tendencies and senior clergy from Najaf theological centres. A wide coalition of seemingly contradictory forces and the upholding of the ambitions of the 1906 revolution have been constant features of progressive political movements ever since.

The nationalization of oil was made possible by a coalition between the nationalist Mohammed Mosaddeq and Ayatollah Kashani, and it enjoyed the initial support of the Tudeh Party (the Marxist party which accommodated many of the secular Left before becoming the official agent of Moscow). But apart from opening a space for political participation and resisting the colonial powers, this movement also confronted the young Shah, who was seeking support beyond the country's borders. Though there were some with republican tendencies in Mosaddeq's cabinet (for example, his interior minister, Fatemi, who was executed after the 1953 coup), Mosaddeq himself stayed faithful to the constitution and limited his demands to obliging the Shah to reign rather than govern. Similarly, despite later attempts to attribute it either to deep-rooted Islamic beliefs or to the class interests of workers, the 1979 revolution was an unprecedented popular mass movement which, despite the indisputable leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, at the time maximally accommodated all internal social forces: religious factions with modernist or traditionalist tendencies, seculars, liberal nationalists and Marxists. But the result of this process was more than a coalition. The 'subject' of the 1979 revolution is correctly named 'people', since it was produced by transcending – at least temporarily – class, ethnic and cultural differences. By December 1978, the vague set of negative sentiments against the Shah, his dependency on the West, his authoritarianism and forced modernization, had become articulated in the slogan 'Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic' (Khomeini himself insisted on the latter, replacing the 'Islamic Government' first chanted by Islamic forces).

The bone of contention has since resided in the role of Islam in this Republic, but the story is more complicated. Despite appearing to pertain only to the internal functioning of an exclusivist state, the presidential elections of 1997 and 2009 became sites for radical politics involving a coalition of all the forces historically at work in Iranian society. How can we explain this, in the light of the brutal purging of both the state and the social sphere of all non-Khomeinist and non-conformist factions since 1981? How did the difference between the Khomeinist factions that won the battle for hegemony of the 1979 revolution – seemingly minimal, when viewed from outside the situation – allow a maximal polarization of the society in the 1997 and 2009 elections?

First, on the occasion of both these elections, the ruling bloc had ambitions to totalize its power by monopolizing all elected and non-elected institutions; and Khamenei explicitly lent his support to hardliners. This totalization of power was less explicit in the 1997 election, but since 2004 Khamenei has openly moved towards an absolutist state, with the aid of theological interpretations of the absolute Guardianship of the Jurist (*velayat-e motlaqe faqih*) by figures such as Mesbah Yazdi, who is also Ahmadinejad's mentor, and an increasing empowerment of the Revolutionary Guards. Barring reformists from the 2003 and 2007 parliamentary elections, and the last-minute favouring of a relatively unknown populist fundamentalist figure (Ahmadinejad) over Larijani, the current speaker of the house and the more traditionalist conservative candidate in the 2005 presidential election, were widely understood as indicators of such a move. Second, both Mohammad Khatami and Mir-Hossein Moussavi, historically figures of the establishment, had become distanced from power. The former had resigned as Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 1992 in protest at the state's increasing control of the cultural sector and had taken refuge as head of the national library. The latter, after a period of relatively successful economic management as

wartime prime minister during the 1980s, became head of the Art Council. However, far from being a 'subtraction' from the state altogether (in the style fantasized by certain French theorists), this situation produced an ambiguous space for a dialectical relationship between politics and the state, in which popular politics has been able to occupy gaps within the state without fully reducing itself to it.



The result of the 1997 election was the election of a president who, albeit hesitantly and unsuccessfully, acted as leader of the opposition – similar in many ways to the role of Mosaddeq in the nationalization of oil. In a sense, more than an ambition to occupy the state fully, or force it to deliver certain policies, both occasions first and foremost represented attempts to set limits on the state. If after the social mobilizations leading to the high turnout in the 1997 elections (which took the hardliners and reformists alike by surprise) aspirations were raised that the state can be democratized step by step, through the occupation of electable posts, the experience of eight years of reform (1997–2005) proved that this was not possible. The hardliners successfully exhausted the political energies of 1997 through constant interventions by non-elected bodies: the Council of Guardians' vetting the reformist parliament's bills, for example, and the establishment of more parallel centres of power and coercion. This was exacerbated by the reformists' underinvestment in popular politics. They soon lost their bases in the student movement by failing adequately to support it against the hardliners' assault after the suppression of the Tehran University uprising in June 1999. Moreover, the theoretical poverty of leading figures such as Soroosh, who imported a Popperian liberalism for the reconciling of Islam and democracy, ended up throwing out the baby with the bathwater, and the link between Islam and politics became obscured.

Ironically, after 2000, when parliament, government and city councils were all still in the hands of reformists, the movement was already politically dead. Subsequently, the events of 11 September 2001 and the rise of the security paradigm at the level of global hegemony, targeting Iran for its nuclear ambitions, gave the hardliners justification for suppressing the reform movement further. Newspapers, one of the rare institutions of a non-state-organized public sphere, were closed down one after the other, and the few that remained internalized the constraints and voluntarily kept their print runs to a minimum so as not to offend governmental sensitivities. Some reformists were incarcerated, some migrated, and some shifted their focus to institutions of civil society, such as NGOs, with their near exclusive emphasis on the politics of human rights, which were easily suppressed. When in the 2005 presidential election Ahmadinejad went to the second round to face Rafsanjani, neither the efforts of opposition forces inside and outside the state to make analogies with the Chirac–Le Pen contest in the 2002 French election, nor the rare intervention of previously apolitical cultural figures such as the film-maker Abbas Kiarostami, succeeded in mobilizing people to vote, since it was Rafsanjani who looked more like an official face of the state.

In the recent election, Moussavi first appeared as an unattractive figure, out of touch with the post-ideological reformist discourse of civil society, and too nostalgic for 1979, which was for many the



original source of all problems. Despite the presence of a strong social welfare policy in Moussavi's campaign, what gradually transformed him into a figure of popular leadership for a wide coalition of social groups and political factions was his difference from the state, emphasized via a constant recollection of the revolution in its initial stages and the role of the self-organization of the people. Despite Ahmadinejad's attempt to reoccupy the role of opposition (successfully achieved in the 2005 election) by identifying Moussavi with Rafsanjani, his performances in the televised debates, and overconfidence in his populist oratory techniques, clarified his position at the heart of the power structure. A week before the election, the streets were already being reclaimed as the place for the actualization of popular politics. Mindful of the recent experience of the reform movement, people went to the polling stations knowing that an elected opposition government would not yield more than a small share of power in the gigantic state structure, inflated with the revenues of record oil prices over the last four years. Nonetheless, such a coalition of forces constitutes the minimal condition of possibility of a popular radical politics (the mass politicization qua political participation and representation needed to face an all-powerful state) in modern Iran. Historically, this possibility has been actualized when it has found a mode of expression in the Shiite religion.

### **Islam: state, church, theology**

In his writing on the 1979 revolution, Michel Foucault proposed a similar formulation, surprisingly Hegelian for his taste. Observing correctly that 'the Shiite clergy is not a revolutionary force' and the Shiite religion is not the hegemonic ideology of the revolution, Foucault wrote,

it is much more than a simple vocabulary through which aspirations, unable to find other words, must pass... [It is] the form that the political struggle takes as soon as it mobilizes the common people... it transforms thousands of forms [of discontent, hatred, misery] into a force because it is a form of expression, a mode of social relation... a way of being together.<sup>1</sup>

If there was any doubt about this at the time, the last thirty years' rise of political Islam in global politics, and even within the borders of Western societies, mixed with all sort of reactionary content, and the very fate of the Islamic revolution, should have ended such a debate. But, again, matters are more complicated.

To start with, as understood from the Quran, Islam is a combination of, on the one hand, theological, eschatological and social elements with a universalist tendency that addresses social justice in general terms (attributed to the first phase of the Prophet's life) and, on the other, particularistic legal and juridical decrees, picked up from Judaism and adapted to the cultural and political matrix of Muhammad's society in the process of state-building (after migration to Medina). Regardless of the historical interpretations, popular in the West, of the rise of Shiism in tribal factional infighting in the early years of a nascent empire, as seen by Shiites the matter is related to social justice and the divine legitimacy required for ruling the state. The failure to repossess the state after the turbulent five years of Imam Ali's caliphate, associated with egalitarian and democratic tendencies, prepared the ground for the introduction of messianism, perhaps more via contact with the Persian Zoroastrians than with Christians: the Twelfth Imam returns from occultation to establish the utopian just and egalitarian state. But while the establishment of the state is theologically postponed, the critique of power, whenever possible, is a theological obligation (*Nahy an al-Munkar*). The combination of these two factors produces a space of politics in dialectical relation to the state without exhaustion by it.<sup>2</sup> It was this historical temporalization of the present as a constant struggle of oppressed against oppressors that came to the fore in 1979.

If Iranians' initial attraction to Shiite Imams was to ally themselves with an opposition internal to their Arab invaders, more than eight centuries later the Safavid Turks picked up this tendency and turned Shiism into the official religion of Iran, to justify building an independent nation-state, in opposition to the hegemonic Ottoman Empire. They aided the consolidation and strengthening of a class of clerics who saw the rule of the state as justified: though undivine, this state could at least protect the lives of Shiite believers after almost a millennium of oppression as minorities. It was during the Qajar dynasty in the nineteenth century, with its weak kings who lost half of the land to Russia and were under colonial (and theologically 'infidel') influence, that clerics expanded their theoretical claims to the organization of the public sphere. However, this was not a claim for rule over the state, although it did implicitly allow for some supervisory function in relation to the state. The role of clerics in the anti-colonial boycott of British tobacco in 1891 and in leading the constitutional revolution should be seen as partially prepared by this shift. Apart from a singular republican attempt by Grand Ayatollah Nayini, in the midst of military assault on the constitutional revolution, to transfer the source of legitimacy of the organization of the public sphere and political sovereignty to the people (rather than the king), the aforementioned theoretical framework remained intact until Khomeini's experimental short treatises on *Velayat-e Faqih*, the Guardianship of the Jurist. Written in exile in the 1960s, these for the first time reserved the right of the management of state for the just clergy.

However, throughout the uprisings of 1978–79 leading to the Revolution, Khomeini never mentioned this concept, instead describing the form of the future state as a general republic that would observe Islamic rules due to the demands of the Muslim majority in the country. Khomeini left Tehran twenty days after the victory of the revolution for the holy city of Qom, merely to advise the revolutionaries as their spiritual mentor. It was not until December 1979, ten months after the victory of revolution, that *Velayat-e Faqih* was mentioned for the first time, and Khomeini was soon back in Tehran, for medical reasons. This move, central to the official interpretations of 1979, is often seen as a dissimulating act, a theologically devised survival technique for the historically minority Shiites. According to these essentialist readings, Khomeini had already revealed his real intention to build an all-Islamic state to be ruled by clerics and it was only the naivety of non-religious forces that allowed them to be blinded by his ostensive republicanism. But the matter is not that certain and the revolutionary process which resubjectivated a nation could have affected Khomeini too. Whether Khomeini had a Robespierrean period or was a Torquemada throughout<sup>3</sup> does not affect the above analysis of the space of Iranian politics. The Islam understood by the participants of the Revolution was an indeterminate cultural form of expression, constituted through the potentialities of Shiite messianism and egalitarianism, whether in full abstraction from and opposition to the history of the semi-church in influential liberation theologians such as Ali Shariati, or by occupying gaps in the contradictory history of the semi-church which had produced progressive and reactionary clerics alike.

Since Khomeini and Khomenist factions themselves exhausted these potentialities, first in the post-revolutionary battle of hegemony and then in the process of state-building – turning Islam into Islamism, martyrdom for justice into a driving motor for the state's legitimacy, and 'the people' qua revolutionary subject into homogenous orchestrated agents of the state – the quarrel over the potentialities of Shiism, the possibility of the disentanglement of its messianic and juridical aspects, and the duality or continuity of Khomeini's intentions cannot be settled solely via theoretical means. Ironically, recent events, still part of an open process, help clarify these ambiguities and partially corroborate Foucault's writings. While authoritarian forces have hidden behind theocratic slogans, identifying political dissidence with blasphemy, and the critique of power with infidelity or religious hypocrisy, political divisions are not focused on the

issue of religion versus secularism, but on discourses of power and citizenship. The Green Movement incorporates some Islamic slogans and constantly refers to 1979 – encouraged by Moussavi during the campaign, but more spontaneously picked up during the demonstrations. What differentiates the seeming repetition of the same slogans is thirty years of historical mediation that has allowed people to reclaim their religion from its theocratization and monopolization in the hands of the state, as an open matrix of Iranian culture with political significance.

The role of religion in Iranian politics should be understood in the context of the conjunction of Iranian history with the historicized inner structure of Shiism; it should not be overgeneralized by identifying it with political Islam *tout court*. Moreover, the crippling entanglement of religion and state has accelerated the inner history of Shiite theology, in both its progressive political and juridical aspects, the former focusing on how to reclaim some space away from the theocratic state and the latter resolving the contradictions of managing a modern state machinery in a globalized world. In contradiction to Foucault's depiction of the anti-modernizing tendency of the Islamic revolution, and notwithstanding its uncomfortable relation to modernity, in the last thirty years the theocracy has acted as a successful catalyst for indigenous modernization. Apart from yearning for the latest instrumentalities of the modern world, whether cloning or nanotechnology, the justification for whose compatibility with sharia is quickly produced in Qom, even the Islamization of the public sphere with its reactionary gender segregation policies paradoxically facilitated the rapid participation in the public sphere of women from traditionalist backgrounds, who soon asked for more civic rights.

### **State, capital, politics**

Iran's first parliament was ended by Russian allies of the king bombarding its building in 1907. Though the constitution was restored after two years of military battles between revolutionary forces and monarchists (backed by some reactionary clerics), in the chaotic years leading up to and during the First World War and the partial occupation of the country by British and Russian forces, its initial ambitions were not realized. The first practical step in the project of modern bourgeois nation-state building was delivered by Reza Shah Pahlavi who established a new dynasty in 1925 and, with the support of Britain, secured the rule of central government, a forced cultural modernization and the industrial and bureaucratic infrastructure needed for the process of primitive accumulation. Nonetheless, his authoritarianism did not allow any class representation and the nascent bourgeoisie, Qajar reminiscent of aristocracy, and feudal lords all became weary of his frequent usurpation of their land and capital, and their transfer not to the state but at times to his own person. A faster development of capital took place after the Shah (Pahlavi the second) returned to power in the 1953 coup, staged with the aid of the CIA and MI6. The land reforms in 1962, advised by the Kennedy government, combined with increasing oil revenues accelerated this accumulation, along with the usual Third World corruption, and the Iranian class formation went through a more or less classical development. This allowed the Shah to transform Iran from a semi-capitalist Western-dependent state to an independent capitalist society with a strong, non-democratic state with a major stake in the economy.

According to Ahmad Ashraf, between 1956 and 1976 'the average share of the public sector in capital formation increased from 36 percent to 54 percent'.<sup>4</sup> As a result the Shah became the authoritarian ruler of a massive capitalist machinery with an enlarged bureaucratic organization. He did not allow any parliamentary or even interest-based representation to the class of grand bourgeoisie (even at the level of a chamber of commerce), despite friendly personal relations with them, let alone political representation for the working class or political opposition. In a populist move, not dissimilar to Ahmadinejad's, in the mid-1970s the Shah moved to repress those few capitalists who

had managed to influence the parliamentary election. The only instance of genuine class-based representation during the post-1953 coup years perhaps was that of the oil-industry workers, who managed to establish a strong union and to get the state to listen to them in September 1978, after orchestrating an effective strike. But the workers refrained from a narrow class-based representation of interests and bestowed their political gains on the rest of the opposition movement. Their list of demands was: '1. End martial Law. 2. Full solidarity and co-operation with striking teachers 3. Unconditional release of all political prisoners. 4. Iranianization of the oil industry. 5. All communications to be in the Persian language. 6. All foreign workers to leave the country.'

The development of capital becomes more complicated after the 1979 revolution and requires some decoding. First, the factories and properties of the grand bourgeoisie, who had liquidated what they could and fled long before the Shah left the country, were either nationalized or transferred to a range of institutions called *Bonyad* (foundation). These bonyads (for example, the Foundation for the Downtrodden and the Imam Committee of Aid) came into existence in the urgency of the Revolution under the auspices of social welfare, but they later became semi- or para-state capitalist institutions. They grew very rapidly after the end of the war with Iraq and became a significant independent sector alongside the public and private sectors. They enjoy high manoeuvrability, using the privileges available to both private and public sectors whenever it suits them, and have special privileges such as immunity from taxation and secrecy of operation. This latter is usually justified as a matter of national security since they are under the control of the leader and part of their revenues allegedly finances Iran's foreign allies, such as Hamas and Hizbollah, but they may also be used to finance the paramilitary agents of domestic repression. Second, capital accumulation has been a tortuous process determined by infighting between the different factions of the Islamic Republic, which take refuge in the ideological rhetoric of revolution when it is to their economic advantage. However, instead of paying too much attention to the alleged economic policies of each faction, it is more useful to consider their political histories, which give classical terms odd meanings, such as when 'the Left' becomes the advocate of the free market, while 'the Right' turns to the rhetoric of economic justice.

After the purge of all non-religious factions in June 1981, the political space of the Iranian state was monopolized by two Khomeinist factions, which, while diametrically opposed to each other in some aspects, did not have antagonistic social bases. The first, known as the Left, were the students involved in hostage-taking at the American embassy in November 1979. Many of them were previously students of Shariati and had a strong leaning towards a social welfare system or state interventionism. In foreign policy they were more belligerent, believing in exporting the revolution (Mohtashemi, Moussavi's representative in the supervision of the recent election, for example, is one of the founding figures of Lebanon's Hizbollah), and culturally less traditionalist. The other faction, with its traditionalist cultural and juridical readings, known as the Right, the conservatives or today's 'hardliners', were rooted in the traditional mercantilist bourgeoisie (bazaar), had almost single-handedly financed the Revolution, and had tight historical relations with Shiite clerics. Notwithstanding the rule of the conservatives over domestic and international trade, the first decade, organized by Moussavi, is associated with the contradictory features of a strong statist economy, relatively successful social welfare programmes, and what has recently been called 'de-proletarianization' and 'structural involution'.<sup>5</sup>

Later, between 1989 and 1997, Rafsanjani moved towards a neoliberal economy, theologically justified in a Friday prayer sermon in which the Prophet was depicted as the advocate of legitimately accumulated (*halal*) wealth. However, the instrumental ideological slogan of anti-imperialism, which after expunging the Khomeinist Left factions from official positions from 1989 onwards was repossessed by the traditionalist conservatives, constantly prevented him from normalizing the relationship with the



West and fully joining the global market. Nonetheless, by 1996 the class formation of Iranian society and the ratio of state to private capital was almost the same as in the years before the Revolution. The reform government of 1997–2005 continued the privatization, but attempted to introduce regulations, reduce nepotism, and introduce some controls over parastate institutions (which were unsuccessful). While the reform government had the most successful economic results, it did not manage (or find it a necessity) to connect its political programmes to economic development. When in 2004, a year before Ahmadinejad's first presidency, two Revolutionary Guards' fighter jets took off to threaten President Khatami during the opening ceremony of Tehran's new airport, expressing their discontent with Turkish contractors taking charge of the airport's catering, a new economic force symbolically announced its existence. During Ahmadinejad's presidency (and a government that has, in four years, had as much oil revenue – \$320 billion – as the rest of the sixteen years of postwar governments put together), privatizations have accelerated, but the major buyer of state companies has been the Revolutionary Guards, an organization which no longer hides its identity behind agents. The introduction of 'capitalism with theological values' has been legitimized by the pseudo-leftist, pseudo-anti-imperialist figure of Ahmadinejad. But since the election, the mask has been removed. The overall dependency of the state – which still, directly or indirectly, owns two-thirds of the economy – on oil revenues permits it ever more mediating power with regard to capital accumulation and class relations. The seemingly liberal efforts to limit so-called statist rule over the economy, by emphasizing the rule of law and political freedoms, reflected in the priority of popular politics over class-based struggle, actually opens a space for deterring that unbridled capitalism that tends to totalize every social and economic sphere.

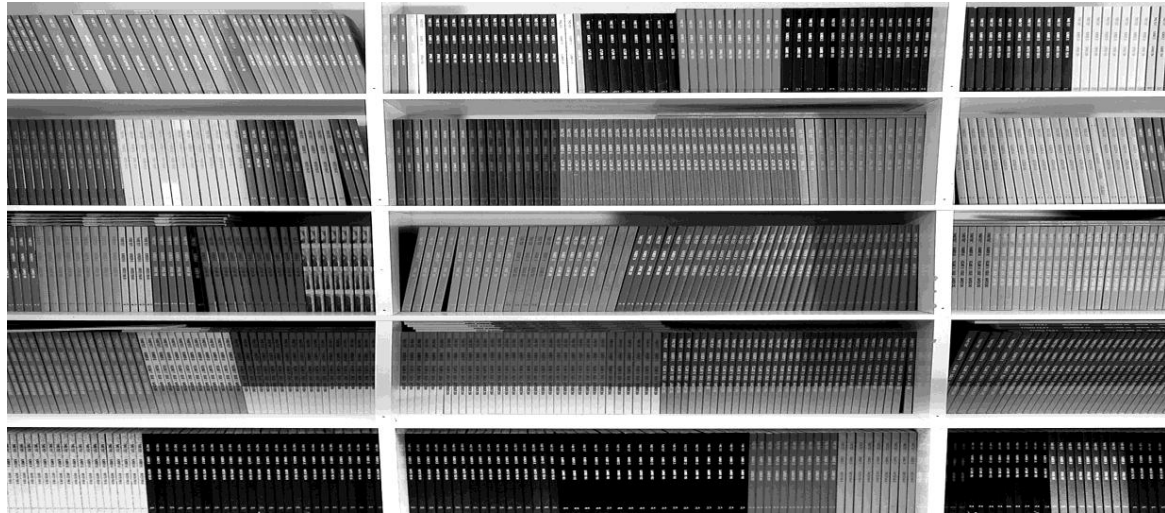
In addition, despite the analogies made between eastern European 'velvet' revolutions and the Green Movement, Iran is already well immersed in global capital. While, at the global political level, especially since 2000, the new hardline champions of anti-Americanism have managed to play a much-needed role as global capital's pseudo-Other by maintaining a mini cold war, in which the logic of war is maintained without being realized. Disarming the hardliners in Iran, with their urge to keep the war an open option, can partially disarm the conservatives in the USA, Israel and Europe. It could also present an internal solution to the crisis of democracy for an Islamic but not Islamicized Middle East. This more universal aspect of the Green Movement has been largely obscured from the point of view of the Western Left. In the temporally expanded politicization of the last few months, the historical experience of the last thirty years, the recent experience of a temporary autonomy of people from the state, and the state's violent coercion, have been mediated and are seeking further articulation. A political space that is neither theocracy nor Western secularism, neither anti-American nor pro-West, has become possible. Whether and when such a possibility can be actualized is yet to be determined.

## Notes

1. Quoted in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2005, p. 202.
2. This is particular to Twelver Shiites and not to other variations, such as Ismailis, who successfully established the Fatemid dynasty.
3. According to Maxime Rodinson's critique of Foucault, 'Khomeini does not have the necessary capacities, even at an illusory level, to be a Robespierre or Lenin ... Let us hope for the Iranian people that he does not reveal himself to be a Dundaloup tending toward a Torquemado.' In Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, p. 245.
4. Ahmad Ashraf, 'From the White Revolution to the Islamic Revolution', in Sohrab Behdad and Saeed Rahnam, eds, *Iran after the Revolution: Crisis of an Islamic State*, I.B. Tauris, London, 1996, p. 31.
5. Sohrab Behdad and Farhad Nomani, *Class and Labour in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?*, Syracuse University Press, New York, 2006, p. 4.

# THIRD TEXT

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE



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# Who was Oscar Masotta?

## Psychoanalysis in Argentina

**Philip Derbyshire**

As Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's sardonic detective Pepe Carvalho ruefully observed, in a dictionary of Argentine clichés, psychoanalysis would have a crucial place, along with 'tango and the disappeared'.<sup>1</sup> 'One' knows that along with Paris, Buenos Aires is one of the centres of psychoanalytic practice, and one of the leading training centres for Lacanians. What is less well known is how this state of affairs came to be historically, and how it connects with the wider history of philosophy in Argentina, more especially with the extensive influence of Sartre there in the 1950s. One way of mapping this field is to look at the work of a maverick figure within Argentine letters, Oscar Masotta, whose intellectual trajectory shifts from a domesticated Sartrean position to exegesis of Lacan's work within the context of a specifically Argentine concern with influence, modernization and praxis.

Oscar Masotta (1930–1979) has become the *fons et origo* of Lacanian analysis in Argentina. A recent volume on him in the series *Founders of Argentine Psychoanalysis* by the appropriately named publishing house Capital Intelectual in 2009, with the subtitle 'A Legend at the Crossroads of Knowledge(s)', bears the signs of this legacy and its repetitive figuration.<sup>2</sup> Yet this later role as Lacan's epigone overwrites and distorts an intellectual trajectory, which has little parallel in the anglophone world. Masotta was emblematic of the sorts of response that a whole generation of Argentine intellectuals made to the extended crisis of hegemony that characterized the years between Perón's fall from power in 1955 and the return of the military in much bloodier and determined guise in 1976. Nevertheless, though constantly republished, in fact his work has had little philosophical impact, even as his figure has grown ever more mythified. He is thus a cultural symptom whose writings may be read as forms of reading from the periphery. The continuity in Masotta's work has to do with a constant, if never systematically articulated, problematic of freedom and authority, which finds shifting conceptual approaches whose very production act out their thematic.

The argument of this article is that Masotta's trajectory from Sartrean literary analysis to Lacanian exegesis exemplifies the dilemmas of a peripheral intelligentsia in relation to metropolitan theoretical production. Philosophical shifts on this reading are symptomatic rather than purely conceptual. I try to demonstrate this thesis by reading Masotta's early writings with their indebtedness to Sartre, then a pivotal text where the ideas of betrayal and fidelity are foregrounded, and lastly the work on Lacan with its preoccupations with transmission and rivalry. The choice of themes constantly refers back to Masotta's own existential and historical position and maps out a particular instance of intellectual dependency. I close with some more general remarks on the position of Lacanian analysis in Argentina now.

### Early writings and commitment

Masotta was a new kind of Argentine intellectual. He did not belong to the aesthetic modernists associated with the long-lived journal *Sur* (1931–70), whose massive influence in Argentina lay partly in their connections with the European avant-garde and the work of translation that *Sur* financed and disseminated, but also in the autonomy that Victoria Ocampo's wealth granted to the journal and its wider cultural activities.<sup>3</sup> Nor was he a tenured journalist or academic. In a sense, he was precariously situated as a jobbing hack: his only claim to attention was prestige. In Beatriz Sarlo's description, 'This is a new type of intellectual different from those before, initially because there is a change in what could be called "beacon authors" and in terms of cultural models. Oscar Masotta was typical of this moment.'<sup>4</sup> Masotta produces his own voice and discursive position, a form of address in which he himself becomes an 'beacon author', an authoritative voice, in the construction of a new public. His lack of specialization and his facility at producing a distinctive form of writing, the critical essay/review in which he would sum up and evaluate a theoretical problematic – an author, a body of work, an extant position

– established him as an arbiter of intellectual fashion within the restricted audience of Buenos Aires.

In the 1950s the philosophical establishment in Argentina had opened to Heideggerian and Schelerian influences which challenged a neo-Kantian domination. Irrespective of these philosophical positions, however, Argentine philosophy was notable for its academicism, a high-minded retreat from the interventionist demotic vulgarity of Peronism.<sup>5</sup> It was the field of literary analysis that revealed an avid desire to think the situation of Argentine society and politics and the ethical position of subjects caught between populism and an intransigent bourgeoisie. The journal *Contorno* was in the van of this development. Founded in 1952 by the author David Viñas and his critic brother Ismael, *Contorno*, which is the Spanish translation of Sartre's term of art 'situation', saw itself as providing a space where the dilemmas of the new intelligentsia could be thrashed out. It involved a number of figures who would later dominate their respective fields: literary critic Noé Jitrik, historian Tulio Halperín Donghi and significant figures like Marxist psychoanalyst León Rozitchner, whom I return to below, and the less well-known Ramón Alcalde, anthropologist and Marxist. In its short life (1952–57) it explored new forms of literary criticism, new forms of literary value and their relation to the dramatic political landscape of Perón and coup. Opposing the cultural populism of Perón's regime it nevertheless refused to accommodate to the elitism that it saw in *Sur* and the politics of cultural value espoused by the traditionalist defenders of the 1955 coup. Disseminating Sartrean thought, *Contorno* also privileged the Sartrean notion of commitment, the willed engagement in a political field, where the intellectuals are distanced from the agent of history, the proletariat. Sartre's *What is Literature?* is a master text for analysing the political and intellectual fields of 1950s Argentina.<sup>6</sup>

Masotta contributed to a special issue of *Contorno* on Peronism with the seminal article 'Sur or Colonialist Anti-Peronism' (1956). Masotta took the journal to task for its endorsement of the September coup and the military's assault on the trade unions. *Sur* invokes an aesthetics of the spirit that justifies the suppression of the spirit's other, the mass, the vulgar – the *demos* who were the object of the coup. *Sur* thus repeats the gesture of colonialism valorizing the 'home of the spirit' in Europe, and subordinating Argentine culture to European models. For Masotta the derogation of the masses in liberal thought reveals the political task of committed writing, the promotion of the 'culture of the proletariat' which will end the dominance of bourgeois

categories, implanted in proletarian consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Gramscian without referring to Gramsci,<sup>8</sup> Masotta develops and generalizes Sartre's idea of 'committed literature' to the creation of a new class culture. *Sur*'s form of address is a 'shout' or a 'prayer'. Both forms occlude the response of the other. The 'shout' imposes a monological voice, drowning out the subordinated subject's own voice, and forcibly seizing the other, and wounding it. The 'prayer' insinuates itself into the subject's consciousness. The other – the mass, the subaltern – is reduced to an object. The liberal intelligentsia thus remains on the side of 'conquest and [evangelical] mission' imposing a culture. The counter-position is that of the 'committed intellectual'; as Sartre would have it: 'one freedom addressing another'. The unresolved problem here is the gap between intellectual and mass, but for Masotta too the problem is that of the status of the intellectual.

One solution is to make the intellectual into a bearer of a truth that originates elsewhere, and here Masotta paradoxically repeats *Sur*'s gesture even as he attacks it. The intellectual, whilst committed to 'creating the culture' of the proletariat, finds the sources of that culture in Europe. So, making a metaphysical destiny out of a social contingency, Masotta performs this ex-centricity by adopting a mode of address from a posited European outside. He becomes the bearer of the European message and in a slew of articles he proffers the central tenets of Sartre, Blanchot or Merleau-Ponty. Separated from institutional authority and from the working class, legitimacy is found within a textual form of will to mastery. So, the essays after the assault on *Sur* have an extraordinary ambition: in the compass of some ten or twelve pages Masotta attempts not merely to précis, but to adjudicate, complex philosophical themes and disputes, as in the essays on Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Daniel Lagache, and the discussion of Sartre and Marxism which he writes in 1959 and 1960. This mastery-effect is undoubtedly *the* main intention of the texts, since the very range and condensation militate against their use value as exegesis: they are excessive, becoming unreadable, yet in their unreadability effect a certain prestige.

Knowledge is performed. But this mastery is exercised in a particular position in relation to text and audience: Masotta stands between the original and the public, disseminating a version or interpretation of a text that originates elsewhere, and depends upon the ignorance of the audience. Masotta exists outside both text and public<sup>9</sup> – he is not an original author, nor is he a simple representative of the audience that he addresses and makes possible for the text to address.

His textual position is both dominant and precarious. He must keep writing commentaries in order to be at all, since he insistently refrains from producing a more substantial *œuvre*. Given the relatively small circulation of the journals in which he was writing at this time and the novelty of the material he discusses, the question of readership arises. In a sense, Masotta is writing to produce an audience that can read him. In another sense, his very textual strategies militate against anyone reading him critically – that is, being able to assess his full range of reference. This ambiguity inherent in the model of the audience implied in his texts reinforces his position of being both outside and between: outside the Argentine cultural space, since he is always intellectually in France or Europe and between that other space and Argentina, mediating this space for an Argentine audience, whose cultural competence in part depends upon his mediation.

However, these exegetical essays do *point towards* a theory of the subject. Masotta's reflections on Merleau-Ponty yield his own version of a Sartrean ontology of freedom. Masotta writes that the I or ego is always more than the given: 'I can never explain my acts on the basis of who I am ... I do not know who I am.' I cannot explain myself through my character, nor my character through this alienated 'I'. It is always possible to realize an *epoche*, a bracketing, which would reveal the true sources of the self: consciousness, that nothingness which is a 'monstrous spontaneity', the experience of which gives us a 'vertigo of possibility'. For Masotta, this *epoche* is a form of ascesis, 'purifying', and is the basis of an (undeveloped) ethics: 'through this [*epoche*] I break with the ties that I maintain to myself and to the others ... and it is given to me to glimpse the translucent sheet of my consciousness in which the truth of my own life is reflected.'<sup>10</sup> This ethical possibility is democratic: 'it has ceased to be the privilege of the philosopher to become an act that can take place in everyday life.'<sup>11</sup> Consciousness here transcends the limitations of the given I to engage in possibilities beyond the merely determined. The self as freedom, as undetermined possibility, the monstrous spontaneity that emerges from nothingness is the cipher of an intellectual seemingly unfixed by theoretical or sociological determinations.

However, this emphasis on 'possibility' runs up against the demand for 'commitment' and led to conflict with David Viñas. In a polemical review of the latter's novel *An Everyday God*, Masotta distances himself from 'committing oneself'. Throwing oneself into the world reveals that the self encountered is not one's own, but 'tied to others'. Masotta sees this alienation of self in the other – which for Viñas could be seen as the positive mark of a new community – as a 'truncated dialectic', lacking the next moment of recuperation of the self:

the task would have to consist in recuperation, in throwing oneself into a project of disalienation, in seeking out through the misunderstanding of the world and the intertwining of selves the fissure that would mark the difference between my own self and the egos of the others.'<sup>12</sup>

The fissure of possibility precisely opens up 'everydayness', which is no longer something we must submerge ourselves in (as Masotta claims that Viñas counsels) but a movement from detotalization to totalization, a movement through the tension of particular and universal, individual and society, and the politics of the everyday



Daniel Santoro, *Captive Victory, or The Peronist Raid*, 2009.

and the politics of history. Masotta's invocation of a dialectic of disalienation then becomes both an ethical strategy, as in his notion of an ethical *epoche*, and a reflection on politics and the politics of literature.

Criticism reveals commitment but also its obverse – rejection and betrayal. The dialectic between them and the dialectic of vanguard and mass within the national is played out in the most accomplished text

of Masotta's early period, *Sex and Betrayal* (1961), his study of the Argentine novelist Roberto Arlt. Arlt was an author whose reputation had begun to be re-evaluated in part because of work by *Contorno*. Their special issue on his work, number 2, May 1954, attempted to reinstate both Arlt's subject matter – the world of the 1920s Buenos Aires lower middle classes and lumpenproletariat – and his much-criticized style (his 'bad' Spanish), seeing them as both a faithful representation of Argentine reality and a critique of that reality – a rebellion against it and a search of redemption. Masotta's move was to read Arlt through the categories of Sartre's *Saint Genet*, notably 'evil', 'bad faith' and 'betrayal'. Arlt must be read in terms of a Sartrean conception of the whole, where life, politics and art are interrelated, and this reveals that Arlt's writing is characterized by an interpenetration of the social and the metaphysical. Masotta's self-assigned task will be to investigate the origin and structure of this 'metaphysical realism'.

The result is the revelation of a self that is abject and that seeks evil as an expression of freedom. But this freedom is caught up in the machinery of power and is a relay of the generalized exploitation of everyone in society. Fundamentally, solidarity is only negative: the mutual betrayal of all by all in the service of social domination. Masotta sees this impossibility of community – the mutual repulsion of humiliated subjects – as Arlt's key discovery, disinterring the morality of society by illustrating its underside. By presenting these subjectivities in their silent self-alienation, Arlt gives us an inverted image of society as it is. But it is just this society that makes the former possible: the anti-society is the truth of society. They become as they are through society and then repeat what they are. But this is just to be what it is in essence to be in society. 'Humiliation' is what it means to belong to middle-class society.

The struggle against 'humiliation' involves the dialectic of evil. The assertion of freedom requires that the recognition of similarity with the other be consciously rejected, that he/she be betrayed. In Masotta's account of Arlt, a certain fidelity to self demands the betrayal of the other, but this fidelity through betrayal is also a betrayal of self, as Arlt's protagonist surrenders himself to the Big Other (one might say) of the system. The metaphysics of existentialism are being mobilized as social anatomy. In pursuit of evil as autonomy, Arlt's anti-hero ends up performing evil as the essence of middle-class belonging, which is precisely the betrayal of all by all. Arlt thus reveals the moral hypocrisy of bourgeois society, but also how the gesture of rejection is itself defeated. The machinery of bourgeois society

functions according to the following sinister logic: self-assertion is self-sacrifice and submission. Arlt's petty-bourgeois judge the other as lacking, and in doing so they introject this failure pointing the finger at their own guilt. I recognize the other's failure and in that image I recognize myself: the body of the other which I condemn is precisely what I am: the middle class is the lumpenproletariat. Masotta calls this a 'delirium of identification' and it leads Arlt's characters to the murder of the other as a perverse assertion of self: if my body is the other's, and that other is irredeemably corrupt, then I free myself from it and my own by its physical annihilation. Masotta concludes that Arlt's characters pass from alienation to alienation, attempting to escape the body by becoming mere consciousness: the world is split between the poverty of those become consciousness and the poverty of those who are condemned to live as bodies.

What Masotta develops here, then, is an account of the subject alienated in class society, whose very freedom functions as a necessary link in the deterministic reproduction of society. He reads Arlt as giving a fictional representation of the social in which cynicism, hypocrisy and betrayal are the crucial vectors of an autonomized totality. Literature is thus the site both of social and philosophical investigation – Arlt's fictions are veridical in some sense, and his characters reveal truths about the constitution of the subject – and of a work of commentary that reveals a critical stance towards literature and society as such. In reading Arlt, Masotta shows what authentic criticism might be and what such criticism entails politically.

Arlt is a means through which to address the situation of the middle-class intellectual and the playing out of those questions of authority, fidelity and commitment that seem definitional for Masotta. The slippage between commentator, writer and character yield the very 'delirium of identification' that Masotta finds central to the experience of the self in Arlt's fictions. It is as though an acute self-consciousness of writer as reader and committed intellectual is registered within Masotta's text as a constant pull to transform analysis into self-analysis. In fact, Masotta is astute enough to perceive this reflexivity, and one of his most revelatory essays is titled 'Roberto Arlt, Myself', written some eight years after *Sex and Betrayal*, as a foreword to a new edition of the latter text.<sup>13</sup> A retrospective judgement on his book, the essay is also an account of what the book unleashed, and becomes a narrative of Masotta's breakdown after the death of his father and his reconstruction as a jobbing intellectual preoccupied with money and position. Rather than merely treating

Arlt in the way Sartre analyses Genet in *Saint Genet*, *Sex and Betrayal* reveals the social preconditions of its own production. Writing the book reveals for him the ‘meaning of existence of the class I belonged to’, which is precisely ‘betrayal’. Like Arlt’s characters Masotta judges the world by acting out a form of projection – he signals betrayal through a form of betrayal, a betrayal of his previous self as a particular form of intellectual, the committed writer of the Sartrean kind. Coming from the same milieu as Arlt, he uses Sartrean ideas to write on Arlt, but, he says, in the tones of Merleau-Ponty. A certain alienating identification (with the Merleau-Ponty ‘who I was not’) already counterpoints the projective identification with Arlt: ‘we had emerged from the same stock’.<sup>14</sup> But the fracture of his ‘illness and death’ forces him to forget ‘Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, and ... ideas and politics of commitment and the ideas I had forged about myself’ and drives him to look for a psychoanalyst. His recovery means he has to make money, and he appears to himself more ‘a character out of Arlt’ than himself, but ‘who was I?’, a question that repeats through the essay.<sup>15</sup> What is clear is that his intellectual agenda has changed: there had been ‘a certain shipwreck of phenomenology’. Masotta had discovered new models, ‘Lévi-Strauss and Lacan’, and abandoned ‘Sartrean ... positions’. Yet the essay finishes not with an argument but with a montage of anxious preoccupations: language, image, class, paternity – all suffused with the lack of mastery that the breakdown indicates, and that the abandonment of Sartre symbolizes.

### Reading Lacan in Buenos Aires

Abandoning Sartre is the betrayal of a particular ethical ideal, and the eruption of an identificatory dilemma. Masotta’s first lecture on Lacan and its subsequent publication<sup>16</sup> are both an attempt to develop a psychology which has a place for the unconscious and a search for a new intellectual lineage. It is the beginnings of an attempt to regain a vanished mastery precisely by subtending himself to a master. The Lacan lecture was the fruit of reading a small section of Lacan’s work, and shows a hybrid character in which Sartrean concepts sit athwart a handful of Lacanian notions. It produces an interesting figure that perhaps brings out Lacan’s phenomenological antecedents, and less consonant with the French Lacan of the mid-1960s. Despite Masotta’s own claims to belong to the *avant garde*, in fact his reading of Lacan has an *arrière garde* quality, which registers Buenos Aires’ relation to ‘Europe’.

Psychoanalysis had a singular history in Argentina. A native school of social psychology under the

auspices of José Ingenieros and José Ramos Mejía had blocked the conduits that might have naturalized Freud in the pampas, and, as Hugo Vezzetti has pointed out, the figures that introduced Freud into Argentina in the 1930s were eccentric – positivist psychiatrists like Gregorio Berman, communist intellectuals like Aníbal Ponce, as well as fascist-leaning intellectuals like Pizarro Crespo. It is only in 1942 that a branch of the International Psychoanalytic Association was founded by a mix of European émigrés such as Marie Langer and Angel Gama and Argentine psychiatrists such as Enrique Pichon-Rivière and Arnoldo Raskovsky. Backing Klein in the postwar ‘Controversial discussions’, the Argentine Psychoanalytic Association (APA) organizes its work through a Kleinian optic, but remains institutionally unanchored. Peronist and post-Peronist legislation restricted psychoanalytic practice to the medical sphere, curtailing its practice, but also emphasizing its local connections with medicine. The APA becomes a region of medicine. Some APA members take up an anti-Peronist politics, pathologizing populism (witness Langer’s pinioning of popular fantasies about Eva Perón to a Kleinian politics of envy and revenge), whilst others shift to the left whilst emphasizing a group perspective in analytic practice – like Pichon Rivière. On the whole, then, in the period of Masotta’s engagements with psychoanalysis, the discipline is a recent import into Argentina and one with a conservative bent, but it too was struggling to legitimize itself and during the 1960s its meagre institutional implantation is threatened by professional developments within the university (the rise of psychology) and by the claims for lay analysis that Masotta was advancing.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, ‘Jacques Lacan or the Unconscious and the Foundations of Philosophy’ is written in a particular context in 1959. It sees Lacan within a philosophical tradition that stems from but supersedes Sartre, and in stressing the philosophical moment precisely bids against a medical version of Freud. But it is not Lacanian, and Lacan is only ‘the head of the most interesting sector of contemporary French psychoanalysis’.<sup>18</sup> For Masotta Lacan’s central idea is the radical opacity of the subject; yet the lecture/article merely introduces a small number of Lacanian notions, notably the ‘Other’, ‘signifier’, ‘bar’, ‘Phallus’ and the Lacanian inflections of Freudian notions such as the Oedipus complex and the unconscious, and Hegelian notions such as ‘desire’. In fact the Lacanian sources that Masotta quotes are quite meagre: two essays that would later be collected in *Écrits*, ‘Le stade du miroir’ (1949) and ‘L’aggressivité en psychoanalyse’

(1948), a shorthand resumé of Lacan's Seminar on 'The Formations of the Unconscious' taken by Pontalis (given in 1957), and 'L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient, ou La raison depuis Freud' (1957), all published in French in professional journals, obtained through Pichon-Rivière. Masotta claims to take on a 'work of decoding', but his decipherment is a repetition of the moment of exegesis he mastered in his 'phenomenological period'. A logic of condensation is at work in a section in which Masotta Lacanizes Freud by conflating the lexicons of the two thinkers.<sup>19</sup> Through a discussion of Freud's second topography and the death drive, Masotta links Lacan, Hegel and the repetition compulsion with Sartre's notion of a 'temporalizing' moment of childhood sexuality, connecting it to an unreferenced comment of Merleau-Ponty on Freud about 'spiritual automata', and then to Lacan's notion of the 'insistence of the signifying chain'. Theoretical differences are erased in a relentless expository drive. Airy claim replaces argument: there is a relation between 'structuralism, Marxism and psychoanalysis'. Becoming the Sartre of *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Masotta looks for a 'modality of totalizing intuition' relating phenomenology to structural coding. Masotta claims that 'phenomenology, structuralism and Marxism converge in Lacan', although this figure looks more like Sartre than the oracular prophet of Seminar X. Chiding Lacan for his failure to pursue his analysis of aggressivity into a discussion of class struggle (unlike Sartre) Masotta finishes the essay with a theoretical conflation of Sartre and Lacan, where the latter's famous mirror phase now is read as an instance of the Sartrean project, the project forward to self-unity and the projection towards the other – a reading at odds with Lacan's own discussion of misrecognition, but very much in keeping with the concepts that emerge from the reading of Arlt.

Masotta thus approaches Lacan, but reads him through Sartre. Yet this prismatic isomorphy reveals a similarity between Sartre and Lacan, which is lost in the later contentions between 'existentialism' and psychoanalysis and has until recently been largely written out of subsequent genealogies of Lacanian thought. Centrally, the notion of an unconscious which should mark a radical difference between Sartre and Freud–Lacan is underdeveloped in Masotta's account. But this also points to the problematic question of the unconscious in Lacan. Masotta on the margins sees a connection that the centre occludes and reveals the hidden dialogue that exists between Lacan and Sartre,<sup>20</sup> but in his rush to embrace Lacan he cannot explicitly acknowledge it. It is the denial of this dialogue and

hence the final abandonment of his early work (and allegiances) that leads to a firmer position as Lacanian exegete, as we shall see in Masotta's account of Lacan's seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'. But the disavowal of this creative hybridization also devalues the position of the peripheral reader inasmuch as it places him/her in a position of repetition of the centre, even as such iteration opens up to unwilling novelty.

Masotta's work until the mid-1960s reveals two axes. First, there is the close reading of texts – foreign and Argentine – which generates a conceptual language that might give an account of the specificities of an Argentine reality. Second, this process of reading produces an existential and professional identity that was always threatened with dissolution because of its conjunctural illegitimacy (a predicament common to the intellectuals of contemporary Argentina) and was consonant with the general lack of models that Aricó notes in a 'generation without teachers'.<sup>21</sup> Such questions of identity underpin much of Lacan's work..

Lacan's early essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I' (1949) is one of the best-known and most commonly referenced of all Lacan's works in the anglophone world. The version we have dates from 1949, and shows all the marks of Lacan's Hegelian borrowings from Kojève's 1930s' seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and their grafting onto Freud's account of narcissism, developed in his 1914 essay 'On Narcissism: An Introduction'.<sup>22</sup> Narcissism is the investment of libido in the ego as opposed to anaclitic attachment where libido is invested in objects. For Lacan this moment of libidinal investment becomes that of identification with the specular image of the mirror stage: the subject 'assumes' the image, recognizing himself in it and appropriating the image as his own. But Lacan stresses that this is a misidentification, a misrecognition since the unity of the subject is false, but it is foundational for the idea of totality.<sup>23</sup>

In an article published in the previous year, 'Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis' (1948), Lacan had linked narcissism with aggressivity, since the erotic attachment of the subject to the image is accompanied by the fear of dissolution and fragmentation, which are produced as the after-effect of illusory wholeness. This aggressivity was exacerbated by the recognition of the other as a *semblant*, another self, contending for the same objects in the world. Narcissism or imaginary identification, then, is intimately tied up with rivalry. The mirror stage is the site of what Freud had called 'primary identification' and gives rise to the ideal ego. For Freud this desired image was the positive pole of identification in the resolution of the Oedipal



crisis. For Lacan, however, this image is necessarily illusory, presenting a false unity, and constituting an irredeemable alienation.

But Lacan also develops a notion of symbolic identification, elaborated through a reading of Freud's 'The Ego and the Id' and 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego', where the notion of narcissism is worked and reworked.<sup>24</sup> Symbolic identification is initially identification with the father but slowly modulates into an identification with a signifier. Even so, as Evans points out, symbolic identification is still based in the imaginary, modelled on primary identification. It is only symbolic in that it completes the subject's passage into the symbolic.<sup>25</sup> What is crucial is that symbolic identification transcends the aggressivity inherent in primary identification.

Lacan thus moves from a Hegelian-influenced account of imaginary identification as alienated misrecognition to an idea of symbolic identification in which the subject now identifies as a signifier within the symbolic order. This changed view of identification corresponds to the incorporation of structuralist theories of language which Lacan made during the 1950s. But as if in accordance with Freud's own account of the ego, which becomes an accumulation of 'abandoned identifications',<sup>26</sup> Lacan's theory preserves his former position as a structurally subordinate moment of a new configuration. Phenomenology is maintained within a new theory as a moment of the production of error. Lacan's own theory registers the philosophical incorporations that have been made in order to arrive at his distinctive account of the subject. The account that Lacan then develops of the symbolic register and the logic of the signifier also is a move to step outside the play of the imaginary and the irresolvable specular game of transferential identifications. It is the assertion of the place of a certain theory against the conflictual coordinates of previous psychoanalysis buttressed by a theory of the Name-of-the-Father, which becomes a stand-in for Lacan's own authority.

In his engagement with Lacan's texts Masotta unconsciously recapitulates their philosophical trajectory, even as his development seems to illustrate Lacan's own theory. In his 1976 introduction to his *Lacanian Essays*, Masotta says that his first essay on Lacan was not merely an introduction to Lacanian ideas but was also an occasion in which 'we wanted to free ourselves from the influence that had been exercised on us by French phenomenology'.<sup>27</sup> This is a *post facto* redescription. In fact, there was a hybridizing of phenomenological ideas with those of Lacan's, an enterprise not that alien to Lacan's own construction

of theory through incorporation. But whereas Lacan assembles ideas, Masotta seems driven to accept or reject *images* of systems seen as complete wholes, and perceives himself to be doing this even when he is not. So Sartre seems to be abandoned, even when he is preserved. Masotta performs himself in yielding to the dominance of the signifier, but in fact he seems to be acting out various imaginary identifications. And what's more he remains attached to the *image* as a site of truth, inasmuch as it accounts for violence, the theme that will return in the writings of the 1970s. This disjuncture between signifier and image, between theory and narcissism, haunts all of Masotta's Lacanian work, and is the site of multiple problematics. In the same 'Introduction' Masotta explicitly links class struggle and aggressivity, but can offer no articulation through Lacan's work. Some structure of disavowal is at work here,<sup>28</sup> since he returns to the theme after noting the 'irruption of fascism in South America' with the Chilean coup of 1973: 'what is the relation of the narcissism that theory speaks about with the function of narcissism in history.'<sup>29</sup> Identity, aggressivity, history: this disjunctive articulation plays out through the lectures on Lacan's 'Seminar on the Purloined Letter' and returns in Masotta's last lectures in Spain.

### Lacan purloined

Masotta gave a series of six lectures on Lacan's 'Seminar on the Purloined Letter' in July and August 1969 in the Instituto Torcuato di Tella.<sup>30</sup> The text is significant for a number of distinct reasons. It is his longest continuous work, some 150 pages, and in comparison to his other essays has a much more focused character.<sup>31</sup> Dedicated to an exposition of Lacan's seminar, it has a clear teaching purpose, and its rhetorical strategy seemingly aims at clarification rather than seduction through display. It is the transcript of a series of lectures rather than an essay as such. This is not unusual in itself: many of Masotta's works have their origin as papers written for presentation. But it marks an intensification of this stylistic development. Increasingly, Masotta's Lacanian contributions were to be marked by their oral origin and traces of voice.

This is clearly mimetic of Lacan's own seminar structure. Lacan's difficulty in writing<sup>32</sup> is well known, as is his reliance on transcripts, and many claims have been made about his style and his preference for oral presentation.<sup>33</sup> The spontaneous character of the production certainly suggests a certain free association, but also mimics a certain oracular quality, which may be an attempt precisely to defer meaning, to escape a

certain fixity<sup>34</sup> but certainly pushes them to aphoristic condensations, which require extensive gloss. The role of exegete then becomes crucial.

Masotta thus mimics but can only do so up to a point. For Lacan orality yields originality: signifying slippage is a means to creative speculation. For Masotta, however, the point is to transmit not to innovate. 'How to begin to talk about Lacan without *betraying* someone whose door is not easy to open and whose practice – the practice of his reading – constitutes the only means of access.' This opening of the first lecture in the series *Psychoanalysis and Structuralism* underscores 'betrayal' as the object of anxiety.<sup>35</sup> The 'Seminar on the Purloined Letter', from 1956, forms the introduction to the 1966 edition of *Écrits*.<sup>36</sup> It has the 'privilege' of opening the *Écrits*, Lacan says. For Derrida this privileged position binds the subsequent material together, but also fixes it, constrains it.<sup>37</sup> But Derrida suggests that in this 'binding', a fixing to the proper, theory reveals an untenable theory of truth.<sup>38</sup> Masotta thus chooses a text which is already privileged, and privileged in its thematization of the question of truth. The text also marks the transition from a literary truth to a psychoanalytic truth, or better the extraction of a psychoanalytic truth from a literary text, or, even better, the reduction of a literary text to its psychoanalytic structure. In one sense, then, Masotta's lectures are a reworking of his essay on Roberto Arlt's fictions, which elucidated their structure in terms of an existential psychoanalysis, but at one remove: it is a reading of a reading of a literary text.<sup>39</sup>

Masotta, then, gives an exposition of a text which is about the possibility of exposition, and his exposition is about the possibility of transmitting an account of Lacan's work which will not traduce that work. In Derrida's terms, Masotta is haunted by the possibility that such a 'proper' exposition is impossible, and that, therefore, his own role as exegete is sabotaged. Derrida argues that Lacan's text is inevitably tied to the slippage of the signifier in writing – dissemination. Masotta's reading is threatened by a doubled dissemination, and seeks in Lacan's own text the theory of truth that would stall such a slippage. The point of Derrida's critique is that Lacan's own theory is undermined by dissemination and that only an unwarranted privilege of the phallus can give the illusion of security. Masotta, in thrall to the Lacanian theory of truth as exposition – here used as a support for an exposition – is thus menaced by betrayal, by an inevitable disloyalty, structured by the very moment of language as such. The guarantee of security withdrawn, writing reverts to the contention of rivalrous claims, exactly the strange

logic of the lectures, which refer back to Lacan's own account of rivalry and identification. Thus the problematic that haunts the attempt at a non-disseminating dissemination of Lacan in Argentina is contained in the very text that Masotta undertakes to expound.<sup>40</sup> Philosophical impossibility threatens not merely exegesis but the social role of exegete: it is the return of social precariousness but now metaphysically constituted.

Lacan's seminar argues that Poe's story about the theft and recovery of a letter is illustrative: it reveals



Daniel Santoro. *Comparative Anatomy with a Lombrosian Analysis of Peronists and Anti-Peronists*, 2006.

the truth, which inheres within the text, and takes the form of a repeating structure, which the letter traverses. A compromising letter, addressed to the Queen, is stolen by the Minister whilst she gazes on helplessly. The Minister hides the letter and the Police are unable to find it. Arsène Dupin, Poe's detective, finds and replaces it. Lacan constructs these two moments in terms of a repeating triangle. For Lacan, the narrative reveals the workings of a general schema of transmission of the signifier, which passes through and transforms its bearers: 'the subject[s] must pass through the channels of the symbolic, but ... *model their very being* on the moment of the signifying chain that traverses them.'<sup>41</sup> An account of truth is concealed within the text, which is mimed by Dupin (and of course the Minister), who can see where (and what) the letter is. The letter, for Derrida, becomes the signified

of the text itself, the meaning of Poe's fiction. Dupin 'returns the letter to its proper course'<sup>42</sup> and knows 'his address, knows the law'.<sup>43</sup> There is a truth here: 'there is a proper itinerary ... that [the letter] returns to a determinable place that is always the same and that is *its own*'.<sup>44</sup> If the meaning of the letter is unknown, nevertheless 'the meaning of the letter and the sense of its itinerary are necessary, unique and determinable in truth, that is as truth'. The letter has its proper place, the place of castration. The unveiling of the veiling of Being, of truth as castration, brings the 'phallus, the signifier, the letter' back to 'their proper place'.<sup>45</sup> The phallus always remains in its place, guaranteeing the truth of discourse and 'Lacan is indeed proposing ... a discourse on the truth of the purloined letter as the truth of "The Purloined Letter"'.<sup>46</sup>

Dupin ambiguously operates as the analyst who sees the truth and the subject who is occupied by the truth, the letter. Masotta, of course, is also caught in this double bind. He identifies with Lacan identifying with Dupin, in that he sees and can articulate the truth of 'The Purloined Letter' and the Seminar on it. But he also bears the signifier, indeed has struggled to appropriate this signifier (the truth of psychoanalysis) from its rival claimants, and thereby acknowledges his own lack – of mastery. This lack parallels what the writing of doctrine constantly implies, that 'At the very moment one believes that by drawing triangles and circles, and by wielding the opposition imaginary/symbolic, one grasps "The Purloined Letter", at the very moment one reconstitutes the truth, the proper adequation, "The Purloined Letter" escapes'.<sup>47</sup>

Masotta's own reading of Lacan is thus caught in a strategy to maintain control even as his mastery is threatened by dissemination or by slippage into rivalry. We should recall the contested field that is *porteño* psychoanalysis and Lacan's heterodox status within it. Masotta had both to establish the authority of Lacan and to negate those who would judge Lacan as a deviation. So he began with a negation: Lacan does not read as a literary critic (and here we can see a gesture of dismissal of Masotta's own past and the tradition of *Contorno*), nor as a traditional psychoanalyst, here figured as Marie Bonaparte. Marie Bonaparte was the first to read Poe psychoanalytically<sup>48</sup> and Derrida will argue that her reading of the Poe story comes close to Lacan's with truth as castration, the castration of the mother and the phallus as the signifier of castration.<sup>49</sup> Bonaparte's name is effaced by Lacan but mentioned by Masotta only to be negated: she reads the same story but cannot see the truth. What is more, Bonaparte was instrumental in excluding Lacan from the Société

Psychoanalytique de Paris in 1953, a couple of years before Lacan gave the 'Seminar on the Purloined Letter'. The gesture of a theoretical rejection, made in the context of an institutional struggle, is repeated in Masotta's introduction to his own lectures and acts as further distancing of the Lacanian innovation from the Argentine Psychoanalytic Association, affiliated to the International Psychoanalytic Association, which is the body that excommunicated Lacan. This is the first mark of the curious game of doubles that haunts Masotta's text just as it haunts Lacan's.

Lacan's own seminar begins with a subordination of the imaginary to the symbolic and, as we saw above, Lacan's imaginary is based in misrecognition and aggressivity: my *semblant* is also my rival, and the object of aggression. As Masotta enacts an identification with Lacan, he must dismiss Lacan's own rivals. This rivalry will continue. The contention around legitimacy and truth can be seen to inform the doubled theft of the letter: the Minister, whose initial is D (though Lacan does not mention it), and Dupin both perceive and acquire the letter. Structurally homologous, they are rivals for possession of the signifier, rivals for possession of the truth. The figuring of the struggle between heterodox and orthodox is clear. But this rivalry is terminated by abandoning the imaginary for the symbolic and the establishment of the rule of the signifier and the law. Nevertheless the theme of identification and rivalry insists: at several points Masotta alludes to identification, and then retreats, saying that Lacan does not deal with the matter. But then Masotta must develop his account of the symbolic precisely by a detour through Lacan's two early essays on the mirror stage and by a long exposition of the Crebillon text that Dupin substitutes for the Queen's letter. This subordination of the imaginary to the symbolic is precisely achieved by the deployment of the truth of the phallus. The symbolic allows the substance of the theory to be perceived, and it is just this that the exposition requires for its own work to continue. Lacan's own account of the symbolic, then, and its perception as the fabula of Poe's tale, becomes the core of the truth that Masotta will transmit within his exposition of Lacan's exposition.

And here again is the anxiety of 'betrayal', a lack of fidelity. For Masotta recognizes that the signifier always betrays, 'becomes the vehicle for error, just where it sets itself up as an exhibition of the truth'. But nevertheless 'there *assuredly* exists [my stress] in the *Écrits* a model of all the intellectual labour required to give an account of the origin and articulation of the concepts generated by theory'.

Masotta's choice of text seems unconsciously over-determined precisely by his position as exegete: he requires a position that will allow him to interpret Lacan authoritatively for his audience. Lacan's own account of language – including necessarily the language of psychoanalysis – contains the possibility of slippage of meaning. Masotta therefore chooses that text which sets up a model for interpretation, which avoids just such an eventuality. But his textual practice is just such that he is haunted by the possibility of dissemination. The letter is that which keeps not only rivalry at bay, but also dissolution. We might say, then, that the cleaving to the symbolic enacted throughout Masotta's reading of Lacan's Seminar is an apotropaic gesture in the face of the implied struggle over the letter and the threat of fragmentation – and nullity – that is called up by the return to the imaginary. Interestingly, in one of the few extra-textual identifications Masotta identifies Dupin with a Kleinian analyst – the rival. The symbolic registers here the site of an ontological security, which Masotta occupies through his exposition of Lacan, and the prospective space of an institutional grounding.

Yet the paradox is that on the model developed within the Seminar, Masotta, as intermediary, is occupied by the letter, the signifier – Lacanian theory – yet can do no more than bear it, utterly incapable of manipulating it, since the signifier speaks the subject. And the dissemination which threatens any interpretation can only be vitiated by repeating the message to the letter – 'the laborious work of reading' or citation. The threat of the purloining of the text requires that the text be merely repeated, which gives rise to the threaded texts of the Lacanian schools, woven with quotations from Lacan's work and rarely engaged in a work of practical development.<sup>50</sup>

## Escaping the present

In 1974 Masotta felt so threatened by the deterioration in the political climate in Buenos Aires after Perón's death that he decided to leave Argentina – as it turned out, for good. Symptomatically, he did not go to live in Paris – as other Lacanians would, notably Juan David Nasío and Roberto Harari.<sup>51</sup> Rather he went to Spain, just then emerging from Franco's dictatorship and beginning to develop a psychoanalytic culture of its own. He reconstructed the same position in relation to the new field as he had to the old: that is, one of exegete–didact, who, standing outside the material and the audience, inducts the public into an understanding of Freud–Lacan, through his own exposition, re-establishing the tradition interrupted by the coup,

neatly expressed in the title of the posthumous collection *Readings of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan*. He introduces Freud in 'simple words', avoiding technical terms, yet managing the 'difficult, no ... impossible' task of not banalizing the ideas.<sup>52</sup> The structure of didact–audience is replicated, and Masotta's authority re-established. His 'secondary labour', as Correias calls it, must go on elsewhere, universalizing a particular message.<sup>53</sup> But this labour requires a distance from both origin and audience: a moment of translation, and a moment of dependency, of borrowed authority. Had Masotta moved to France, he would have had to deal directly with the *École Freudienne*; rather than translating those ideas he would have had to translate himself into French and stand in direct relation of subordination to Lacan (or to his heirs). The letter would arrive at its destination, but could go no further.

Now, if exile is about loss and the melancholy of loss, since the lost object cannot be given up, the reconstruction of the same scene is an attempt at the hallucinatory disavowal of loss. Avoiding an explicit engagement with the reality of the dictatorship and with history, Masotta's repetitions of the structure of dependent authority in Argentina signal a true flight into denial.<sup>54</sup> The structure of the psychoanalytic didactic enterprise becomes a means to escape the present, since the interminable labour of exegesis stands in the place of explanation. Yet even here exegesis is symptomatic. In the *Readings* Masotta introduced a variable but defining list of Lacanian notions. Yet, insistently, he returns to the theme of narcissism, and the question of the double registers his insistent trope of rivalry, competition and legitimacy. This instance has a peculiarly personal staging. Masotta imagines being introduced to someone who 'knows Freud and Lacan' and comments that this would be 'terrible ... more than terrible'. Why? Because what relation would exist between 'someone called Masotta, teaching Freud and Lacan in Barcelona, and me? A scarifying relation.'<sup>55</sup> What would be terrible would be to meet someone who would be Masotta defined by knowing and being able to teach Freud and Lacan. Masotta is only himself in this function, but anyone else who has that function would be equivalent to him. The subsequent discussion of the double in literature (Poe, Dostoevsky, Dumas) pivots around the idea that the only thing to do with the double is 'kill him'.<sup>56</sup> In part this is the Lacanian theme of aggressivity and the threat of the other to unicity or individuality: interestingly Masotta replies to a question, half in jest, that 'There is only one Lacan...'<sup>57</sup>

As the discussion continues, Masotta returns to the staged encounter of narcissism and aggressivity of 'The

Purloined Letter' but explicitly ties it to the death drive. Aggressivity in the struggle over the image is now founded in the modulation of the death drive where aggression is directed at the other or at the self. Here a theory of violence is gestured at and then covered over. A complex linkage that might be forged between identity and its vicissitudes in doubling, and the death drive and its expression in the repetition compulsion, with both moments articulated around the question of violence, is lost.<sup>58</sup> However, in *The Drive Model*, delivered as a lecture in Galicia, Masotta discusses melancholy and the death drive, again reconstructing Freud's temporal development: for Masotta what is definitional of melancholy is that 'the melancholic cannot endure the other's character as other'.<sup>59</sup> Melancholy is linked to the presence of a hidden 'corpse', which haunts the self, and which stands in punishment, since this corpse has access to the powers of the death drive, as the superego does. The melancholic suffers from a sadistic insistence of the lost object which it cannot allow as other, but which asserts itself aggressively in being made the same. It is as though Masotta is condensing his situation as melancholic exile and the repetition of his existential position with regard to psychoanalysis with a demand for a theory that will account for the violence that shapes him, his exile and the political field he has abandoned. And this condensation strains the exegetical account, refocusing it on Lacan's contribution to the understanding of aggression is the 1949 text which in the orthodox canon is definitively superseded in Seminar II. Repetition and insistence are the phenomena that Lacan discusses here with regard to the 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', not the aggressivity of narcissism.<sup>60</sup> This rather is Masotta's repetition and reworking. The 'hidden corpse' is the Sartrean moment of violence and aggression worked through in the perpetual civil war that is society, but also the mourned moment of another place. *The Drive Model*, having reconstituted the machine of identifications, now yokes it to the machinery of repetition: what is in play in Freud's text, he says, is a drive to explain 'suffering, pain, self-punishment and sadism directed at the self, the persistence of failure, the refusal of success, the melancholy evocation of the disasters of the past ... in short the insistence of repetition'.<sup>61</sup> Here perhaps we have the *image* that emerges from one of Masotta's final readings: an evocation of the complex figure of the exiled 'beacon-author' in a text that returns to an origin that has always been a repetition.

Masotta's work marks the persistence of the theme of identity and legitimacy, which first found expression in the Sartrean notions that he expounded and used to

read the literature of Argentina, but which also gave body to his own position as an intellectual. Even as a Lacanian, he never fully inhabits Lacanian discourse, although he performs a set of identifications with and through Lacan. His attachment to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, his stress on the notions of narcissism and the double, his inchoate but insistent theorizing of the *imaginary*, militate against his theoretical commitments as exegete and transmitter of Lacan, since his symbolic identity always threatens to regress to a specular one, even as his theoretical preferences pull Lacan back to a pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal space. His glossing of the mirror stage through the concept of aggressivity, however, suggests that it is the question of violence that is signalled by the concern with narcissism, the question of social violence and its internal psychological correlates that he discerns in the fictions of Roberto Arlt. This violence over contested objects, over the nature of the social, found discursive expression in the writings of Sartre and it is their presence that returns in the late Masotta. He is unable to think beyond the Lacanian psychoanalysis to which he had committed his symbolic identity, but he nevertheless inflects his readings of Freud to maintain a subterranean link to the Sartre of contestation and struggle.

### Post-mortem memorial

Post-mortem (he died in exile in 1979) Masotta became a memorial and monument. From the precarious nomadism that characterized his life and thought, in death he became a foundation stone of Argentine Lacanianism, constantly invoked but rarely read. After the 1976 coup, many Lacanians went into exile, but many stayed, and at least one account argues that it was precisely the void left by the exile, disappearance and dismissal of more publicly committed analysts that allowed Lacanianism its access to institutional success.<sup>62</sup> What was more pertinent was the fact that Lacan's works found a more extensive distribution in the Argentina of the dictatorship and after, the very hermeticism and political scepticism of the later Lacan being an asset. The Lacanian bureaucracy also established a solid presence in Buenos Aires and Rosario. Argentine Lacanianism is an orthodoxy and its training procedures and educational methods have institutional weight and power. Lacanianism has become normalized as a moment of university and medical practice and as a therapeutic adjunct to middle-class life. Masotta, with his complex interaction with phenomenology, literature and psychoanalysis is reduced to a false unity, a gesture he himself anticipated in his specular identification with Lacan.

This mimicry is one solution to the problem of the relation of a self-constituted intellectual periphery to its supposed centre, a relation that marks a constant trope of Argentine culture through the twentieth century, and is manifest in *Sur*. We might consider this to be a form of colonialism at the level of theory, where the model of the intellectual, the conceptual apparatus and the problematic of theory are all produced elsewhere and transferred to the new terrain *as if the gap between origin and margin* did not exist. Masotta registered this problem in his critique of *Sur*, and his early work is partly an attempt to use Sartrean categories creatively. However, the transmission of Lacan was restricted to exegesis: producing an authoritative (and subsequently authorized) discourse, but never engaging with Argentine reality. The return of the repressed (Sartre), however, marks a stubborn refusal at the level of the unconscious to remain within the colonial role. Later Lacanianism, especially as deployed by Germán García (who has done most to canonize Masotta), is an extraordinarily powerful discursive apparatus, which like some enormous gravitational mass deforms the field of Argentine letters and philosophy. Lacan is a necessary point of reference and his ideas form cliché philosophemes reeled out on any and every occasion.<sup>63</sup> What it fails to do is think psychoanalysis in its articulation with philosophy and politics, since it always already privileges Lacanianism as some fundamental truth.

## Notes

1. Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *The Buenos Aires Quintet*, trans. Nick Caistor, Serpents Tail, London, 2003.
2. Juan Andrade, *Oscar Masotta – una leyenda en el cruce de los saberes*, Capital Intelectual, Buenos Aires, 2009.
3. See John King, *Sur: A Study of the Argentine Literary Journal and its Role in the Development of a Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988.
4. Beatriz Sarlo, interview in J. King, *El di Tella y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta*, trans. Carlos Gardini, Ediciones de Arte Gagliamani, Buenos Aires, 1985, p. 303.
5. Gabriel D'Iorio, Preface to *Tierra y figura y otros escritos*, La Cuarentena, Buenos Aires, 2007.
6. See William Kutra, *Contorno: Literary Engagement in Post-Peronist Argentina*, Associated University Presses, London, 1988.
7. Oscar Masotta, 'Sur o el anti-peronismo colonialista' (1956), in Oscar Masotta, *Conciencia y estructura*, Jorge Álvarez, Buenos Aires, 1968, p. 112.
8. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971, pp. 12–14.
9. 'They are going to call us translators', he says to Rosa Rodrigues, in Rodrigues de Andrade, *Puzzle Masotta: lo Imaginario*, Homo Sapiens, Rosario, 1997, p. 137.
10. Masotta, *Conciencia y estructura*, pp. 38–9.
11. Ibid., p. 39.
12. Ibid., p. 135.
13. In *Conciencia y estructura*, pp. 177–92.
14. Ibid., p. 181.
15. Ibid., p. 186.
16. 'Jacques Lacan y el inconciente en los fundamentos de la filosofía', was given as a lecture and then published in a revised form in *Pasado y Presente*.
17. See Mario Plotkin, *Freud in the Pampas*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2001; my review, 'Objects of Analysis', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2003; and also Hugo Vezzetti, *Las aventuras de Freud en el país de los argentinos: de José Ingenieros a Enrique Pichon Rivière*, Paidós, Buenos Aires, 1996.
18. 'Jacques Lacan o el inconsciente en los fundamentos de la filosofía' (1965), in Oscar Masotta, *Ensayos lacanianos* (1976), Anagrama, Buenos Aires, 1979.
19. He says where 'the Id finds its psychic representative, the Phallus is already there', bringing together in a highly condensed and questionable fashion Freud's Id and Lacan's signifier of difference; *ibid.*, p. 36.
20. Roudinesco comments that 'Lacan ... was a great reader of Sartre ... his own theory of the subject and his doctrine on freedom had been constructed in opposition to Sartre's arguments.' Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. Barbar Bray, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p. 333. See also David Macey, *Lacan in Contexts*, Verso, London, 1988.
21. Aricó continues, 'no matter how bright the intellectual beacons that were taken as illuminating other realities were (Sartre, Gramsci, Marx...), at the local level this generation almost completely lacked models'. José Aricó, quoted in Oscar Terán, *Nuestros años sesenta*, Puntosur, Buenos Aires, 1980, p. 152.
22. Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. XIV, Hogarth Press, London, 1919, pp. 69ff.
23. Lacan (1949), in Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan Smith, Tavistock, London, 1977, p. 2; Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 81.
24. As discussed by Borch Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1986, sections 2 and 3.
25. Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 81.
26. Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. XIX, 1963.
27. Masotta, *Ensayos lacanianos*, p. 11.
28. Ibid., p. 12.
29. Ibid., p. 17.
30. This was a crucial site of intellectual activity in downtown Buenos Aires during the Onganía dictatorship (1966–70), when much university activity had been repressed. A multi-functional space – gallery, theatre, cinema, lecture hall – it serviced a new nomadic intelligentsia. See King, *Sur*.
31. It is thus as weighty in his œuvre as *Sex and Betrayal*, but lacks the halting character of that text.
32. See Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, ch. 25, where she discusses the difficulties that François Wahl, Lacan's editor, had with getting him to write; and Marcelle Marini, *Jacques Lacan: The French Context*, trans. Anne Tomiche, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1992, especially pp. 22–3.
33. See Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, Granta, London,

- 2006, p. 128. There is an interesting self-allegorical element here too: Derrida, the great writer with his meta-physical commitment to the un-working of writing, and Lacan, the charismatic *seminariste*, with his fear of the written, precisely as un-working.
34. Jacques Derrida, 'Le Facteur de la Verité', translated as 'The Purveyor of Truth' by Alan Bass, in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, eds, *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD, 1988.
  35. 'Psicoanálisis y estructuralismo' is the printed transcript of the lectures given at the Instituto di Tella, and forms part of Oscar Masotta, *Introducción a la lectura de Jacques Lacan* (1970), Corregidor, Buenos Aires, 1999, pp. 15–150; p. 15.
  36. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Seuil, Paris, 1966.
  37. 'For the Love of Lacan', in Jacques Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1998, p. 49.
  38. Derrida, 'The Purveyor of Truth'.
  39. There may be another fact that determined the choice of the text, inasmuch as Borges had translated the Poe story 'The Purloined Letter' some years before, and had made significant alterations to the plot in his version (including the change of gender of one of the characters, which has interesting resonances with the issue of 'feminization' by the message), so that the question of translation and fidelity already surrounds the Poe text in its Argentine context. See Efrain Kristal, *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 2005, pp. 61–7.
  40. The title of the volume in which the collected lectures was published, *Introducción a la lectura de Jacques Lacan*, carries another echo, that of Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel in Paris in the 1930s: Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1948.
  41. Ibid., p. 43; my emphasis.
  42. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in Freud's Technique in Psychoanalysis, 1954–55*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988.
  43. Derrida, 'The Purveyor of Truth', p. 186.
  44. Ibid.
  45. Ibid., p. 184.
  46. Ibid., p. 185.
  47. Ibid., p. 186.
  48. See Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, trans. John Rodker, Humanities Press, New York, 1971.
  49. Derrida, 'The Purveyor of Truth', p. 188.
  50. One has to be careful here: the period we are dealing with is the 1960s where only Lacan is privileged to innovate. Later, after the Master's death, other figures will claim a theoretical originality within the Lacanian school, notably Lacan's appointed heir, Jacques-Alain Miller.
  51. Nasó's work would be to fill out some of the lacunae in Lacan's work, and Harari would go on to be one of the more creative interpreters of Lacan's work, splitting his time between Paris and Rosario, Argentina. His recent work on Lacan shows an original development of the theory of the *sinthome*, which stands in tension with the orthodoxies of Argentina and France.
  52. Oscar Masotta, *Lecciones de introducción al psicoanálisis* (1977), Gedisa, Barcelona, 1996, p. 16.
  53. Carlos Correás, *Operación Masotta*, Interzona, Buenos Aires, 2007, p. 145.
  54. One can note that history *does* explicitly mark Masotta's texts but glancingly in the 'Report on the Buenos Aires School' there is a mention of 'bloody blows' (Masotta, *Ensayos lacanianos*, p. 239) and in an earlier text on 'Sigmund Freud and the Foundation of Psychoanalysis' (1973) there is a more poetic allusion 'the ink of our text is stained with the blood of a dead president' (*Ensayos lacanianos*, p. 194).
  55. Oscar Masotta, *Lecturas de psicoanálisis, Freud, Lacan*, Paidós, Buenos Aires, 1991, p. 165.
  56. Ibid., p. 166.
  57. Ibid., p. 198. But in Spanish this has the interesting echo of a sentimental commonplace 'there is only one mother', or 'you only have one mother'.
  58. This fusion of death drive and Lacanian aggressivity suppresses Lacan's reworking of the death drive as a function of the symbolic, and later as an aspect of all drives: it quite capriciously goes back to a pre-Lacanian Freud to emphasize a Lacanian motif.
  59. Oscar Masotta, *El modelo pulsional*, Catálogos, Buenos Aires, 1990, p. 70.
  60. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II*.
  61. Masotta, *El modelo pulsional*, p. 106.
  62. Plotkin, *Freud in the Pampas*; and Sergio Visakovsky, *El Lanús: memoria y política en la construcción de una tradición psiquiátrica*, Alianza, Buenos Aires, p. 202.
  63. Plotkin offers numerous examples in his edited collection *Argentina on the Couch*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 2003.

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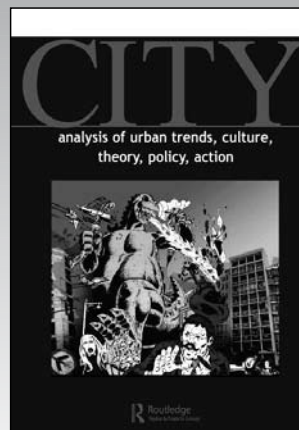
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# As flowers turn towards the sun

## Walter Benjamin's Bergsonian image of the past

Andrew McGettigan

Benjamin's theses 'On the Concept of History', the final precipitate of the unfinished *Arcades Project*, was intended to strike at the fundamental pillars of a thought complicit in its times.<sup>1</sup> On the seventieth anniversary of the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact, which prompted its drafting, it is tempting to question the attraction of this set of notes, not intended for publication for fear of 'misinterpretation'.<sup>2</sup> Faced with proliferating readings of its intricacies, the question nonetheless remains how to understand its 'messianism' given the post-religious attitude of its many advocates. This article examines once again the 'Copernican Revolution in historiography' announced by Benjamin, and its metaphysical commitments; here, in the light of its recruitment of a topology of historical time from Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, as mediated via Proust.

Benjamin's critique of chronological progression attacks the understanding of historical time as 'an advance through stages of empty, homogeneous time' (Thesis XIII). In place of uniform instants abstracted from a continuum, Benjamin presents us with the concepts of *Jetztzeit* ('now-time') and past as 'image'. What does this criticism entail, if it is not simply indicating the shortcomings of a historically determined reception of Marx? Benjamin's 'messianism' holds that certain pasts have not passed into non-being: his concept of historical time (which connects less to a philosophy of history as such than to a philosophy of historical *experience*) is concerned with a re-presenting (*Vergegenwärtigung*): the return of past time.

Both concepts, *Jetztzeit* and image, lack clear, systematic presentation, creating a philological problem that can only be addressed by mimicking Benjamin's own comportment towards the Jena Romantics. Early in his dissertation on the concept of art criticism in early German Romanticism, Benjamin raises two questions concerning his attempt to 'use the concept of reflection as a methodological grid for the thought of

the early Romantics'. The first is whether the Romantics thought systematically at all or pursued systematic interests in their thinking; the second is 'why, granting the existence of these basic systematic notions, they were registered in discourse so strikingly obscure, even mystifying.' Both of these questions have resonance for an attempt to present the 'systematic interests' here. To the first, Benjamin gave the following response:

their thinking can be *set in relation* to systematic lines of thought ... into a properly chosen system of co-ordinates, no matter whether the Romantics themselves completely specified this system or not.... To demonstrate this systematic referability, however, means nothing other than demonstrating the right and the possibility of a systematic commentary on early Romantic thought *by offering one*.<sup>3</sup>

### Remembrance, not science

Though often quoted, Benjamin's retelling of the story of the chess-playing 'Turk' is rarely read as a critique of a historically determined reception of Marxism. Yet the analogy of the automaton containing a hidden dwarf points to the latent theology in the theory of dialectical progress. 'The puppet called "historical materialism" is to win all the time' (Thesis I). This historical materialism, given in quotation marks, should be contrasted with that developed over the course of the 'Theses'. It is the thought that they are to win in the end that marks a theology ill-suited to the situation facing the working classes. It is 'faith in progress', the belief that history is on their side, that has 'corrupted the German working class' (Thesis XI).

Historical materialism, a vital weapon in the proletariat's cognitive and practical struggle, while not losing its productive, analytical power, is hamstrung by its ideas about time.<sup>4</sup> Or, rather, it is too close to the images of 'vulgar empiricism'; its destiny is to be reappropriated in such a way that revolutionary

action is stymied. Marx and Engels's invocation of the 'self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority'<sup>5</sup> decays into Josef Dietzgen's 'With each passing day, our cause becomes clearer and our people smarter.'<sup>6</sup> It is from the necessary critique of this faith in progress, a progress 'inexorable' and without limit, that, for Benjamin, a revised historical materialism must be constructed.

There are two main aspects to this construction. First, as counter-idea to progress, Benjamin insists on reading history as a negative totality, a 'catastrophe', whose trajectory is to be interrupted by revolutionary activity. In the 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', we find: '(Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately achieved interruption).' Classless society, a vision of de-alienated humanity, is not an advance in epochal terms (understood as a process rendering history meaningful or rational), but a breach. The continuum of history is to be broken. 'Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.'<sup>7</sup> This substitution could be seen as replacing one idea of practical reason with another, more productive one.

Benjamin's second concern is directed to the idea of abstract instants out of which time as a whole is composed. This is the time of measurement common to labour and science. Sufficient to account for positivist aims, Benjamin believes he has located a form of historical experience to which justice can be done only through a different set of ideas about historical time. As he writes in Konvolut N of the *Arcades Project*: 'in remembrance [*Eingedenken*] we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to write it with immediately theological concepts.'<sup>8</sup> Remembrance as socio-cultural experience escapes positivist historicism's purview. It is from this perspective that Benjamin is concerned to resist the reduction of history to a science, historical materialist or otherwise.<sup>9</sup> History's 'original role' as remembrance operates as an exception, or counter-example, which reorients ideas about history.

Benjamin understands the transition to capitalist modernity and its concomitant class struggle to have precipitated quasi-autonomous forms of social experience which have their own effects and which are not reducible to the economic conditions under which they were formed. That is, their *temporal structure* is held

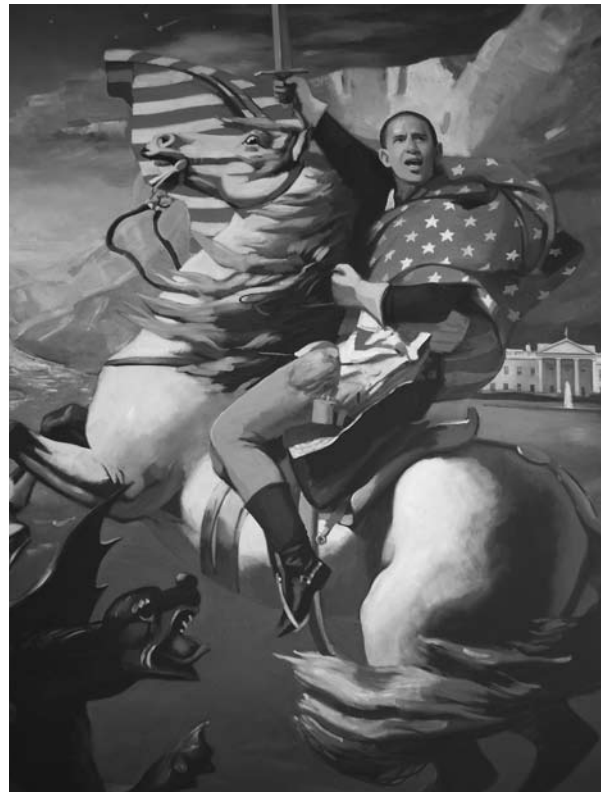
to be radically distinct from the temporality of developing productive forces, social relations and means of production. It is his contention that the manner in which historical time is experienced in remembrance is intimately connected to the formation and atrophy of revolutionary consciousness.

There is thus a dual tension around the ideas about historical time in Benjamin's work – whether the ideas of historical materialism are *adequate* to the experience of remembrance, but, in addition, what ideas are most *productive* in relation to developing that experience. Benjamin makes two implicit references to Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, where each serves as a corrective.

Thus it pleased Social Democrats to conscript the working class into the role of a redeemer of *future* generations. In this way, they cut through the tendons of the working class's best potential. With this training, the class unlearnt its hatred and its self-sacrifice [*Opferwillen*], both of which feed on the image of benighted forbears, not on the ideal of freed descendants. (Thesis XII, my translation)

and

History is the object of a construction, whose site forms not from empty, homogeneous time but time filled by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]. So for Robespierre ancient Rome was a past period charged with now-time, which he blasted out from the continuum of history. The French Revolution understood itself as a returned Rome. It cited ancient Rome exactly as fashion cites a costume from past times. Fashion



has the scent for the relevant, wherever it passes in the thickets of yesteryear. Fashion is a tiger's leap into past times. However, the leap of fashion takes place in an arena in which the ruling class still gives the orders. Exactly the same leap in the clear sky of history is the dialectical leap as Marx conceived the Revolution. (Thesis XIV, my translation)

Compare these extracts to the first section of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, where Marx contrasts the revolution to come with the bourgeois revolutions, which 'borrow [from the past] names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and borrowed language'.<sup>10</sup>

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead.<sup>11</sup>

Far from seeing the French Revolution's turn to Rome as an anaesthetic numbing, Benjamin adopts it as a model and insists that the energy for revolution comes from particular past times. For certain periods in the past are charged with a particular tension which can be brought to bear upon current conditions.

*Jetztzeit*, now-time, names a charged, rare conjunction of 'now' and 'then' where, in contrast to ideas of historical linearity, certain pasts have not been left behind in their passage through history. It is important to stress here that the past returns as an 'image' under particular conditions of collective, historical experience. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin insists that the past 'decomposes into images not narratives'.<sup>12</sup> The German *Bild* is the site of many difficulties for translation and interpretation, and there is significant work still to be done on its technical specificity in early neo-Kantianism and phenomenology of science. For Benjamin, however, since *Bild* translated *image*, this German legacy conjoins with one from France, that of Georges Sorel and Henri Bergson.

## Sorel

In *Reflections on Violence*, Sorel developed a theory of myth based on his reading of Bergson's early philosophy. These myths, collections of images, constituted for Sorel the 'forces that really move men' which give 'an aspect of complete reality to immediate action' by producing a coherent experience.<sup>13</sup> In this way,

they constitute a revolutionary mind-set. Sorel was concerned to contest a deterministic reading of political change and as such gives weight to a voluntarist concept of political will underlying the unity needed for organization. In the correction of Marx outlined above, we can discern at least the tenor of Sorel's insistence that any revolutionary enterprise trusting in the impact of 'investigations, scientific syntheses and demonstrations' is bound to fail.<sup>14</sup> My sense is that Benjamin is attempting to overcome this verdict in developing his own take on historical materialism as a supplement to the contemporary scientific slant. In particular, it is in the concept of *Anschaulichkeit* that this approach can be most clearly identified:

A central problem of historical materialism that ought to be seen in the end: must the Marxist understanding of history necessarily be acquired at the expense of the perceptibility [*Anschaulichkeit*] of history? Or, in what way is it possible to combine a heightened graphicness [*Anschaulichkeit*] with the conduct of the Marxist method?<sup>15</sup>

Sorel can be seen as setting a problem to which Benjamin responds.

Benjamin's own 'Critique of Violence', in which he adopted the notion of the 'general proletarian strike' from Sorel, remained a fragment in an abandoned political programme.<sup>16</sup> Here, the task for historical analysis is to identify those past occasions in which finite history has been interrupted (albeit in a limited, fruitless fashion) so as to determine the potential constructions and actions which can halt the trajectory of history. Revolutionary political action is generated by the possibility that an undistorted absolute could redeem history, if only certain material conditions were suspended.<sup>17</sup> Its abandoning coincides with Benjamin's first reading of Marx around 1924. If we turn to the work of the 1930s, we can see that several consistent themes – interruption, suspension, caesura – continue into the later work, where the task is still to produce a 'real state of emergency' which 'will improve our position in the struggle with fascism' (Thesis VIII). However, there are three new coordinates operating within the later work: 'image', *Jetztzeit* or 'now-time', and the replacement of reference to the quasi-Romantic absolute with reference to the 'messianic'. To rehearse the epistemological precursor to this 'Copernican Revolution' in historiography we may recall that to resolve the problem of synthetic *a priori* judgement, Kant identifies and breaks with the tradition:

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend

our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Benjamin's critique of a homogeneous, flat, placid past time, towards which the historian attends, entails a rejection of the 'fixed point which has been found in the 'what has been'.<sup>19</sup> In addition, it demands an account of past times which would be neither uniform, nor empty, but marked by a varying charge or valency.

The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has claim. ... As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun rising in the sky of history. A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of transformations. ... The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. (Theses II–V)

The messianism of the 'Theses' is distinct from the 'divine' [*göttlich*] of essays such as 'Critique of Violence'. We no longer have a model of history constructed on the dualism of fallen time and the absolute, which might possibly arrive.<sup>20</sup> The return of past time in the *Jetztzeit* is not the arrival of any divine violence. Instead, interruption is achieved through a specific conjuncture of charged past time and the present, the *Jetztzeit*, which Benjamin terms variously an 'abridgement' or a 'constellation', in which the continuum of time is 'blasted apart'. Here, the weak messianic power rests with the revolutionary activity of each generation and is not restricted to the deposing, pure violence of the general strike. It is not that any 'inner connection' between 'Critique of Violence' and the 'On the Concept of History' is lacking, but the nature of this connection requires explication. Similarly, it is not that the earlier writings are more theological than the later – the metaphysical coordinates shift along an axis that is not reducible to one between idealist theology and materialist Marxism. Each configuration is an admixture of materialist practice and metaphysical commitment.

What, then, does this 'secret heliotropism' signify? Combined with the emphasis on images it gives a clue to an almost secret engagement with Bergson in Benjamin's later work.<sup>21</sup>

## Bergson

If we pursue this thread by linking it to certain formulations found in the *Arcades Project*, we achieve a crucial insight: the image of the past is analogous to Bergson's 'memory-image'. Benjamin's Copernican Revolution in historiography recruits Bergson's presentation of memory, in *Matter and Memory*, to provide a topological model for the interrelation between past and present. If Bergson's model of memory-images combining with perception in activity were taken as a schematic for historical time, one would produce something akin to the specificity of *Jetztzeit*. The invocation of Bergson here should not be seen as contributing to a 'de-Marxification' of Benjamin.<sup>22</sup> Rather, it specifies the apparatus Benjamin develops to theorize the return of past time in remembrance, as a key to understanding his concern for revolutionary consciousness within communist political engagement.

Besides a handful of references in the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin's explicit discussion of Bergson is limited to his essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire'. Though that piece contains a critique, it also claims *Matter and Memory* as one of the 'towering' works of the early twentieth century; he concurs with a work that 'regards the structure of memory as decisive for the philosophical pattern of experience'.<sup>23</sup> The criticisms offered later in that essay regard the estrangement of the *durée* from historical experience and of Bergson's concept of action from politics.

Negotiating a path between materialism and speculative philosophy, Bergson criticizes a dominant yet incomplete scientism by questioning the assumption that perception is directed towards knowledge. He begins from a different axiom: that perception is concerned with action. He postulates that the amount of conscious perception experienced by a subject is directly proportional to the intensity *of* or capacity *for* action. Perceptual consciousness enlarges as the potential scope for action increases.<sup>24</sup> At the animal level, the body as sensory-motor system can respond to stimulus by immediate reaction – this impulse reaction is not action on Bergson's model. Instead it is the capacity to suspend such impulses which marks human development. Memory, distinguished in two ways, plays the vital role in this development: habit, as bodily memory organizes the sensory-motor system, but 'true memory' prolongs the past into the present of immediate perception and produces experience as a duration (*durée*).<sup>25</sup> This is Bergson's finessing of Kant's noumenal freedom of the subject, where *indetermination* marks the distance achieved from the causal laws of matter.

Not only, by memory of former experience, does this consciousness retain the past better and better, so as to organize it with the present in a newer and richer decision; but living with a more intense life, contracting, by its memory of immediate experience, a growing number of external moments in its present duration [*durée*], it becomes more capable of creating acts of which the inner determination, spread over as large a multiplicity of the moments of matter as you please, will pass the more easily through the meshes of necessity.<sup>26</sup>

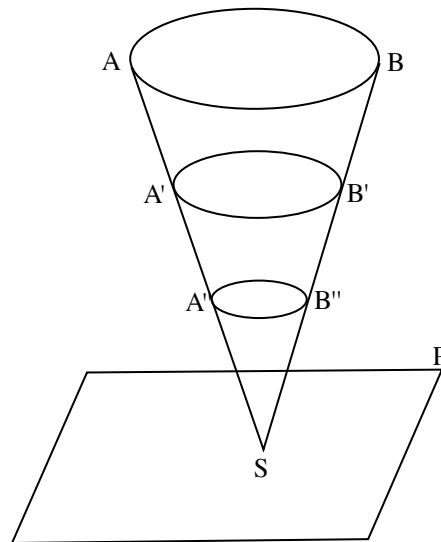
Thus perceptual consciousness is produced in the present, but without memory it would only be passive reaction: these two functions are abstracted in Bergson's theory but, according to him, neither pure perception nor pure memory is encountered in practice. These two elements are dialectically structured. All past psychical life survives in memory, but not all memories are able to become memory-images and so enter into experience. This is because the past is 'Always inhibited by the practical and useful consciousness of the present moment ... by the sensori-motor equilibrium of a nervous system connecting perception with action.'<sup>27</sup> Memory-images can only ally themselves with perception if the present makes an appeal to the particular memory-image or images.<sup>28</sup> 'Virtual, this memory can only become actual by means of the perception which attracts it. Powerless, it borrows life and strength from the present sensation in which it is materialized.'<sup>29</sup>

There are two main features from Bergson repeated in Benjamin. First, the past has a determining relation to the present but relies on the present for its actualization. (The 'founding concept' of historical materialism is 'not progress but actualisation'.<sup>30</sup>) Second, and at the same time, the past as memory-image is a source of that capacity without which operation in the present is condemned to limited reaction. Qualitatively distinct, far from being inert objects of study, *historical* pasts address the present equivocally and heterogeneously. In the *Arcades Project*, this dialectical structure is expressed by the concept of 'legibility':

For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And indeed, this acceding to 'legibility'

constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each 'now' is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. ... It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*].<sup>31</sup>

In laying the philosophical foundations for his concept of *durée*, Bergson had already conducted a critique of the quantifiable, homogeneous time of the instant. For all talk of the soul in Bergson, *Matter and Memory* provides one of the few genuinely novel breaks with the linear representation of time as a series or sequence of instants. Chiefly, the difference is that the past for Bergson has not passed into non-being. With the diagrammatic representation of the cone, he provides an image which can be used to grasp the relation between past and present as conceived in the *Jetztzeit*.



If I represent by a cone SAB, the totality of recollections accumulated in my memory, the base AB, situated in the past remains motionless, while the summit S, which indicates at all times my present, moves forward unceasingly, and unceasingly also touches the moving plane P of my actual representation of the universe.... Over the surface of the base are spread ... my recollections in their totality.... We tend to scatter ourselves over AB in the measure that we detach ourselves from our sensory and motor state to live in the life of dreams; we tend to concentrate ourselves in S in the measure that we attach ourselves more firmly to the present reality...

In point of fact, the normal self never stays in either of these extreme positions; it ... gives to its representations just enough image and just enough idea for them to be able to lend useful aid to the present action.<sup>32</sup>

What is of particular interest here is the attempt to depict the ontological difference between the present universe (P) and past (the base AB). Whether a cone is the best figure to represent the self or subject is moot. There is a constitutive ambiguity in the meaning of S (which could be seen to give a spatial interpretation

to P). On consideration we can see that it is asked to depict three different aspects of Bergson's idea:

1. the temporal interrelation of memory and present, conceived as occupying two ontologically distinct terrains;
2. the attitude or attunement of the subject, more or less reflective, whether turned towards memory or the present; dreaming as different again;
3. the capacity for action – the ability 'to lend useful aid'.

With regard to the last point, the 'apex' of the cone fails to depict the relative zones of indetermination created by the conjunction of memory and present. That aside, its place as the contact point of the present, which 'moves forward unceasingly', and the past, which 'rotates' in this direction, describes the heliotropism of Benjamin's Copernican Revolution in historiography: if AB refers to the past, S to the subject, and P to present reality.<sup>33</sup> If we invert the cone, the analogy of flowers (the cone) turning to the sun (S) rising in the sky (P) is clearer.

For Bergson the past is 'constantly pressing forward ... so as to insert the largest possible part of itself into the present action'.<sup>34</sup> Benjamin's 'weak Messianic power' belonging to each present is to actualize the image of the past through its return. The image utilized by Benjamin of 'telescoping the past through the present'<sup>35</sup> can be combined to better represent the structure of the conjuncture or convergence of AB and P at S. Here I envisage 'telescoping' as naming the manner in which telescopes open and collapse, rather than the function of the lenses. The state of exception, the caesura in the present (P), the 'point of explosion', is the condition of possibility for transformation: AB contracts into P, through the subject S, in what Benjamin terms the 'death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth'.<sup>36</sup> The relative extent of the telescoping, the cone compacting along its jointures, determines the proportional 'charge' of the *Jetztzeit*. Thus the purpose of historiography is not to reconstruct the base AB, but to enable the conditions for the transformation of the present, the conjunction as constellation of (AB/P).

For Bergson, pure memory cannot be annihilated, but its connection to the present can be severed by

accident (aphasia resulting from trauma and injury forms the empirical basis of *Matter and Memory*). Benjamin writes:

A chronicler who recites events ... acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. (Thesis III)

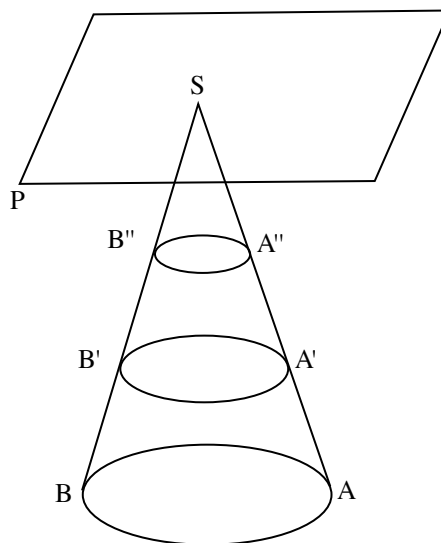
In the possible absence of such redemption, the past can be lost: 'For that image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably' (Thesis V). On this schematic, fascism is the accident or catastrophe which severs the past from a present to which it turns. Its rise to power at that time marked a trajectory to be interrupted through revolutionary measures.

What is gained by imposing this structure on Benjamin's theses? Besides offering an interpretation of the 'secret heliotropism' which is grounded in Benjamin's insistence on 'image' (*Bild*), it accounts for the return of past time in a charged combination so that its revolutionary aspect is captured. The *Jetztzeit* is *not* the 'mystical *nunc stans*'. Above all, it provides a model,

until now lacking, which would not represent historical time as 'an advance through stages of empty [*leere*], homogeneous time' (Thesis XIII). For Benjamin, historical times vary in terms of their degree of 'charge' (*leer* can indicate 'empty' or 'flat', lacking energy).<sup>37</sup> Only to the extent that past times breach linearity, through potential return, do they become historical.

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between different moments

of history. But if a fact of the case is a cause, it does not mean that it is already historical. It might become historical, afterwards, through occurrences which might be separated from it by thousands of years. The historian, who commences from this insight, stops letting the series of occurrences run through his fingers like a rosary. He grasps hold of the constellation in which his own epoch is connected with a completely determined earlier one. In this way, he grounds a concept of the present as 'now-time' in which shards of messianic time are violently precipitated. (*Theses*, Appendix A, my translation)



At this point, it is important to distinguish this adaptation of a particular topology from *Matter and Memory* from the metaphysical monism privileged in contemporary neo-Bergsonism: the metaphysics of becoming, intuition and *élan vital* are not present in Benjamin's historicization of memory.<sup>38</sup> For all its musty metaphysics, the cone represents one of the few novel contributions to thinking of memory and time. It is one of the 'fertile parts of his work' that 'falsifies the whole'.<sup>39</sup> It can be extracted and adapted without subscribing to the reflections on the soul in the later sections of *Matter and Memory*. As Osborne has rightly noted, the monism of *élan vital* is insufficient to 'sustain any philosophical concept of history'.<sup>40</sup> However, the earlier account of 'memory' can sustain a structure for maximizing the radical potential of remembrance.

A further qualification is necessary. For Benjamin, 'Bergson emphasized the antagonism between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* which arises from memory. But he leads us to believe that turning to the contemplative actualization of the stream of life is a matter of free choice.'<sup>41</sup> Bergson's account depicts a 'well-balanced man' who directs attention and summons memory to give practical aid.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, the full character of Benjamin's account is only appreciated if we factor in Proust's 'immanent critique of Bergson' through the notion of the *mémoire involontaire*. In the 'Paralipomena to the Theses on the Concept of History', Benjamin makes explicit the connection to his notion of the 'dialectical image': 'The dialectical image can be defined as the involuntary memory of redeemed humanity.'<sup>43</sup>

## Proust

In 1925, in the early stages of his shifting affiliation to communism, Benjamin was commissioned to translate Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu* in conjunction with Franz Hessel: only the early volumes appeared before the publisher went bust. A traditional intellectual history might see this as the key moment in Benjamin's development away from his self-described 'German period'. If Proust's *À la Recherche* is an attempt to 'produce experience synthetically' under damaged modern conditions, then Benjamin's historiography seeks to produce historico-political experience synthetically under conditions of increasing barbarism. Its task is to find and somehow present that which the collective has lived through but which can no longer be assimilated into experience to produce a *charge* directed towards changed conditions. As Proust writes,

we ought to fear ... even the past, which often comes to life for us only when the future has come and gone – and not only the past which we discover after the event but the past which we have long kept stored within ourselves and suddenly learn how to interpret.<sup>44</sup>

In the hope of harnessing this fearful power of the past, Benjamin seeks a 'unique experience' with it that shocks or strikes, but generates a 'revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past'.<sup>45</sup>

The 'messianic' does not name an alternative order, register or era of time. It is a model of conjunctural past time returning within a particular form of experience, remembrance; there is a plurality of forms of time in Benjamin's work, but remembrance is the one with political relevance.<sup>46</sup> It does not conceptualize history as a whole – it is mortgaged to revolutionary energetics. As such, there is further reconstructive work to be done that would position it more broadly within a totalizing philosophy of history – a history of all possible histories. What comes back in the return of past time? What is the role of the historian? What is the relation between remembrance and revolutionary consciousness?

To start with the first question. In one sense, one could read the return of past time in the *Jetztzeit* as the liberation of its potential energy: 'this work – comparable, in method, to the splitting of the atom – liberates the enormous energies of history that are bound up in the "once upon a time" of classical historiography.'<sup>47</sup> This would distinguish the 'Copernican revolution' from the time travel of popular culture. Similarly, on this reading, it is hard to support the moral interpretation offered by Axel Honneth. Although Honneth recognizes the connection to Bergson, his insistence that it is a model for the restitution of past injustices through communicative engagement with dead victims sets the 'Theses' a test it cannot pass.<sup>48</sup> As Honneth concludes, whatever form of reanimation occurs, it cannot bring the dead back as 'interacting participants in a moral community'.<sup>49</sup> However, one does not need to see the 'images' as revenants to whom a debt can now be settled, but rather as a force with transformative potential. With this in mind, the references to redemption ought not to be understood with reference to 'resurrection'. In the quotation from the third thesis above, the 'past become[s] citable in all its moments'; that is, available to voluntary memory. On a single occasion, Benjamin references the Gnostic doctrine of apocatastasis: the redemptive return of the whole of past time in a single instant, the abridgement of the entire course of history.<sup>50</sup> In diagrammatic form,

point S would disappear, as P and the entire base AB form a compacted cylinder before contracting into a vanishing point.

From this discussion of the 'energetics' of the *Jetztzeit*, we can see that Benjamin is not concerned with a ceaseless mourning for the lost oppressed. Although Benjamin advocates 'honouring the nameless' and can be seen as formative for 'writing history from below' (especially Thesis VII), the materialist historian 'invites the dead to the banquet table' in order to 'bring the present into a critical state'.<sup>51</sup> The task of the historian is not simply mapping and constellating those periods of past *Jetztzeit*, but synthesizing the conditions for remembrance to be activated as a revolutionary force. Benjamin's approach to historiography should not be understood separated from the outline of the *operative* writer's activity in 'The Author as Producer'.<sup>52</sup> Honneth's remarks that 'Benjamin undertakes the difficult, indeed daring, attempt, to transfer Proust's narrative techniques to the depiction of history'<sup>53</sup> should be viewed from this broader perspective.

Memory in Bergson appears as a capacity managed by the subject with mastery over its functions. The emphasis on the involuntary in Benjamin raises questions about the nature of revolutionary consciousness. The energy of past-time overwhelms the practical judgement of the rational subject. Indeed, with the cessation of passive happening (*die Stillstellung des Geschehens*), the creation of a political zone of indetermination, a state of exception (*Ausnahmestand*), comes the possibility of that which was once gone writing its own history (Thesis XVI). This ambiguity captures the idea that the subject is here the site of rupture.

In the *Theses*, Benjamin is aware throughout of the 'high price our accustomed thinking will have to pay' to avoid complicity or conformism (Thesis X). To recapitulate, the worry surrounding certain of Marx's conceptions is that they are too similar to certain bourgeois images, which will appropriate or distort their radical charge. Ready-made, inherited, habitual concepts which capture something of passing reality in so far as they are directed at practical accomplishment represent for Bergson what must be overcome to reach a true, metaphysical intuition. If, for Bergson, the 'mind must do itself violence, reverse the operation by which it ordinarily thinks, continually upsetting its categories, or rather, recasting them',<sup>54</sup> this is transformed by Benjamin's concern to struggle against fascism.

Alongside this general theme, two supplementary concerns must be raised. Benjamin opposes the master-

ful, bourgeois subject in control of a diminished, unproductive experience; in so doing, he co-opts intoxication, a theme present throughout his writings. To win the 'energies of intoxication for the revolution' involves rejecting the 'sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom' which figures as autonomous choice and calculation.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, Benjamin accepts that certain images are necessary for the formation of revolutionary consciousness, where 'spiritual forces' manifest themselves as 'courage, humour, cunning and fortitude' (Thesis IV). This sits uneasily with some commentators.<sup>56</sup> These reservations cannot be dismissed as a jejune reluctance to face up to the sacrifices and deleterious impact of drawn-out political engagement. We perhaps need only recall the citation from Mussolini which has led many on the left to flee from this kind of 'irrationalism'. 'I owe most to Georges Sorel. This master of syndicalism by his rough theories of revolutionary tactics has contributed most to form the discipline, energy and power of the fascist cohorts.'<sup>57</sup> Images as 'myths' to dupe cannon fodder would be ideology and propaganda in the worst sense. There is no means to sidestep this problem in Benjamin, since the insistence on remembrance and image prevents any separation, *à la* Althusser, between science and ideology. What distinguishes the images of fascism from those proposed by Benjamin? If we remain with the idea of an intellectual elite arguing over which images best capture the minds of the proletariat, then we are stuck with Sorel.

It is not possible here to trace this complex through Benjamin's work. I can only offer three preliminary indications. First, as already indicated, Benjamin's interest in 'images' appears as a response to the problem set by Sorel, not an acceptance of its terms. In the concept of *Anschaulichkeit* is located an effort to provide a supplement to historical materialism – to address a potential weakness. The influence of *Reflections on Violence* marks it out as a real historical force with which to wrestle. Second, contra Sorel's elitism, the efforts of the 'operative writer' set out in 'The Author as Producer' are directed against the division of labour which would divide the intellectual who attempts to instigate the 'real state of emergency' from the intoxicated agents of revolutionary action.<sup>58</sup> Third, Benjamin produced extensive writings on experience, its various forms, and the conditions pertaining to it, which provide resources to displace naive notions of political will and agency and give new inflection to the old problem of enthusiasm. Revolutionary consciousness is not simply characterized by the absence of sober, practical judgement. Whilst the overcoming of



the latter figures in Benjamin as masochism, destructive character and intoxication, it also does so, *pace* Proust, as happiness.<sup>59</sup>

## Alchemy

Convinced of a political crisis in the present (indeed, the imminent possibility of absolute destruction), the historical materialist seeks to 'brush history against the grain' to find that which is lost or effaced in the historical victory parade depicted in common sense. In producing a constellation between the 'then' of the oppressed past and the 'now' of the present, the historical materialist experiences a time no longer inert or gone. Rather than infinite mourning for the lost other, or salutary narratives ruined by historicist prejudices, the historical materialist taps the political unconscious by seeking that image which steals past the conformist intellect to unanchor that deeply buried, unknown catalyst; to chip away at an enervating sadness to glimpse and effect a transformed life. Paradoxically, under Benjamin's transformation, the historical materialist becomes an alchemist seeking to distil from profane experience a collective Damascene illumination.

It is a historical index to the changed conditions of philosophical experience that 'Proustian communism' can be developed as something to which the masses can be won. Honneth, Jameson and Wohlfarth conclude that interest today cannot lie in the implementation of its politics or historiography and that in this regard Benjamin is not 'our contemporary'.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the desire for its relevance to persist, for it to be contemporary, reverberates with Adorno's reversal of Croce's question: opposed to asking 'what is living and what is dead' in Benjamin, we intuit political experience to have regressed and atrophied through the cumulative impact of the twentieth century.<sup>61</sup> The pulse of intellectual life that animates that brief, gnomic touchstone continually forces itself upon an imagination ill-served by what appears today.

As a counterpoint, or stimulus to a broader endeavour, the very 'strangeness' of what has been presented here may have some value. Adorno notes that in Benjamin's work 'The absurd is presented as though it were self-evident, in order to disempower what is self-evident.'<sup>62</sup> This insight stimulates the question: could an alternative conception of time appear as anything other than metaphysical today? A revanchist 'common sense' burrowing its way out from under the fragmenting socialist palimpsest is eager to assert the real as rational, and the speculative irrational. Sensed good fortune at coming to this text late may rather indicate a thoroughly depoliticized existence.

The generation of a concept of history that resists the realized unreason of contingency and counterfactual historiography will require a metaphysical armature in order to put the crucial question to the eternalized present of governmental administration. Adorno, in his most Benjaminian moment, wrote: 'beside the *demand* thus placed on *thought*, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.'<sup>63</sup> If we wager that thought, beyond its ability to record, can contribute to stripping the future of its cruel wonders, its barbaric magic, then Benjamin lies ahead of us as more than an attenuated emblem of melancholy.

## Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in *Illuminationen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, pp. 251–61; 'On the Concept of History', trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 4: 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003, pp. 389–400. Hereafter citations are embedded in the main text with references to the numbered thesis.
2. 'I don't need to inform you that I have not the least intention of publishing these notes (and certainly not in the form in which they have been presented to you). They would open up the floodgates to enthusiastic misinterpretation.' Walter Benjamin, Letter to Gretel Adorno (April 1940), cited in Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, Pluto Press, London, 2000, p. 207.
3. Walter Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism' (1920), trans. David Lachtermann, Howard Eiland and Ian Balfour, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 1: 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1996, pp. 116–200; p. 135, italics added.
4. I concur with Peter Osborne's reading that historical materialism is more important for Benjamin as the living, intellectual tradition of Communism than as the theory of Marxism. See Peter Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats', in Peter Osborne and Andrew Benjamin, eds, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, Clinamen Press, Manchester, 2000, pp. 57–107; p. 68.
5. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore, Penguin, London, 1967, p. 92.
6. Cited by Benjamin in Thesis XIII.
7. Walter Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 4: 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003, pp. 401–11; p. 402.
8. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1999, Konvolut N8,1, p. 471.
9. Benjamin, 'Paralipomena', p. 401.
10. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,

- Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1934, p. 11.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.
  12. It is not clear whether this latter claim has transhistorical validity, or whether the emphasis on image connects to the destructive character of modernity such that traditional modes of communication are no longer able to express modern experience. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations*, pp. 83–107.
  13. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (1908), trans. T.E. Hulme and J. Roth, Free Press, Glencoe IL, 1950, pp. 48–9.
  14. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
  15. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N2,6, p. 461 (translation altered).
  16. Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence' (1921), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 1: 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1996, pp. 236–52.
  17. History is depicted as an institutional cycle of law-making and law-preserving violence and should be considered alongside Sorel's adoption of Vico's notions of the waxing (*corsi*) and waning (*recorsi*) of epochs. The law-bound nexus of guilt (*Schuldzusammenhang*) prevents the unmediated appearance of the Absolute in experience. A weak divine (*göttlich*) power cannot break through these constraining structures in anything other than a distorted form. Benjamin recruits Sorel's revolutionary syndicalism to advocate their destruction (*Entsetzung*). Structurally, the argument is identical to that disjunction presented by Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*: either Abraham is justified by the possibility of a direct relationship to God or there is no faith. For the early Benjamin, either there is the possibility of divine violence, which expiates in its undistorted arrival, or there is only the cycle of lawful order heading for catastrophe. Theology here cannot be 'a guaranteed economics of salvation'. Only 'on the abolition of state power [is] a new historical epoch founded' ('Critique of Violence', p. 252). If we momentarily introduce a different terminology, then we can say that fidelity in Benjamin's early practice is towards the possible appearance of the absolute as the only hope for finite history.
  18. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, Macmillan, London, 1933, 'Preface to Second Edition', B xvi, p. 22.
  19. 'The Copernican revolution in historical perception is as follows. Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in the "what has been," and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to acquire its dialectical fixation through the synthesis which awakening achieves with the opposing dream images. Politics attains primacy over history. Indeed, historical "facts" becomes something that just now happened to us, just now struck us: to establish them is the affair of memory. ... What Proust intends with the experimental rearrangement of furniture, what Bloch recognizes as the darkness of the lived moment, is nothing other than what has been secured on the level of historical, and collectively.' Walter Benjamin, 'The Arcades of Paris' in *The Arcades Project*, pp. 873–84; p. 883.
  20. In Irving Wohlfarth's recent three-part essay in *Radical Philosophy*, it is this systematic shift that is absent from his consideration of Benjamin's continued adherence to aspects of his early anarchism. Irving Wohlfarth, 'Entsetzen: Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part One', *Radical Philosophy* 152, November/December 2008, pp. 7–20; 'Critique of Violence – The Deposing of Law: Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part Two', *Radical Philosophy* 153, January/February 2009, pp. 13–26; 'Spectres of Anarchy: Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part Three', *Radical Philosophy* 154, March/April 2009, pp. 9–24.
  21. For further references to the connection to Bergson, see Axel Honneth, 'A Communicative Disclosure of the Past: On the Relation between Anthropology and Philosophy of History in Walter Benjamin', trans. John Farrell, *New Formations* 20, Summer 1993, pp. 83–94.
  22. See: Leslie, *Walter Benjamin*; and T.J. Clark, 'Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?', *Boundary 2*, vol. 30, no. 1, Summer 2003, pp. 31–49.
  23. 'Towering above this literature is Bergson's early monumental work, *Matière et mémoire*. ... The title suggests that it regards the structure of memory as decisive for the philosophical pattern of experience. Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data. It is not, however, Bergson's intention to attach any specific historical label to memory. On the contrary, he rejects any historical determination of memory.' Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939), in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, Fontana, London, 1992, pp. 152–96; pp. 153–4.
  24. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (1896), trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer, Zone Books, New York, 1991, p. 32.
  25. 'any perception ... always occupies a certain *durée* and involves, consequently, an effort of memory which prolongs, one into another, a plurality of moments.' *Ibid.*, p. 34.
  26. *Ibid.*, p. 242–3 (translation altered).
  27. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
  28. *Ibid.*, pp. 152–3.
  29. *Ibid.*, pp. 127.
  30. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N2,2, p. 460.
  31. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N3,1, p. 463.
  32. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, pp. 152–63.
  33. 'memory, laden with the whole of the past, responds to the appeal of the present state by two simultaneous movements, one of translation, by which it moves in its entirety to meet experience, thus contracting more or less, though without dividing, with a view to action; and the other of rotation on itself, by which it turns towards the situation of the moment, presenting to it that side of itself which may prove to be the most useful.' *Ibid.*, pp. 168–9.
  34. *Ibid.*
  35. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N7a,3, p. 471.
  36. *Ibid.*, Konvolut N3,1, p. 463.
  37. The German term *homogene* must be translated as 'homogeneous' in the mathematical sense to indicate uniformity of degree, not the biological term 'homogenous' indicating common descent.
  38. Deleuze's reference to the cone in *Bergsonism* is motivated by the account of virtuality – the *coexistence* of the present and the past. It is not concerned with *historical* time. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (1966), trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Zone Books, New

- York, 1991, pp. 59–60.
39. Max Horkheimer, 'On Bergson's Metaphysics of Time' (1934), trans. Peter Thomas, rev. Stewart Martin, *Radical Philosophy* 131, May/June 2005, pp. 9–19; p. 10.
  40. Peter Osborne, 'Marx and the Philosophy of Time', *Radical Philosophy* 147, January/February 2008, pp. 15–22; p. 15.
  41. Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 154.
  42. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 153.
  43. Benjamin, 'Paralipomena', p. 403.
  44. Marcel Proust, *The Captive* (1923), trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright, Vintage, London, 1996, p. 91.
  45. The Bergsonian companion to Proust is Borges's involuntary dreamer 'Funes the Memorious', who, having been paralysed in a riding accident, 'never moved from his cot' and deprived of sensori-motor activity and the organizing function of habit is incapable of even the abstraction that would untangle the 'garbage heap' of his memory and move beyond the limited, incurable associations that mark his cognitive life. Jorge Luis Borges, 'Funes the Memorious', trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths*, Penguin, London, 1970, pp. 87–95. Cf. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 155: 'A human being who should dream his life instead of living it would no doubt thus keep before his eyes at each moment the infinite multitude of details of his past history.'
  46. Cf. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, pp. 242–3. Other examples of forms of experience which determine different temporalities include those of Benjamin's core 'types': the gambler, the flâneur and the collector. Of the last, he writes: 'At the conclusion of *Matière et Mémoire*, Bergson develops this idea that perception is a function of time. If, let us say, we were to live vis-à-vis some things more calmly and vis-à-vis others more rapidly according to a different rhythm, there would be nothing "subsistent" for us, but instead everything would happen right before our eyes: everything would strike us. But this is the way things are for the great collector. They strike him. How he himself pursues and encounters them, what changes in the ensemble of items are effected by a newly supervening item – all this shows him his affairs in constant flux.' *Arcades Project*, Konvolut H1a,5, p. 206. The reference is to *Matter and Memory*, p. 207.
  47. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N3,4, p. 463.
  48. 'What represents the core of Benjamin's theory is the conviction that only magical forms of experience can provide the methodological model for an attitude within which we can disclose the past in such a way that the injustices perpetrated there can be atoned for retrospectively in the present.' Honneth, 'A Communicative Disclosure of the Past', p. 91.
  49. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
  50. 'And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis.' *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N1a,3, p. 459. On the notion of abridgement compare these passages: Benjamin – "'Now-time'", which as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a monstrous abbreviation, coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe' (*Thesis XVII*, translation altered); Bergson – 'And would not the whole of history be contained in a very short time for a consciousness at a higher degree of tension than our own, which should watch the development of humanity while contracting it ... into the great phases of evolution [condensing periods into a] few more differentiated moments of an intenser life, and in thus summing up a very long history' (*Matter and Memory*, pp. 207–8).
  51. *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N15,2 and N7a,5, pp. 481 and 471.
  52. Walter Benjamin, 'Author as Producer' (1934), trans. Anna Bostock, in *Understanding Brecht*, Verso, London, 1973, pp. 85–103.
  53. Honneth, 'A Communicative Disclosure of the Past', p. 93.
  54. Henri Bergson, 'Introduction to Metaphysics' (1903), trans. Mabelle Andison, in *Creative Mind: Introduction to Metaphysics*, Philosophical Library, Michigan, 1946, p. 190.
  55. Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism' (1929), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 2: 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, Belknap, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1999, pp. 207–21; p. 215.
  56. Terry Eagleton, for example: 'The surrealists, Benjamin writes, perceived an ecstatic or anarchic component in every revolutionary act; but, he quickly adds, "to place the accent exclusively on it would be to subordinate the methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution entirely to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance". Precisely such a subordination scars Benjamin's own work, all the way from the spasmodic Sorelian violence espoused in his early ultra-leftist apocalypticism to the revolutionary Messianism and political poetry of the *Theses* themselves.' Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, Verso, London, 1981, p. 177.
  57. Cited in Arthur Versluis, *The New Inquisitions: Heretic-hunting and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Totalitarianism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 39.
  58. As noted in 'The Author as Producer', the intellectual's solidarity with the working class can never be immediate or unmediated – the concern must be to address functional relationships in transforming the mediating conditions. Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', p. 102.
  59. '[H]istory is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [*Eingedenken*]. What science has "determined," remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete.' *Arcades Project*, Konvolut N8,1, p. 471.
  60. Honneth, 'A Communicative Disclosure of the Past', p. 94. Wohlfarth: 'A modern secular mind cannot but be disconcerted (*entsetzt*) by these unargued, unarguable fiats, which raise the following questions in the present context.' 'Critique of Violence – The Deposing of Law', p. 21. Fredric Jameson, 'An Unfinished Project', *London Review of Books*, 3 August 1995, pp. 8–9.
  61. Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1993, p. 1.
  62. Theodor Adorno, 'Benjamin's *Einbahnstrasse*', trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, in *Notes to Literature*, Volume 2, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992, p. 323.
  63. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Verso, London, 1997, p. 247.

# The absent philosopher-prince

## Thinking political philosophy with Olympe de Gouges

**Ariella Azoulay**

Since the publication of Olivier Blanc's biography of Olympe de Gouges and the first collection of her texts, compiled and edited by Benoîte Groult,<sup>1</sup> dozens of articles on various aspects of de Gouges's work have been published. All of them share the assumption that the author of this work was a fascinating figure of the French Revolution who left behind an unprecedented body of feminine political writing and theatrical work. At the same time, paradoxically, many of these studies also share the assumption that de Gouges was a conservative thinker, in terms both of her politics generally and of her feminism.<sup>2</sup> She is represented as a woman trapped in the accepted political or philosophical positions of her times. Her declared affinity with Rousseau – although she also insisted on the distance between them<sup>3</sup> – has been a major factor in the way her work has been read. Indeed, the central categories deployed in discussions of her writings are informed by this affinity, a fact which prevents commentators from viewing de Gouges as an independent political thinker who did not conform to the conceptual system of most of her contemporaries.<sup>4</sup>

My own interest in Olympe de Gouges is not limited to the interpretation of the writings of a past thinker. It is part of an ongoing endeavour to outline a civil political thought, mostly through reading women's texts as an alternative to a modern political thinking that is focused on rule and turns the political into a judgement of taste. But I shall not expound on this here. However, my reading of her writings here aims not only at reconstructing what Olympe de Gouges wrote, but also what the writings contain potentially, derived from de Gouges' specific position in the discourses of her time – the position of a woman who, like her female peers, struggled with the Ancien Régime and did not become a citizen of the new one. To this end, I shall first dwell on the triangle formed by the writings of de Gouges, Arendt and Rousseau. Second, through

a discussion of de Gouges's defence of the king, of her play *The Slavery of the Blacks*<sup>5</sup> and of her novel *The Philosopher-Prince*,<sup>6</sup> I shall present the main precepts of Olympe de Gouges's political thought.

### **The governed population and the ruling power**

The common struggle of women and men in the Ancien Régime nevertheless led, as we know, to the creation of the modern citizen shaped by the denial of political rights to women. In the two years between the storming of the Bastille and the beheading of the king, the men who had become citizens already constituted a part of a new regime that had not so much removed its predecessor as tried to contain it in many ways. The 'Declaration of Human and Civil Rights' clearly shows this: the men who had ventured against the previous regime were soon enough recruited to justify the new one that they had established. The declaration composed by de Gouges, The 'Declaration of the Rights of Women and Female Citizen', like other texts by her and her female contemporaries, bears the traces of a different political discourse. This difference stems first and foremost from a gap between, on the one hand, the whole population of those who were governed and, on the other, the body politic conceived as comprising only citizens – a gap that disappeared without a trace in the language and thinking of most of her contemporaries, but which, as I hope to show, is presented in de Gouges's writings in various forms.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, challenges to traditional or hegemonic modern political thinking are not only to be found in the writings of women. Hannah Arendt, who dealt explicitly with the limits and limitations of traditional political thought, and hardly read works by female philosophers, drew out a new horizon for political thought from the margins of works by male philosophers. Arendt dwelt on critical discussions of modern

political thought in the writings of Locke, Kant, Hegel and Marx. This horizon, as Arendt's female readers know full well, opens to the gaze at moments when philosophy thinks *action* and assumes human plurality – in other words, when the gap between the governed population and the ruling power and what is considered as the body politic is not erased. Arendt did not see this horizon in Rousseau. What she found in his works was the philosophical foundation for Robespierre, and Arendt considered him the one responsible, almost directly, for transforming the 'political' into the 'social' during the French Revolution:

The shift from the republic to the people meant that the enduring unity of the future political body was guaranteed not in the worldly institutions which this people had in common, but in the will of the people themselves. The outstanding quality of this popular will as *volonté générale* was its unanimity, and when Robespierre constantly referred to 'public opinion', he meant by it the unanimity of the general will; he did not think of an opinion upon which many publicly were in agreement.<sup>8</sup>

In *On Revolution* Arendt argued that Robespierre's Reign of Terror was based on transforming the concern for the republic into a concern for the people, and that the origin of this shift is to be found in Rousseau. The Jacobins, she wrote, did not share with the Girondins their concern for forms of governance, institutions and constitutions. Instead, they trusted the natural benevolence of class. Arendt's criticisms of the Jacobins and Robespierre often coincide with those of de Gouges, to be found, for example, in the text that cost her her life, in which she suggested opening to referendum the issue of the proper form of governance.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of de Gouges's explicit criticism of the place and role Rousseau assigns to women, and in spite of the distance she wished to create between his works and hers, she would have contested Arendt's criticism of Rousseau had she read it. In one of de Gouges's piercing texts against Robespierre, she criticized him for trying to rule through ignorance, chiding him for his attitude towards philosophers: 'Tell me Maximilian', she wrote in a pamphlet in November 1792, 'why, in the convention, were you so wary of intellectuals? Why did we see you roaring at the electoral assembly against the philosophers to whom we owe the downfall of tyranny, who are the restorers of governments and the true foundation of the world?'<sup>10</sup> De Gouges refers here not only to contemporary philosophers but also to those thinkers whose writings foretold the end of a regime of which citizens are not a part, first and foremost among them Rousseau. However, it was not

the presence of the philosopher-king that de Gouges wished to see at the heart of the political arena, but rather his absence, or a present-absence as I hope to show below in relation to de Gouges's only novel, *The Philosopher-King*.

### Split in the social contract

At the time of de Gouges's writing, Rousseau's total identification with Robespierre had not yet become as obvious as it was for Arendt. De Gouges harshly criticized the Rousseauist 'general will' and its metamorphosis in the cult, created by Robespierre, of the 'Supreme Being'. Still, she identified the possibility of reading in Rousseau's text an opposition to Robespierre's interpretation and to state terror. True, de Gouges herself did not explicitly produce such a reading of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, although it is necessary in order to reconstruct the philosophical tradition within and against which de Gouges insists on thinking. I shall therefore propose a reading of Rousseau's *Social Contract* as constructed on the basis of two contradictory pacts. The blurring of these two contradictory pacts enabled Robespierre to construct a reign of terror while remaining a Rousseauist. But, I shall argue, their separation is a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for the alternative political thinking that may be detected in the writings of both Olympe de Gouges and Arendt, and within which I wish to pursue my own work.

Rousseau's *Social Contract* proposes not one but two interrelated pacts. The first pact is that upon which the citizens had agreed, being aware of its clauses while 'signing' it. The other, disguised as part of the first, as only another clause within the same contract, actually breaches and violates its foundation. The two pacts differ in five ways: in what is being exchanged; in the agreement of the citizens; in the end (telos) of the social contract (preservation of the body politic, the life of the parties to the contract or the state or the regime); in the source of sovereignty; and in the principle that determines men's choice ('greater good' or 'lesser evil').

The first pact is outlined in Rousseau's description of the passage from the state of nature to a social order:

This transition from the state of nature to the civil state produces a most remarkable change in man by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct and endowing his actions with the morality they previously lacked. Only then, when the voice of duty succeeds physical impulsion and right succeeds appetite, does man, who until then had looked

only to himself, see himself forced to act on other principles, and to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations.<sup>11</sup>

This passage is in fact the transformation of man into citizen. Rousseau enumerates the great advantages man gains ‘in return’ while depriving himself of several advantages endowed by nature. According to Rousseau, man’s faculties are developed, his ideas enlarged, his sentiments ennobled, his entire soul elevated: ‘what man loses by the social contract is his natural freedom and an unlimited right to everything that tempts him and he can reach; what he gains is civil freedom and property in everything he possesses.’<sup>12</sup> This impressive list of advantages should justify men’s choice to alienate their freedom. They do it for their own utility, Rousseau writes, and this list is meant to make us understand why. Instead of their natural liberty men gain political and moral freedom, and their simple possessions become legalized. This choice, so it seems, is a reasonable one, based on a principle of ‘greater good’. Man had liberty and property in the state of nature, and now, in the social order, he continues to benefit from both but to a higher degree. What the social pact actually requires the associates to alienate for the sake of the whole community is ‘only that portion of his *power*, his *goods*, his *freedom*, which it is important for the community to be able to use’.<sup>13</sup> The citizens, as Rousseau stresses time and again throughout *The Social Contract*, had agreed upon alienating *only* three of their rights: power, good and freedom, and nothing else.

But this is only part of the story, or just one story. For another story emerges from Rousseau’s description of the context in which this choice should be made:

I assume that men having reached the point where the obstacles that interfere with their preservation in the state of nature prevail by their resistance over the forces which each individual can muster to maintain himself in that state. Then that primitive state can no longer subsist, and humankind would perish if it did not change its way of being.<sup>14</sup>

At a certain historical moment, men’s preservation in the state of nature comes under threat. Contrary to some other philosophers of the social contract, Rousseau does not identify the state of nature with the war of all against all. He speaks instead of a threat hovering above the state of nature due to some *historical* factors that he, however, does not specify. In this story, too, the choice to be made sounds reasonable. But unlike the first story it is based on a different principle – that of ‘lesser evil’. Men are required to choose giving up what they naturally have or else be

coerced into doing so. Forcibly losing all they had in the state of nature and subjecting themselves to a political regime would be evil – choosing to do so from their own will would be the lesser evil.

But clearly from that moment on, we can no longer speak of agreement and choice. *The Social Contract* is, as Rousseau clearly writes, an effort ‘to find a form of association that will defend and protect the person and goods of each associate with the full common force, and by means of which each, uniting with all, nevertheless obey only himself and remain as free as before ... This is the fundamental problem to which the social contract provides the solution.’<sup>15</sup> The outside threat is so ponderous that people have no choice but to unite and submit themselves to a ruling power *as if it were* their own choice, obeying their own voice.

The first story, of the transition from man to citizen, from the state of nature into the social order, is ahistorical. Nothing in the external circumstances is identified as obliging men to take a decision, and their decision is an expression of free choice between two comparable options. The story of the second contract is delineated in more concrete circumstances, such as have forced men to choose between an unknown threat, about which only the sovereign possesses precise information – quite familiar to us, isn’t it? – and their subjugation to a political order that, in return, will protect them from this threat. In the second contract, they are prevented from formulating the options of their choice. The sovereign presents them with a catastrophic threat and its proposed removal – a solution cast in the mould of ‘the lesser evil’. ‘The lesser evil’, framed and formulated by the sovereign, is not one option of several, but rather a single solution to a single problem, and if the associates of the contract will not choose it willingly, it will be forced upon them anyway, and at a higher price. These two stories are not independent of each other, or totally separate. Indeed, they are seamed together in such a way that the shift from one to the other is hardly perceptible. But these are not nuances or different versions of the same thing; they are two distinct models. The intrusion of a threat into the social contract, such that only the sovereign can fully know its details, assess its scope and suggest ways to eliminate it, changes the ‘rules of the game’ of the political association and marks the difference between the two contracts.

What was at stake in the first social contract, its inviolable sanctity, is the preservation of the body politic upon which all citizens had agreed: ‘the body politic or the sovereign, since it owes its being solely to the sanctity of the contract, can never oblige itself, even

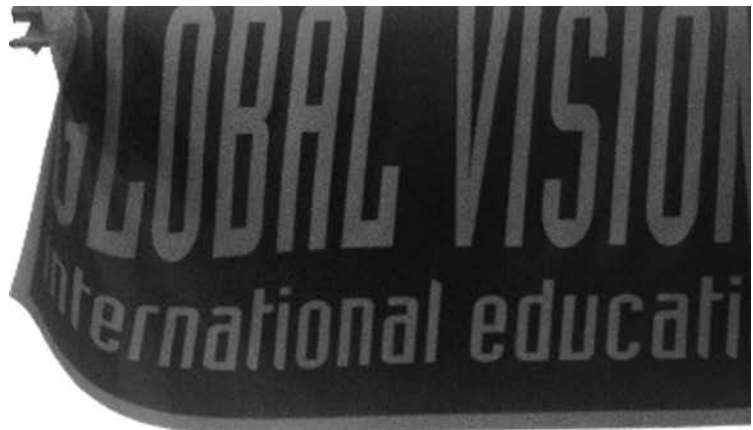
toward another, to anything that detracts from that original act, such as to alienate any part of itself or to subject itself to another Sovereign.<sup>16</sup> Sovereignty is the exercise of the general will. The general will can never be alienated and should always remain the collective being that gathers together and decides for itself and not through any representatives: 'Power can be transferred, but not will.'<sup>17</sup> In relation to the first pact, then, it is clear that the Sovereign alone – the citizens themselves – judges the importance of the services he is required to render the state.

But all of a sudden, midway through the book, Rousseau introduces a new right, not previously discussed, not included in the agreed contract presented earlier in the book: the 'Right of Life and Death'. Although this is a new right in the context of *The Social Contract*, it is a very old one outside it, well known as the right of the Sovereign in the old sense of the term. With the appearance of this right in the text, the declared end (*telos*) of the social contract – to preserve the body politic – is replaced by the more urgent need to preserve the life of the 'contracting parties'. And it is clearly written, in the old language of the pre-social contract era, that it is not only the Sovereign – now called the Prince – who has the right to take life if necessary; it is the citizen's duty to give his life:

whoever wants to preserve his life at the expense of others ought also to give it up for them when necessary. Now the citizen is no longer judge of the danger the law wills him to risk, and when the Prince has said to him, it is expedient to the State that you die, he ought to die; since it is only on this condition that he has lived in security until then, and his life is no longer only a bounty of nature, but a conditional gift of the State.<sup>18</sup>

Under a threat to their lives, a threat about which they know nothing, the citizens' preference for the 'lesser evil' makes way for the ethic of the exceptional regarding the lives of others, an ethic conceived and constructed, then, as the citizens' own free will.

Neither Rousseau, nor Hobbes before him,<sup>19</sup> ever questioned the sovereign's right over the life of the subjects, but this questioning is at the heart of de



Gouges's philosophy. One example of this is evident in de Gouges's proposal to institute a female national guard. These women will convince the warring men that the war they are fighting contradicts the essence of their citizenship as a political association with fellows. In the sovereign who authorizes them to take lives – both their own and others'; it is all the same to her – de Gouges sees a tyrant, and regards the warring men as traitors to their fellow citizens: 'It is my intention to write a play so as to ask all the soldiers involved in the war to show fraternity towards the interests of people of other nations, they have nothing to gain from the battles, they are getting killed for the sake of their tyrants!'<sup>20</sup>

It is tempting – and to a certain extent also correct – to regard de Gouges as a harbinger of the well-

established position of critic of the military aspect of democratic republican regimes. But seeing her in this way, discerning a continuity between her criticism and what nowadays is understood as a leftist criticism of a certain form of political power, is to fail to see the revolutionary moment of her time as the moment at which new possibilities of political communities were created, mistakenly identifying it solely with the transition of sovereignty from the monarch to the people. Reducing de Gouges's position to 'opposition to power' takes for granted the subjugation of the political association to a ruling pole as well as the fact that political association is based upon the division of the governed population (within the borders of a state) into citizens and non-citizens (this split is the distinction of passive and active citizens according to Sieyès). Further, it takes it for granted – as 'natural' – the recruitment of citizens to abandon or take the lives of others who are governed without being citizens. But this is precisely what reading de Gouges enables us to contest. The creation of the third estate, based on the differentiation between passive and active citizens and the establishment of non-monarchical institutions of governance (such as the national assembly and the people's army), did not satisfy the revolutionary demands of women such as Olympe de Gouges prior to the Revolution. This is why, I propose, we should see her writings as a criticism not merely of the mode of action of governing institutions but of their actual construction as such, as well as a last attempt to envision differently the nature of political association and its limits. I wish therefore to reconstruct not only de Gouges's unique outlook, but also that other possibility upon which de Gouges insisted until her dying day: to imagine political life not based upon the taking of life.

### **Sovereignty devoid of its right over lives**

I shall try to reconstruct the way in which de Gouges's conceived political association and her vision of sovereignty devoid of its right over lives through a reading of two of her texts. The first is a play written in 1782, seven years before the outbreak of the Revolution, in which the lives of two black slaves – a man and a woman – are at stake. The second, a political pamphlet, concerns the life of king Louis XVI, which is also at stake. The first deals with the authority of the king vested in his deputy, governor of the island, to take the lives of slaves and punish them for murdering a white guard who abused them. The second looks at the authority of the national assembly to take the life of the king. By juxtaposing these two texts and pointing to the matter common to both – contesting the

sovereign's right to take life and a reconceptualizing of the source of sovereign power – I hope to transcend the usual narrow framework of commentary on de Gouges to discuss de Gouges's political horizon as a constitutional monarchist and as a limited feminist. I contend that the king's trial was for de Gouges a singular, formative moment at which it was still possible to block the emerging continuity between the new and old regimes and to prevent the taking of life from becoming the basic principle of sovereignty.

In the text 'Olympe de Gouges, Défenseur officieux de Louis Capet',<sup>21</sup> de Gouges serves as counsel for the king's defence, through a brilliant analysis of the relation between the old and new power, attempting to tip the scales and ward off any continuity: 'I think that Louis made many mistakes as a king; but when he is bereft of this title of his that has been taken from him, he ceases to be guilty in the eyes of the republic.'<sup>22</sup> Here de Gouges distinguishes very clearly between the two bodies of the king – the king's position and the king himself – and seeks, analogously, to distinguish between the mistakes ascribed to him.

After years in which the king's physical body had been out of public sight and certainly away from political space, the Revolution wished to bring him back onstage and expose his truth. In view of the chain of events during the first two years of the Revolution, nothing, it seems, could have satisfied the revolutionary urge to see the king's truth short of his naked body beheaded by the guillotine. De Gouges, however, proposes a different relation between the two bodies of the king, divorced from the category of truth. This is not to take the king's mistakes lightly. She finds him guilty of them: 'He is weak, he has been misled: he has misled us, he himself has made mistakes: here in two words is his trial.' De Gouges even thinks that the king should pay a price for these mistakes. However, the worst mistake ascribed to him – being the king – is not one for which he alone is responsible: 'One of the greatest crimes of Louis Capet, you will agree, was that of being born king at a time when philosophy was quietly preparing the foundations of the republic.'<sup>23</sup> Even had he possessed nobler traits than he did, she reminds her readers, when the gates of enlightenment were opened there was no longer any place for his rule, and his deeds became patently illegal.

These claims, intended to defend the king, are one example of de Gouges's consistent support, from the first to the last of her works, of all those whom the law has rendered illegal: the illegitimate child,<sup>24</sup> the woman, the prostitute, the poor, the slave and now the king. She does not seek to show mercy for the



king or for any of the above; nor does she seek an exceptional gesture of pardon. She asks of him who has replaced the sovereign – and whom she insists on seeing as a party to political association – to suspend the law. Not suspension as we know it from Schmitt and Agamben; rather, its opposite. In the case of the king de Gouges identifies an exceptional case, giving grounds for the suspension of the law, such that the one damaged by this law be treated differently, his status regulated and, if need be, the law re-legislated. For, as de Gouges clearly states, Louis XVI does not bear exclusive responsibility for his most heinous deed. The new law has turned him into an accomplice, ‘His forefathers overfilled the cup of France’s evils; unfortunately for him, the goblet cracked while held in his hands, and all its splinters came raining down upon his head.’<sup>25</sup> But it was not only Louis’s forefathers, kings themselves, who had sinned. Our forefathers also, the subjects of the previous kings, had sinned in granting the king their recognition and allowing his rule. For de Gouges, this historical moment is the decisive test of political association and crucial in the formation of the constituent principle of the new regime as either a continuation of the old or as new and totally distinct. Had it chosen not to behead the king, the new regime would have placed at its centre an inclusive pact and the sovereign’s obligation to care for his fellow citizens – including a deposed king – rather than establishing itself, and its relation to its subjects, on the foundation of its authority to take their lives. The new regime failed this test and, like its predecessor, sanctified itself in the blood of those whose happiness it should have tended.

De Gouges in fact proposed to transform the suspension of the law into an opportunity to examine the damages it was wreaking. But the suspension of the law is not the abandonment of those for the sake of whom it was suspended, not an abrogation of their defence by the sovereign. On the contrary, this suspension entrusts these people to the protection of the sovereign. Striving to forestall the new sovereign’s execution of the death sentence against the king, she claims: ‘Beheading a king will not suffice to kill him; he lives on long after his death; but he truly dies when he survives his fall.’<sup>26</sup> The first half of the sentence paraphrases the cry ‘The king is dead, long live the king!’, and points to the relative ease with which the continuity of power is maintained with the people’s support. The second half identifies what may be the one and only possibility for the creation of a true break in the continuity of a monarchy: allowing the king to survive under the power that has usurped

him while enabling him to acknowledge this power and recognize its legitimacy as an expression of the new civil association. De Gouges thus draws a line between herself and those who were about to vote for the king’s beheading. They sought a new start of one kind only – absolute and total – and, to this end, would behead the king with a single neat cut. De Gouges, on the other hand, warned against the transformation of the authority to take life into a constituent principle of the regime, foretelling the reign of terror under which every body that threatened the unity of power and sovereignty was beheaded.

### Not to take life

Almost a decade before the king’s beheading became an item on the public agenda and the breakout of the Haitian revolution,<sup>27</sup> seven years before the storming of the Bastille, de Gouges wrote a play, *The Slavery of the Blacks*. In the background of the plot one reads how, step by step, a governed population negates the sovereign’s authority to take life through their resistance to being governed unequally. The play shows, that is, how the sovereign’s authority to take life is maintained through this differential rule and how it is abolished once the association of the citizens with the non-citizens undermines the differential rule.

The plot centres on a black slave, Zamor, who has killed his master’s white guard in response to the latter’s request that Zamor attack Mirza, his beloved (a slave like himself), for having refused the guard’s overtures.<sup>28</sup> After Zamor commits murder, he and Mirza escape. On their way they rescue a French couple whose boat has sunk. The grateful couple propose to defend them. For the most part, the play deals with the question of whether they will be executed or spared. Sophie, the Frenchwoman rescued by Zamor, the governor’s wife, slaves, men and women, servants and apprentices and even a military officer, all gradually come together to save Zamor and Mirza from a band of armed men who, led by a judge, are hunting them down to execute them for their crime. The governor wavers between the two newly polarized factions created in the play – the men demanding execution and the non-citizens (women, blacks and deserters) who cross the lines and join the demand to free the two slaves. The judge calls on the governor to reach a decision:

They must be put to death at once, more especially as two Europeans have incited a general revolt among the slaves. They depicted your commander as a monster. The slaves listened avidly to these seditious speeches, and all have promised not to execute the orders that they were given.<sup>29</sup>

The play explicitly calls for the rule of law as a necessary condition for freedom but acknowledges the limits of the law. It justifies disobedience to an obviously illegal law, the legislation of which was made possible under circumstances of differential rule. The play presents Zamor not purely from the perspective of the law that judges his deed, but rather in the context of a reconsideration of the regime that outlawed him in the first place, and abandoned him to injuries that would not be inflicted upon white citizens.<sup>30</sup> According to Marie-Pierre Le Hir's interpretation, the actions of the women working to save the two slaves are for de Gouges invalid if they are not sanctioned by the sovereign.<sup>31</sup> On my reading, quite the opposite is the case. The necessity to take the slaves' lives was unanimously accepted among the governing group of governed. When the governor rules that this is what is to be done, his decision would reconfirm that upon which they – namely one group of governed whose agreement is preserved by excluding another group of governed from the circle of agreement – are agreed. The decision *not to take* their lives, on the other hand, is an effect of the governed's contestation of the dividing line between them as governed. This contestation annuls any previous agreement between the sovereign and one group of the governed, an agreement that constituted the basis for abandoning the lives of another group. The decision *not to take lives* having been taken, the sovereign and the representatives of the governing–governed group cannot continue to confirm their previous agreement about whose life may be taken. The play ends not only with the governor's preventing the execution of the slaves, but also with his calling to the residents to come out and celebrate the opening of a new political horizon as the different governed parties associate with each other and refuse to be ruled differentially:

Residents, join me and let us serve these miserable beings with our power. Europe has donned a new face. All peoples tend towards one and the same liberty ... The King of France, called Beloved Louis, is a friend of the people, he no longer desires an unequal division amongst the governed who are all his children. He, conjointly with the nation, no longer wishes for the governed to be executed. The constant tyranny of rulers has committed crimes. And if ever the French Spirit shall prove the keenness of its humaneness and outlook, this will happen when such a noble revolution takes place.<sup>32</sup>

Although de Gouges revised this play several times, one year, even three years, after the French Revolution, she always kept the anticipation of a revolution that did not take place: the joining together of a heterogeneous

corpus of the governed – women, slaves and men as well – who refuse to recognize any law or authority which abandons their lives or enlists them to take others' lives.

The difference between the old and the new regimes now gains a new meaning that is not limited to the ruling sphere and its institutions, but to the way they relate to the plane of being governed and the alliance binding those governed. Neither monarchy nor republic as a form of governance suffices to describe a real transition from one regime to another. The agreement among the members of a homogeneous governing group of governed which characterized the Ancien Régime – the agreement on the right of the sovereign and its proxies to take life – continues to characterize the new regime as well, even if the composition of this governing group has radically changed.

Towards the end of the *The Slavery of the Blacks* the governor deliberates, musing over power:

Sovereigns render their people happy: every citizen is free under a good master, and in this country of slavery one must be barbaric in spite of oneself. Hey! How can I help abandoning myself to these reflections, when the voice of humanity cries out from the bottom of my heart: 'Be kind and sensitive to the cries of the wretched'. I know that my opinion must displease you: Europe, however, takes care to justify it and I dare hope that long there will no longer be any slaves. O Louis!<sup>33</sup>



Unlike interpretations of the play that draw an analogy between the governor and the king, the fictional setting and France, I propose a straightforward reading of the governor's words. The governor addresses an absent king whose absence obliges him to refrain from taking Zamor's life, to pardon Zamor for his crime and to change the law creating the hothouse that in fact nurtured this crime. As the judge in the play demands, Zamor's execution would have been an example to the people of what would happen to anyone who ever dared to challenge the ruling power, its laws and its single, unified, irrefutable sovereignty. In this play, as in the political pamphlet 'The Three Ballot Boxes', that landed de Gouges in prison, she attempts to turn the people's uprising against injustices into a lesson for tyrants, 'that to win their revolution will be a lesson to tyrants and not to the people'.<sup>34</sup>

### Rendering the taking of life patently illegal

In her text in defence of the king, de Gouges still believed that it would be possible to prevent the constitution of a unified sovereign power and propose, instead, a different structure. However, in this text she contends that the goal of the new regime, too, is to preserve its sovereignty and its unity. It is the very idea that the people should choose a regime once and for all – be it republican, federalist, monarchical or democratic – such that this regime constructs itself as irrefutable that motivates de Gouges to address the allegedly republican sovereign as if he were merely one of an unbroken lineage of tyrants: 'Oh tyrants of the earth, let a tremble engulf you.'<sup>35</sup>

In her address to the king, written after the flight from his Paris palace, de Gouges comments on the nature of any legitimate relation between the sovereign and the nation: 'You have learned that the king's ruling power is worth nothing when it does not *originate* in the supreme power supported by the people's trust.'<sup>36</sup> Beyond the chronology of concrete events that it is possible to link in various differing causal relations to explain the fall of the king, the monarchy disintegrated, according to de Gouges, because the people deserted the king. De Gouges emphasizes not the source of sovereignty but rather the capacity of the people, of the governed community – men and women alike – to lend authority to sovereignty, even when it does not originate in the nation. In other words, in both a monarchy and a republic the legitimacy of the sovereign depends on the people. When the king was deposed, the nation became the origin of sovereignty that, however, is not ensured once and for all, but rather requires incessant

renewal of its validity by the nation. Reading the third clause of de Gouges's 'Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen' in this light, it is clear that for her the nation is not an abstract myth or ideal but rather a concrete aggregate of the governed who comprise it – women, men, whites and blacks. Moreover, the sovereignty of those who have declared themselves the nation's representatives 'is worthless' unless the women acknowledge it. Accordingly, as de Gouges wrote in clause 16 of her 'Declaration', 'The constitution is cancelled and null if most of the individuals who comprise the nation have not taken part in its composition.'<sup>37</sup> Addressing the king in this text ('Will there or won't there be a king?'), she affirms what he needs to regain his rule: the people's renewed recognition of his rule. She acknowledges the king's mistakes, criticizes his deeds and his discretion, but is in no hurry to join those who wish to relinquish his rule altogether. She does not spare the enlightened revolutionaries either, but concludes that their great mistake, equivalent in her view to that of the king, was their exclusion of women and slaves. However, de Gouges affirms the potential embodied in the declaration that served as a foundation for the constitution for restoring the rights of women and slaves. She is therefore not in a rush to be rid of the constitution either, which she describes as 'a masterpiece'. Calling on the king to return to the people and on the people to return to him, she warns against the 'unthinkable' destruction: 'Should such a glorious creation, a source of light that has become a beacon for the world, be extinguished so as to ignite the torches of clashes? No, honourable sirs, a masterpiece such as this should not ever be allowed to rot away.'<sup>38</sup>

### Altering sovereignty

To classify de Gouges as a monarchist is to miss her argument about the king's salvation – the salvation of the possibility of women reuniting with men as equal participants in the political act, thus restoring the possibility of circumscribing man's rule. De Gouges did not seek the preservation of the monarchy but rather the revival of the kingdom. Within the kingdom she wished to preserve the function of the king but only while reorganizing the structure of sovereignty. Unlike most of the revolutionaries of her generation, de Gouges did not propose to transfer sovereignty from the king to the people. Neither did she propose, however, to leave it in the hands of the king as a unified sovereignty.

A sketch of de Gouges's alternative conception of sovereignty emerges from her novel *The Philosopher-*

*Prince*. The novel tells of a journey through the kingdom of reason, imagination and power. It is an adventurous and brilliant novel, full of humour and philosophical insights comparable to Voltaire's *Candide*, published four decades earlier. At the end of his journey, the protagonist Almoladin describes what Louis XVI should have done to prevent the massive bloodshed that occurred during and following the French Revolution. Very little has been written about this novel beyond its being mentioned in passing in works that deal with other of de Gouges's texts.<sup>39</sup> The limited discussion of it that there is totally ignores its radical proposal for a newly articulated conception of sovereignty and presents the novel as conservative, especially in relation to the position of women.<sup>40</sup> (On its back cover even the publisher declares: 'a very conventional ending'.)

Almoladin, the philosopher-prince of the title, travels through several kingdoms, studying how political relations between human beings and the sovereign are managed in each, and how relations between the sovereign and his subjects are conducted. Having achieved glory through the counsel he offers and the deeds he performs, he returns to his own country, Siam, and rules it for fourteen years. He is renowned as a beloved king and a caring father to his children. After grooming his son to rule after him, Almoladin chooses to leave, to give up his throne and live as a commoner in a village with Palmire, the woman with whom he fell in love some fifteen years earlier and whose love he had been forced to forfeit for marriage with Queen Idamée, to whom he had already been betrothed at the time. Before leaving his kingdom, Almoladin assembles his people and, donning his royal robes, appears before them in his full authority:

My children, for fourteen years now you have been subject to my laws, they have not been a burden to you and your gentleness has proved to me, thousands of times over, that you were satisfied with your sovereign. I have not ruled you at all as a tyrant, I have always loved you gently and ruled you like a father; but if fate had allowed me to choose my avocation, my heart would not have led me to kingship. I will never forget the sacred words uttered by he who brought me into this world, in his very last moments, 'My son', he told me, 'a good king who has done everything for his people has not done enough if he hasn't given them a worthy successor to replace him.'<sup>41</sup>

Almoladin relinquishes the throne as soon as he feels able to trust his son to take his place in a worthy manner and to trust the people to resist his son's rule should it exceed appropriate limits. The

coronation at which he passes his crown to his son is, then, not as a ceremony continuing the royal dynasty as in the past but, rather, as a ceremony constituting a new covenant in the framework of which a new type of sovereign rule is founded. Almoladin imposes two conditions that shake up the structure of sovereignty: 'Here is the condition that I have decided to impose upon my son', he says, turning to the people before he goes on, 'I do not know how many years I will be absent from my kingdom. I request and demand that without my express instructions not a single death sentence against a single offender will be carried out.'<sup>42</sup>

On the face of it, one might say, Almoladin remains the sovereign, he who is authorized to declare an exception, while his son, the acting sovereign, is his father's subject, thus leaving the structure of sovereignty as before. However, two significant details undermine this interpretation and reveal the complexity of the proposed structure. First, Almoladin is physically abandoning the territory and retreat from the political space in which he will, in fact, remain only as an absent authority – one that could be termed nature, philosopher-king, invisible entity, godhead or even international tribunal – which the people or the (acting) sovereign can mobilize should one of them dare to disobey Almoladin's commandment not to take anyone's life. This commandment was intended to protect both the people from the king and the king from the people. The second condition that Almoladin imposes concerns the structure of the relations between the three poles of the invisible absent authority, the sovereign and the people. During the coronation a covenant is established between them, articulating a new structure of sovereignty. In the course of the ceremony Almoladin warns his son in the presence of the people, forbidding him the localized use of the death sentence and thus founding his regime on a mechanism of exception – the meaning of which is the taking of lives. From here on, Almoladin will become an invisible entity, an absent presence, through the condition he leaves behind for the continuation of power. As he is about to disappear, his consent will be forever unobtainable. In so doing, he accordingly renders the taking of life patently illegal.

### **Toward a civil disagreement**

Even if de Gouges's writings do not propose a well-ordered or methodical discussion of 'the political', 'the regime', 'contract', 'citizenship' or 'sovereignty', they are a rich and inspiring source for political thought because of the traces they bear of a possibility that

was present at the precise moment that the modern conception of citizenship was invented and distorted, shaped as goods distributed by the sovereign state. Its distribution – always tight-fisted and not always for all alike – has maimed the citizens who received it.

This maiming, which I have elsewhere called *civil invalidity*, turned these citizens – us – into accomplices in a crime committed against others governed along with us without any acts having been perpetrated. This civil invalidity is not an individual characteristic, the outcome of a damaged personality or moral shortcoming in the persons suffering from it. A civil invalidity is created when the differences in the ways various groups are being governed become a structural feature of the regime. It is an effect of being governed differentially – governed with and alongside others, but in an entirely different way. A civil invalidity is an effect of the regime and its governmental apparatuses; the governed participate – consciously and unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly – in the formation of those apparatuses and are formed by them.

It is this invalidity that enables one group of the governed to be recruited in order to persecute another group; to subject them to a catastrophe, and then see this catastrophe as ‘these people’s catastrophe’, ‘a catastrophe from their point of view’, a natural part of the order of things.<sup>43</sup> ‘In its various forms’, Eyal Weizman wrote, ‘the principle of the “lesser evil” functions as a pragmatic compromise, an exception to common ethics and political contracts, and in fact acts as the primary justification for the very notion of this exception.’<sup>44</sup> Through the reading of Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* in this article I have tried to show how the consent of the citizens to the ethics of the exception, to the lesser evil in relation to the taking of life, is not external to the social contract but part of its structural logic and an essential part of the existence of citizens in democratic regimes. I have also tried, through the reading of Olympe de Gouges, to mark initial ‘dotted lines’ along the seams that hold these two pacts together, locating the threads that need to be pulled in order to unravel the fusion that had become an evident given of modern democratic regimes. A new regime – led by a revolution that has not yet taken place – would have to be based upon a structural *disagreement* among its governed about the taking or abandoning of life. This disagreement is the consequence of the political ontology of their being a heterogeneous plurality, or an ‘inoperative community’ to use Jean-Luc Nancy’s words.

**Based on a translation by Tal Haran**

## Notes

1. Olivier Blanc, *Olympe de Gouges*, Editions Syros, Paris, 1981; Benoîte Groult, ‘Olympe de Gouges: la première féministe moderne’, in *Olympe de Gouges: Œuvres*, Mille et une femmes, Mercure de France, 1986. To date, very little (only one play and the ‘Declaration’) of de Gouges’s writings have been translated into English.
2. It has become *bon ton* to depict de Gouges as politically conservative and limited in her thinking on slavery or women. See, for example, Doris Kadish, ‘Translating in Context’, in Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney, *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Womens’ Writing 1783–1823*, Kent State University Press, Kent OH, 1994; Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean 1787–1804*, Chapel Hill Press, Chapel Hill NC, 2004. This is accompanied by an attitude that holds her talent as a playwright to be limited beyond the pioneering subject matter with which she dealt. Thus, for instance, Eléni Varikas writes, in her introduction to a play republished in 1989, ‘if de Gouges’ play is worthy of our attention today, this is not so much due to its dramatic value but mainly because of the ideas it expresses.’ Eléni Varikas. ‘Introduction à L’esclavage des noirs’, in *L’esclavage des noirs*, Côté-femmes, Paris, 1989, p. 17. See also Annette Rosa, *Citoyennes: les femmes et la révolution française*, Messidor, Paris, 1988. Gabriella Verdier, who offers an analysis of several of de Gouges’s plays, criticizes this view and demonstrates de Gouges’s innovativeness in the realm of theatre: Gabriella Verdier, ‘From Reform to Revolution: The Social Theater of Olympe de Gouges’, Catherine Montfort-Howard, ed., *Literate Women and the French Revolution of 1789*, Summa Publications, Birmingham AL, 1994.
3. See, for example, the sarcasm with which she refers to him – ‘the citizen from Geneva’ – in a text calling on women to rescue France. De Gouges quotes a passage from Rousseau’s 21st letter to Julie without disclosing its author, distancing herself from its position. See Olympe de Gouges, *Écrits Politiques 1792–1793*, Côté-femmes, Paris, 1993, p. 121.
4. The most radical stand of this type is taken by Erica Harth, who in the final chapter of her book thanks Daniel Morris for making her think about the limitations of de Gouges’s thought: ‘De Gouges’ feminism is defined by the boundaries of the philosophical discourse.’ Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1992, p. 233. Harth analyses the play *The Slavery of the Blacks* and the novel *The Philosopher-Prince*, presenting both as mainly conservative due to de Gouges’s understanding of nature, ‘which contradicts Rousseau’s depiction of initial equality in the second speech and illustrates his view of women’ (ibid.). In this article I propose a reading of these plays that is diametrically opposed to Harth’s. Contra Harth, see also Verdier, ‘From Reform to Revolution’, in which Verdier proposes the category of solidarity among women as a central motif for the interpretation of de Gouges’s plays.

In an article on de Gouges’s rhetoric, Janie Vanpée stresses the importance of the immediate historical

- context in understanding her work and shows the degree to which de Gouges assumes that context to be shared by her audience. Vanpée proposes a fascinating analysis for understanding the rhetorical means employed by de Gouges to address her audience. Janie Vanpée, 'Taking the Podium: Olympe de Gouges's Revolutionary Discourse', in *Women Writers in Pre-revolutionary France: Strategies of Emancipation*, Garland Publishing, New York, 1997). However, this analysis is based on an assumption that I will seek to refute: the assumption that, in the absence of this context, the texts emerge as weak. This assumption pertains to a particular stratum of the text while disregarding the importance that de Gouges ascribed to the fact that her texts were meant to be *read*. In Vanpée's work the criticisms of de Gouges's capacities for writing and philosophizing are contradicted by the spell-binding manner in which she represents the author's unique treatment of issues such as that of illegitimate children. See Janie Vanpée, 'Revendication de la légitimité: les performances révolutionnaires d'Olympe de Gouges', in *Sexualité, mariage et famille au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Les presses de l'université Laval, Quebec, 1988; Janie Vanpée, 'Performing Justice: The Trials of Olympe de Gouges', *Theater Journal* 51, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD 1999.
5. Olympe de Gouges, *L'esclavage des noirs* (1792), Côté-femmes, Paris, 2006; Olympe de Gouges, *L'esclavage des Nègres – version inédite du 28 décembre 1789*, ed. S. Chalaye and J. Razgonnikoff, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2006.
  6. Olympe de Gouges, *Le Prince philosophe: conte oriental*, 2 vols, Indigo and Côté-femmes, Paris, 1995.
  7. For more on this gap see ch. 1 of Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books, New York, 2008.
  8. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Penguin Books, London, 1990, p. 76.
  9. Olympe de Gouges, 'The Three Ballot Boxes', in *Écrits Politiques 1792–1793*.
  10. De Gouges, *Écrits Politiques 1792–1793*, p. 166.
  11. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, Book I, ch. 8, p. 53. All quotations from Rousseau refer to this edition.
  12. Ibid., Book I, ch. 8, pp. 53–4.
  13. Ibid., Book II, ch. 4, p. 61, emphasis added.
  14. Ibid., Book I, ch. 6, p. 50.
  15. Ibid., Book I, ch. 6, pp. 49–50.
  16. Ibid., Book I, ch. 7, p. 52.
  17. Ibid., Book II, ch. 1, p. 57.
  18. Ibid., Book II, ch. 5, p. 64.
  19. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, ch. 21.
  20. De Gouges, *Écrits Politiques 1792–1793*.
  21. Ibid., pp. 191–4.
  22. Ibid., p. 192.
  23. Ibid.
  24. See Vanpée, 'Revendication de la légitimité', for an analysis of the issue of illegitimate children in de Gouges's work.
  25. Ibid.
  26. Ibid., p. 194.
  27. In a later Introduction added to the play one year after the revolution in Haiti (and almost a decade after the play was written), de Gouges attempted to ward off the colonists' attacks against her play and its contribution to the uprising. In reply to these attacks she addressed the slaves and challenged the violence of their revolution just as vehemently as she had condemned Robespierre and the violence exercised by him and his accomplices in the French Revolution, comparing the deeds of the slaves to those of the despots that preceded them. De Gouges acknowledged the blacks' rights to equality but rejected violence as a means to obtain them.
  28. Prior to a restaging of this play at the Théâtre Volland, Emmanuel Genvrin compiled a comparison of its three versions. All three indicate de Gouges's strong position on the abolition of slavery. I would like to thank Genvrin for allowing me to read his remarks, only part of which were published. See his introduction to the play in Emmanuel Genvrin, *Études: suivi de l'esclavage des nègres d'après Olympe de Gouges*, Éditions Théâtre Volland 1988.
  29. Olympe de Gouges, *The Slavery of the Blacks*, Act II, Scene 6, trans. Maryann DeJulio as *Black Slavery, or The Happy Shipwreck*, in Kadish and Massardier-Kenney, *Translating Slavery*.
  30. This stance anticipates Lyotard's moral thinking by about two hundred years. (Jean François Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich, Theory and History of Literature Vol. 20, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985.)
  31. In her article on the play, Marie-Pierre La Hir points out the pioneering stand of de Gouges, who as early as 1783 called for a redefinition of the role of the king. Le Hir states, however, that 'there is no question at all that *The Slavery of the Blacks* sets out to defend the monarchy'. In order to explain the conflict between de Gouges's innovativeness and her monarchist stand, she introduces the terms of a patriot king and popular sovereignty. Marie-Pierre Le Hir, 'Feminism, Theater, Race: *L'esclavage des Noirs*', in Kadish and Massardier-Kenney, *Translating Slavery*, p. 74.
  32. Ibid.
  33. De Gouges, *The Slavery of the Blacks*, p. 106.
  34. De Gouges, 'The Three Ballot Boxes', p. 246.
  35. Ibid.,
  36. De Gouges, *Écrits Politiques 1792–1793*, p. 189.
  37. Ibid., p. 209.
  38. Ibid., p. 191.
  39. With the exception of Harth, *Cartesian Women*.
  40. De Gouges, *Le Prince Philosophe*. Some critics even charge the text with support for the oppression of women. According to Leopold Lecour, 'She paid women no compliments here either [mentioning only] their "shameful" features, their shortcomings, laziness, their vanity, etc.' (*Trois femmes de la révolution*, Librairie Plon, Paris, 1900, p. 82).
  41. De Gouges, *Le Prince Philosophe*, p. 70.
  42. Ibid.
  43. I showed this in relation to the catastrophe inflicted upon the Palestinian residents of Palestine/Eretz-Israel during the years 1947–50 which became their 'disaster' – the *Nakba*. See Ariella Azoulay, *Constituent Violence 1947–1950* (in Hebrew), Resling, Tel Aviv, 2009.
  44. From an unpublished paper Weizman presented at a workshop on 'The Lesser Evil' at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson NY, 2007. A later version is available at <http://roundtable.kein.org/node/802>.

### Of princes and principles

Graham Harman *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, Re.Press, Melbourne, 2009. 247 pp. £16.00 pb., 978 0 9805440 6 0.

Unlike those of some of his compatriots, the name of Bruno Latour is not one to have graced the pages of *Radical Philosophy* with much frequency. It is not just that he is more usually considered a sociologist than a philosopher; his research concerns and theoretical proclivities, even as a sociologist, are somewhat distanced from the critical thinking that marks many of the concerns of the journal.

Latour made his mark with his early writings on the sociology and philosophy of science – books such as *Science in Action* (1988) and *The Pasteurisation of France* (1993) are remarkable for their insights into science in the process of its making or doing (action, in any case). They are also noteworthy for the witty and slightly irreverent way in which they are written, a characteristic trait of Latour's work that has never disappeared. These early accounts – one of the ways in which scientific claims succeed in making themselves immune to controversy, the other of the ways in which Pasteur's theories about the microbial origins of disease came to dominance – were faulted by some for what was seen as a quasi-Machiavellian portrayal of the processes by which scientists recruit allies and engage in trials of strength. But although the 'black boxes' that controversial claims become as they gain acceptance are described in one place as 'machinations', these essays develop an 'associology' that makes one crucial point clear: the social is not a given but something in a ceaseless process of construction involving both human and non-human agents. Invocations of 'the social' as some homogeneous substance operating behind the backs of actors could henceforth be construed as magnificent feats of 'explaining away'. Although we perhaps benefit here a little from hindsight, it is difficult to place such books unequivocally in the 'social constructionist' camp that Science and Technology Studies in general, and Latour in particular, have been taken to task for having developed, and that has sedimented so deeply into critical sociological common sense.

It is perhaps not surprising that in a number of subsequent book-length studies – *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*

(1996), *Pandora's Hope* (1999), down to the more recent *Politics of Nature* (2004) and *Reassembling the Social* (2005) – Latour spends a considerable amount of time correcting many of the mistaken readings of the 'actor-network theory' with which his name is most closely associated. But read as philosophical texts exploring the *construction* of reality, books such as *Pandora's Hope* go some way to supporting the characterization in Graham Harman's book of Latour's work as metaphysics. Given more recent essays on William James, and on unabashed advocates of pre-critical thinking (such as Tarde and Whitehead), and exemplars of what he calls the 'second empiricism', not to mention philosophers who are all but unknown in the Anglo-American traditions (Étienne Souriau, for example, to whose small book on modes of existence Latour has devoted an essay), Latour's philosophical proclivities are becoming much more evident. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* is, then, a very timely text.

*We Have Never Been Modern*, perhaps Latour's best-known work, exemplifies his largely unwavering argument about the philosophically problematic nature of modernity and the critical rationality it so frequently vaunts. The withering claim that the book develops about modernity, which sees a separation of politics and knowledge that emerges most clearly with Hobbes, translates more generally into a series of dichotomies (modernity and tradition, theory and practice, and so on) that exemplify Latour's concerns about the subject-centred thinking of the modern settlement.

*We Have Never Been Modern* offers the closest thing to a conspectus of Latour's work, and Harman considers it the most 'original piece of philosophy in the last twenty years'. The critical dissection it offers of the 'intellectual Munich of 1781' forms the starting point not only for *Prince of Networks* but for Harman's continuing investigations of the possibilities of an object-oriented metaphysics more generally. Both Harman and Latour share the conviction that new forms of thinking are required to overcome the capitulation to the caricatures of scientific reductionism/materialism that characterizes philosophies of access and their

acceptance of the human–world split. (They also share a refusal to take the linguistic turn.)

This brief recapitulation of some of the key points of Latour's œuvre indicates the uncommonly broad nature of his research interests. But it does not, perhaps, serve as adequate notice for the core concerns of *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, a book whose title implies, at the very least, a surprising articulation between entities that many – social scientists above all – might have been inclined to place in safely separate universes. *Prince of Networks* is a book, as they say, of two halves. In the first, Harman develops an exposition of what he sees as the metaphysics that is embedded within four of Latour's best-known texts: *Irreductions*, *Science in Action*, *We Have Never Been Modern* and *Pandora's Hope*. Following an interpretative strategy that will be familiar to readers of *Tool-Being* (Harman's book on Heidegger), the account develops by extracting an argumentative core of four principles guiding Latour's work. These principles, Harman argues, remain more or less unchanged from the early essay *Irreductions* to the recent ruminations of *Reassembling the Social*.

*Prince of Networks* contends that *actants*, *irreduction*, *translation* and *alliance*, subtended by another principle, that of *utter concreteness*, form the basic principles that 'guide [Latour's] vast empirical labours'. The universe is made up of innumerable unique actants, events that do not endure and are utterly specific. There is no Aristotelian distinction between substance and accidents here, as actants don't endure by themselves. Because every actant is nothing other than what it actually is, it cannot be reduced to anything else (although there is equally nothing to stop anything or anyone from trying to reduce one entity to another). But as no thing can be reduced to anything else, translation is always required, active mediation that adds to and modifies what it mediates (unlike a 'transparent intermediary', which would presume reducibility). And, finally, since actants are utterly concrete events, articulated by their relations with each other, reality is a function of collective processes of alliances between actants.

Much of the first half of *Prince of Networks* is devoted to exploring the metaphysical implications of these principles in Latour's work. Critical-sociological notions such as power are interestingly reworked within this framework: power is a function of relations between actors, and a result rather than an explanatory starting point (a view Latour shares with Foucault, although this is quickly forgotten when one starts talking in terms of generalities such as 'surveillance

society', for example); and the alliances between actors that are exemplified in relations of domination always consist of much more than just relations between humans (yes, chewing gum, nuclear technology, Elvis Presley and the Marshall Plan are all elements of post-1945 US hegemony). Evidently, a crucial element of Latour's philosophy lies in the centrality it accords to relations: with actors or actants having no endurance, no hidden depth, they are necessarily deployed in external relations, failing which they cease to be real. Harman is quick to make the link here with Whitehead, who has been an important reference point for Latour for many years now. (There are some parallels between the former's 'actual occasions' and Latour's actants.)

However, the crucial point for Harman (who does not discuss the sociology much, and is a little cursory in his appraisal of Whitehead) is that this metaphysics of actors assembled in networks of external relations seeks to overcome the modern rift between primary and secondary qualities that informs the 'intellectual Munich' of modernity, and with it the categorical distinction between human and world. But it does so by seeing rifts absolutely everywhere: between humans and humans, humans and world, object and object, and so on. Reality thus here becomes a discontinuous construction, the product of trials of strength between innumerable actors human and nonhuman.

The second half of *Prince of Networks* develops a more critical analysis of the limitations of this relational metaphysics, offering an extensive discussion of a series of questions designed to support Harman's claim for a more fully object-oriented metaphysics (the lineaments of which have been explored extensively in his other work). The claim here is that for a metaphysics finally to become adequate to the autonomous reality of objects, without succumbing to the correlationist supposition that every datum must be a datum for a human, it must yield to a conception of objects as bearers of 'cryptic essences', split from both their qualities and their relations. Latour's critique of substance–accident thinking – the subject–predicate metaphysics that Whitehead considers as itself an achievement of abstraction – precludes his metaphysics from giving a good account of change, and whilst his relational thinking offers a largely effective counter to the human–world split, it nonetheless has a tendency to forget that in its more exigent manifestations, realism demands not only that we deal adequately with the distinction between primary and secondary qualities but also that things exist independently of us 'whether we like it or not'.



The nub of the argument in the second half of the book turns around the difficulties that relational ontology has with this aspect of realism, developing the position that Harman takes in his earlier books, *Tool-being* and *Guerilla Metaphysics*. Indeed in some respects, as he acknowledges, *Prince of Networks* represents an attempt to synthesize the surprisingly realist Heideggerian phenomenology of those books with an equally surprisingly metaphysical Latour. 'Not the easiest of tasks' he drily observes. However, these later chapters offer an interesting reworking of Heidegger's odd conception of the fourfold and of the notion of vicarious causation, which, qua *local occasionalism*, Harman argues, is one of Latour's most crucial metaphysical innovations.

Harman's reading of Latour is largely generous: he takes the position, as he puts it, of the critic who wants to see Latour *succeed*, rather than fail. He shares with Latour and a number of others a dislike of the kind of criticism that takes a pride in its relentless irony and scepticism and is adamant in his dislike of the self-imposed abnegation of philosophies of access, which he holds responsible for philosophy's reticence to deal with the very objects that form the bread-and-butter of scientific research. *Prince of Networks* is littered with examples of a hyperbolic reading strategy, putting the author in a position of 'maximum strength' in order to explore the new areas of the map his (or her) claims light up. However, such an ambitious piece of work is not without its shortcomings. For the most part, these criticisms revolve around what gets left out in Harman's account of Latour's metaphysics.

The first and perhaps most difficult issue concerns what is entailed by the processes involved in drawing out and condensing Latour's metaphysics into the statement of a series of core arguments or basic principles. The approach that Harman adopts here is both *Prince of Networks*, greatest strength and its greatest weakness. It is a strategy that he employs to brilliant effect in his reading of Heidegger, and anyone who has endured the lofty pronouncements of Heideggerians casually dismissing the merely ontic concerns of empirical investigation cannot fail to warm to it. Indeed, that Harman can defend a form of philosophical actualism *via* Heidegger is a delightful irony for anyone who has tired somewhat of clever textual



play and fatalistic historicist pronouncements about the end of this or the end of that to which Heideggerians can be prone. However, the decision taken in *Prince of Networks* to neglect the myriad empirical divagations of Latour's work in order to focus on what Harman takes to be the guiding principles of his metaphysics is a more difficult translation.

To abstract out *the* metaphysics of actor-network theory is a bold move, which will hopefully shock a good many social scientists (and it is not without an ally-recruiting effect all of its own), yet to focus so resolutely on basic principles ignores many of the peculiarly and properly *mundane* empirical issues, particularly those revolving around reflexivity that Latour the social scientist evinces. Whilst it is certainly true that metaphysics could and should be able to talk about anything and everything from distant galaxies and subatomic particles to fairies at the bottom of the garden and nursery rhymes, the fact of the matter is that Latour *does* focus on social scientific issues. Equally, he vindicates an *experimental* metaphysics, about which Harman has surprisingly little to say.

Harman acknowledges that his text has no ambitions to perform the kind of scholarly labour of describing influences, tracing sources, following links and so on that one associates with commentaries, and there

is no reason why the construction of a metaphysics need follow this pathway. However, such labour is undoubtedly a critical element not just in scholarly commentary (philological concerns need not be the sole concern of nerds and book-fanciers), but also in the construction of the self-evidence of terms like ‘metaphysics’. Latour makes persistent reference to the meticulously documented reconstructions of the emergence of philosophy in the work of Barbara Cassin (and more recently to the phenomenal work of Reviel Netz, *The Shaping of Deduction in Greek Mathematics*), both of which emphasize the practices involved in the construction of things that we now take as virtually self-evident. Concept-words like ‘principle’ are black boxes like everything else, and whilst they may be difficult to dissociate from their allies, this is not a decision that *Prince of Networks* takes (although it is certainly willing to consider the difficulties of disengaging Kant’s arguments from their allies, in an amusing thought experiment about Karl Rove).

One can understand Harman’s reticence to engage in these issues: after all, it was disregard for textual niceties that he deployed against the Heideggerians to such good effect in *Tool-Being*. And in any case, why should one bother tracing the provenance of an argument, a concept or a word, when you are merely

concerned to avail yourself of the force it has acquired over twenty-five centuries of philosophical (and non-philosophical) history?

However, a closer consideration of such matters – along with a more nuanced engagement with Latour’s Whitehead (the importance for the latter of negative pretensions, the irreducible role conferred on ‘societies’ in his metaphysics, and the indissociability of both empirical and rational considerations in the construction of a conceptual scheme) – might have cast more light on Latour’s work and some of the genuinely puzzling things that he says. Equally, it might have allowed for a more nuanced discussion of his recent invocations of notions like that of *plasma* as a way of thinking about the ‘reserve army’ of actants absent from the ‘articulated social world of relations’.

However, *Prince of Networks* is an excellent book and the concerns expressed here are tangential to its stated aims. Harman is an astute thinker and a witty writer and we can be glad that his singular philosophical trajectory has brought him into such close orbit with Latour. It will be interesting to see how Latour’s own book on metaphysics (rumoured to be in preparation) will deal with the issues that Harman raises.

**Andrew Goffey**

## Orthographic ageism

Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 2: Disorientation*, trans. Stephen Barker, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2009. 267 pp., £25.50 pb., 978 0 8047 3014 3.

Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out*, trans. David Barison, Daniel Ross and Patrick Crogan, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2009. 93 pp., £17.95 pb., 978 0 8047 5869 7.

The first volume of Bernard Stiegler’s *Technics and Time*, *The Fault of Epimetheus* (1994; trans. 1998), was quickly recognized as an ambitious work that synthesized deconstruction, Heidegger’s existential analytic, André Leroi-Gourhan’s anthropology, and media/technology studies. Stiegler opened his multi-volume project by asserting that technics was the ‘unthought’ of philosophy and that philosophers had failed to recognize that humans are necessarily prosthetic beings. Because of the ‘de-fault of origin’ that left humanity without qualities, the essence of humanity is to be always outside of itself, to be always already supplemented by technics. Through the prehistoric co-emergence and structural coupling of humanity and technics, humanity has become a unique form of life that evolves through means other than life: the

evolution of its ‘programs’ has been transferred from genetic memory (which is now relatively stabilized) to ‘epiphylogenetic’ memory, or technics. A *transductive* relationship binds together humanity and technics so neither can exist without the other, resulting in human evolution taking the form of the endless negotiation of socio-genesis and techno-genesis, the former ‘re-doubling’ and re-appropriating the developments of the latter.

Over the course of *The Fault of Epimetheus*, Stiegler established a formidable philosophical position from which he could fault virtually any philosopher for failing to recognize the default of humanity, the fact that technics is originary. Stiegler concluded the book with an exemplary reading of Heidegger, demonstrating that Dasein’s mode of access to the past and

therefore mode of anticipation of the future was always already determined by technics. According to Stiegler, Heidegger's attempt to secure an 'authentic temporality' for Dasein fails, and its failure illustrates that any analysis of temporality 'must take into account the prosthetic specifics conditioning access to the already-there'. *Technics and Time 2: Disorientation* concludes with a similar philosophical critique, this time of Husserl's *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*. Reversing Husserl's efforts to protect the immediacy of the transcendental ego's 'living present', Stiegler argues that primary retention and secondary recall are 'contaminated' by what he terms 'tertiary memory', the technical memory of that which one has not lived. Capitalism is therefore able to exploit the synthesis of retentional finitude by producing industrial temporal objects that coincide with the flux of consciousness and homogenize the criteria for memory's selection and recall. Stiegler's reading of Husserl has already attracted a number of criticisms (from Mark Hansen, Jean-Michel Salanskis and John Leche, among others), but it remains a compelling recovery of a philosopher who is far too often summarily dismissed for his idealism or undeconstructed metaphysics. Yet in the chapters that lead up to that reading, *Disorientation* operates on more empirico-historical terrain, tracking *how* human consciousness and temporality have been prosthetically synthesized throughout history. Surveying the emergence of writing and the transition to analogic and numeric media, Stiegler offers a 'history of the supplement' that takes the form of broad generalizations about different eras of media. As a result, however, *Disorientation* comes perilously close to repeating info-age clichés about the deleterious impact of new media on society, and Stiegler's techno-deconstructive method reveals its inherent limitations when applied to the particulars of media history.

One of the first tasks of *Disorientation* is to establish the distinction between *phonological* and *orthographic* writing (though the former is always also the latter) and to identify the specificity of orthographic writing within the history of arche-writing. Reactivating grammatology's quasi-foundational problem of phonological writing, mere mention of which may scare off those with little patience for Derrida's fixation on language, Stiegler opens up a new horizon for deconstruction that should be of general interest. According to Stiegler, deconstruction's effort to expose phonological writing's by-now-familiar 'metaphysics of presence' (the simulation of *phonē*, self-presence of voice) and Derrida's desire to

make the notion of arche-writing irreducible to any empirical case of writing have blocked recognition of the specificity of orthographic (from *orthos*, right) *exactitude*. The novelty of linear, alphabetic, orthographic writing 'is the exactitude of the *recording* of the voice rather than the exactitude of the recording of the *voice*'. In fact, phonological presence is merely a reality effect derived from the exactitude of orthographic inscription. Because the dependence of the phonological on the orthographic leads to their confusion, Stiegler paradoxically begins his investigation of writing by discussing photography, which, without any phonological tendencies, exactly records the past as past. Stiegler's readings of Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and Fellini's film *Intervista* are not exactly revelatory, but the detour into photography and cinema at least makes immediately clear that his investigation of writing has consequences that reach beyond writing in a restricted sense.

Stiegler derives the question of exactitude from Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences* and 'The Origin of Geometry', two texts that also guided Derrida's early works. (Stiegler's intervention might be understood as an internal reorientation of deconstruction through a return to those texts whose reading was at the 'origin' of Derrida's programme.) Husserl described the *construction* of ideal geometric objects from the fluctuating and approximate shapes of empirical intuition. Yet the ideality of geometry's objects could not be assured until they were 'sedimented' in written language. The exact inscription of ideal objects made them available for inspection at other times and places, generating a process of 'communitization' through which other geometers could reactivate – but always with a difference – the original intentional meaning of geometry's objects. For Stiegler, this process of communitization and différent reactivation of meaning should be extended to all of orthographic writing. According to Stiegler, iterability – the ability of a text to be legibly repeated in the absence of its sender and any determinable addressee – is only fully accomplished through the reification and decontextualizing that characterize orthographic writing, though all writing tends toward such iterability. But the iterability of orthographic writing is paradoxical. The certitude made possible by the ability to re-access the exact inscription opens up incertitude. Since neither the original nor any context of reading can ever be repeated, with orthographic writing the 'textual experience arises from the principle of identity as marked by *différance*'. In other words, greater exactness produces greater potential for variation, or 'identity (re)produces difference'.

Stiegler titles his chapter on writing 'The Orthographic Age', but it might equally well have been named 'The Golden Age', since the subsequent account in *Disorientation* of the rise of new forms of analogic and numeric media narrates the history of the decline of 'literal' *différance*. Addressing everything from real-time broadcasting to cognitive science to genetic engineering, Stiegler paints a picture of a society in which the suppression of temporal delay, ethnic and individual differences, and even (the effects of) *différance* itself has progressively weakened the capability of humanity to 're-appropriate' the effects of techno-genesis. Whereas the deferred temporality and *différent* identity of writing made possible *knowledge*, the real-time capabilities and industrial ownership of new forms of media favour the ever-faster production of unrepeatable *information*. Writing generated active participation and encouraged individuation because it required a 'minimal reciprocity that connected the reader of a text with its author, namely, that they share a techno-logic competency'. Analogic and numeric technologies instead sever that relationship, setting centralized and specialized media production against a passive 'media consumerism' that consists of only the purchasing power needed to buy output devices. Most dramatically, the transmission of information at near the speed of light transforms the conditions of 'event-ization', destroying locality by making what happens 'there' seem to instantaneously happen 'everywhere' and eliminating any discernible delay between an event's recording, transmission and reception. Stiegler pessimistically concludes that new media technologies threaten to suppress *différance*, or at least to reduce it to a scale below the threshold of human perception.

Stiegler's diagnosis of the situation of contemporary media will appear all too familiar to many readers. Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry, Marshall McLuhan's infamous definition of the media as 'extensions' of man's nervous system (formulated around the same time as André Leroi-Gourhan, whom Stiegler excessively quotes in *Disorientation*, argued that technics is the 'exteriorization' of man's nervous system), and Paul Virilio's apocalyptic descriptions of the effects of 'light time' all make their way, either implicitly or explicitly, into *Disorientation*. Of course Stiegler reconfigures all of these ideas to account for the default of humanity (Adorno and Horkheimer even receive an explicit critique in the as-yet-untranslated third volume of *Technics and Time*), but one would expect more detailed engagements with discrepant forms of contemporary media from the

founder of the group *Ars Industrialis* and former director of the experimental music centre IRCAM. A more serious problem is whether deconstruction can serve – as Stiegler wishes it to – as a foundation for these kinds of critiques of media culture. In the interview between Derrida and Stiegler that is transcribed in *Echographies of Television*, Derrida was willing to admit that there are different 'modalities' of *différance*. But, in general, Derrida deflected Stiegler's assertions about the radical difference of new media, arguing that *différance* is still at work in real-time technologies and that the feeling of 'no future' (a punk slogan which Stiegler is fond of repeating) still involves an opening to the future.

Interestingly, Stiegler relies less strongly upon deconstruction in *Acting Out*, a small volume whose translation accompanies and might serve as an introduction to *Disorientation*. In the two short pieces collected in *Acting Out*, Stiegler persuasively makes use of Gilbert Simondon's theory of the co-individuation of the *I* and *We* (which has not received adequate recognition due both to the lack of translations and to Deleuze's specific assimilation of it) to support his analysis of contemporary disorientation and to explain his discovery of the vocation of philosophy while in prison serving a sentence for armed robbery. Stiegler claims his time in prison was 'spent in philosophical *practice*, in *experimental* phenomenology, and in passage to the limits of phenomenology'. This biographical 'passage' *through* phenomenology is not to be underestimated. Indeed, the continuous negotiation of the transcendental and empirical throughout Stiegler's philosophy is reminiscent of Husserl's investigations in *Ideas*, which occurred prior to Husserl's dogmatic equation of the phenomenological method with idealism. The solitude of incarceration, Stiegler claims, led him to 'deduce' the phenomenological *epokhe*, the isolation of the transcendental ego from belief in the world. But rather than opening up an infinite field of transcendental experience to be studied, the *epokhe* revealed to Stiegler only the default of humanity: the fact that there is no 'interior' milieu without the constitution of an 'exterior' one. Stiegler writes therefore that he strove to reconstitute the world through the disciplined cultivation of the signifying practices of reading and writing. Far from being a self-indulgent memoir, this narrative of individuation explains why Stiegler so fervently attacks contemporary media culture, offering hope for the development of that critique in future volumes of *Technics and Time*.

**Brian Rajski**

# You've been framed

Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Verso, London, 2009. viii + 193 pp., £14.99 hb., 978 1 84467 333 9.

Tarik Kochi, *The Other's War: Recognition and the Violence of Ethics*, Birkbeck Law Press, London, 2009. 278 pp., £70.00 hb., 0 41548 270 4.

Judith Butler's book has one of the strangest titles for a book ever. Not strange in itself, that is, but strange in that one might be led to believe from the title that the book is about war. A couple of formulations in the book even suggest that this might once have been part of Butler's intention: she claims that we might need to rethink freedom from coercion and formulate a sexual politics in the context of a pervasive critique of war, and that this might help reorient the Left beyond the liberal antinomies on which it currently founders. Yet the book itself is far from offering even the rudiments of such a pervasive critique. In fact, the dominant theme, if any can be found, is in the idea of the 'framing' in the title. Even then, the book falls short.

Beginning with a discussion of 'frames of recognition', a discussion which centres on precariousness and has little to say about war, Butler suggests that frames are constructed around one's deeds. In particular, and playing on the other meaning of 'to be framed', a frame is constructed such that one's guilty status becomes the viewer's inevitable conclusion. Later in the book this is used to make sense of the photographs of torture produced during the war on terror, yet the point that is ultimately made is hardly new or original: that the photos were 'framed' in such a way and that through this framing the state works on the field of perception and representability. In other words, a long account of 'framing' leads to little more than the rather well-known point that the state seeks to structure interpretation.

This tendency to dress up an argument that barely goes beyond stating the obvious occurs again and again, so much so that one wonders if a footnote or two might have gone missing from the book. 'We are at least partially formed through violence', Butler tells us, as though this hasn't been clear since – take your pick, according to taste – Marx, or Hobbes or Machiavelli, or Plato. 'Very often, we do not see that the ostensibly "domestic" issues are inflected by the foreign policy issues', Butler suggests, managing to ignore a few decades of left work in international relations and international political economy. 'To be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state', Butler claims,

failing either to reference the essentially Lockean nature of this 'dilemma' or to admit to holding on to this particular liberal antinomy.

Given these weaknesses, it's hard to know quite what the point of this book is, exactly. One chapter, 'Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time', is reprinted from the *British Journal of Sociology*, where it appeared with responses from five other people. Butler's rejoinder to the responses, in the following issue of the *BJS*, appears here as a chapter on 'Non-Thinking in the Name of the Normative'. Yet as a chapter in this book, without the original responses in the *BJS*, it makes little sense. Worse, the only part of the chapter that speaks to the intended theme of the book as a whole, namely a (mild) critique of Talal Asad's book *On Suicide Bombing*, is in fact a section which did not appear in Butler's original rejoinder.

Symptomatic of the lack of clarity concerning the book's central purpose is the number of rhetorical questions that appear again and again through the text, with some rhetorical questions actually containing more than one question. Over just four pages alone (83 to 86) I counted fifteen. One is tempted to respond with a version of that item of 1980s' corporate bullshit directed at workers who bring their bosses problems when they should be bringing solutions: 'Don't give me questions, Judith, give me answers.'

What 'answers' do come are far from helpful. Chapter 1 suggests that 'aggression can and must be separated from violence ... and there are ways of giving form to aggression that work in the service of democratic life, including "antagonism" and discursive conflict, strikes, civil disobedience, and even revolution.' The opportunity to say any more about a potential revolution that is aggressive yet not violent is passed over. In the final chapter, however, Butler expresses her 'doubt that non-violence can be a principle'. This is sustained through the claim that non-violence involves an 'aggressive vigilance over aggression's tendency to emerge as violence'. So: aggression and violence are to be distinguished, but non-violence is not the principle to be held. Yet because aggression has a tendency to emergence as violence we have to have an aggressive vigilance over aggression.

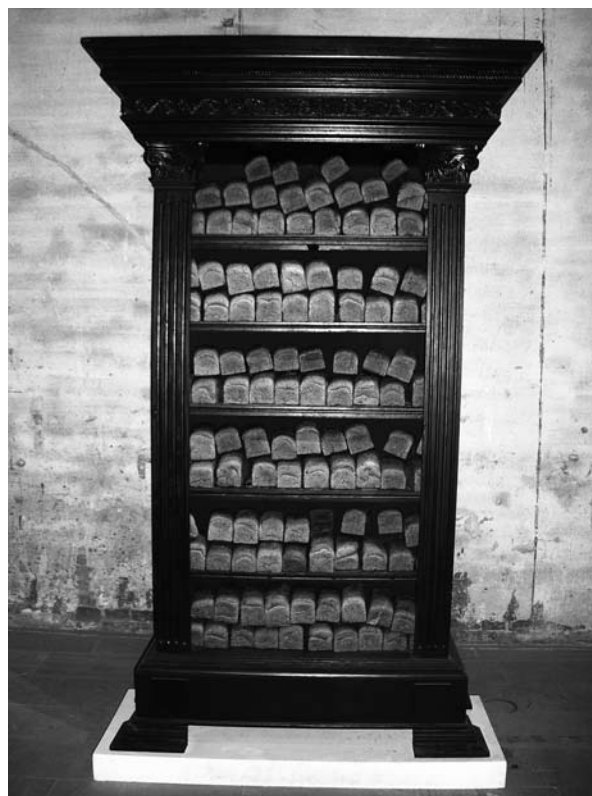
One of the issues flagged early in Butler's book is recognition: 'the point will be to ask how norms operate to produce certain subjects as "recognizable" persons', despite the fact that 'precariousness itself cannot be properly recognized'. Yet the category is not really utilized in what remains of the book. In contrast, where Butler raises recognition only to let it drop, Tarik Kochi uses the category as the starting point of a detailed, lengthy and critical interrogation of several standard positions and major thinkers in what passes as 'war studies' and military-political thought.

The strength of Kochi's book lies in its attempt to connect war as understood in the traditions of military thinking or strategic studies with a more general account of the social violence of capital in general and imperialism in particular. The early chapters thereby critique a variety of ways of thinking juridically and morally about war. Understood as various ways of 'ordering' war, these accounts have a tendency to legitimize certain types of state violence and delegitimize other, non-state forms of violence. In making this argument Kochi takes up and challenges the work of thinkers from Vitoria through to Habermas, and situates his challenge in both the particular context of the war on terror and the wider context of the failure of international organizations to bring about anything approaching the 'peace' they claim to desire. In so doing, Kochi teases out the ways in which the criticisms of war made by the legal and moral thinkers in question are always undermined by their simultaneous justifications for certain types of 'legal' or 'moral' wars.

In contrast to the juridical and moral ordering of war, Kochi engages what he calls the political ordering and disordering of war, using Hegel's ethics of recognition as a stepping stone to move from his critique of the 'classic' thinkers and on to the work of Marx, Lenin, Schmitt and Benjamin. One omission here, however, is the work of Ernst Bloch, whose insights into the history of natural law theory permeate Kochi's earlier chapters but who fades from view once Kochi starts articulating his own account of war. Nonetheless, his work on and with these thinkers allows him to read Marxism both within the tradition of thinking about war and also very much against it. On this view, war needs to be understood not just in terms of state violence, as happens in both the consensus that has built up around the Westphalian model and the Clausewitzian assumptions that still permeate so much of the thinking about war, and much more in terms of a global intra-state civil war. Through Marx, the justification of state violence in terms of the traditional

notions of sovereignty or ethical life is reformulated via an account of global economic relations, thereby 're-framing' (there it is again, this time Kochi's) the concept of war as class struggle. It is precisely *this* war, Kochi suggests, that better explains why political ideas are always already militarized, and it is also very much *this* war that proves Marxism's more general relevance to political thinking about war beyond its supposed stock-in-trade contribution to guerrilla warfare.

As a provocation this is powerful, and Kochi's book deserves the kind of wide readership that its publisher's price tag seems designed to preclude. However, it is undermined a little by Kochi's closing position, which gives up any account of war as class violence and class violence as war in favour of an ethics of Others. In his final chapters he outlines a 'praxis of recognition' as the basis for a judgement on war. Such an attitude 'involves suspending the constant demand to condemn the other's violence and instead engage in the effort of recognizing the ethics of the other's war'. But how this connects with or develops the argument about the social violence of capital is not made clear. Worse, there is a danger that it could be used against the very political implications of Kochi's argument as a whole. The danger might best be illustrated with comments made by the military historian Michael Howard in his work on war and the liberal conscience, first published in 1978, which Kochi does not discuss despite liberalism being a constant target in his own book. Against the American practice of 'dehumanizing' the enemy



in the Cold War and Vietnam, Howard encourages treating the enemy in a more ‘humanized’ fashion as a figure with ‘fears, perceptions, interests and difficulties all of his [*sic*] own’. Howard is well known as a deeply conservative specimen of the generally conservative tribe of military historians, yet such a comment resonates with Kochi’s recognition of otherness and might well hint at a rather conservative use of the idea of precariousness. As well as being a hint as to the fundamental tension in Kochi’s work, this potential to rethink the enemy in terms of an ethical other in a variety of political ways is also a useful reminder of the more general danger in all moves from politics to ethics: that an intended political radicalism runs the risk of being turned into an ethical conservatism.

**Mark Neocleous**

## Black meteorology

Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2009. 109 pp., £9.95 pb., 978 1 58435 072 9.

Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver first becomes aware of Laputa when it occludes the sun, enveloping him in its strange shadow. The levitating island, kept aloft by means of a magnetic lodestone at its core, is a kind of parodic New Atlantis, an aristocratic society of scientists and their balloon-carrying retainers who are sustained by the tributes of those unfortunate enough to live below. If these are withheld, so Gulliver learns, Laputa will hover above the offending region, turning itself into a climatological weapon that prevents sunlight and rain reaching the ground, thus causing famine and impoverishment below. Fast-forward now to 1996 and we find a Pentagon-produced paper titled ‘Weather as Force Multiplier: Owning the Weather in 2025’ that envisions a future in which the meteorological milieux of battlezones and enemy territories are shaped, manipulated, and indeed designed to military advantage. Recently there has been much media coverage of geo-engineering proposals put forward as possible responses to climate change, such as those discussed in the just-published report by the Royal Society (‘Geo-engineering the Climate: Science, Governance and Uncertainty’). These typically involve scenarios such as the technological production of clouds to reflect solar radiation away from the earth’s surface. But it will come as no surprise that projects of weather domination or design serving other interests – and

intended for more Laputa-like habitat or environment destruction – are also well under way.

Laputa’s ecological terrorism does not appear in Peter Sloterdijk’s short book *Terror from the Air*, although it might well have done. First published in 2002 as *Luftbeben* (literally ‘airquake’), the book is marked by 9/11 and its aftermath but is also closely tied to Sloterdijk’s extensive and long-standing work on atmospherics (presented in his *Sphären* trilogy). Although Laputa might look like an early-eighteenth-century presentiment of atmoterrorism, Sloterdijk identifies the latter’s primal scene in the release of chlorine gas on 22 April 1915 at Ypres, when it was used as a weapon against French-Canadian troops. With this, the hitherto principally ballistic technologies of combat – which implied precise spatial targeting and so, the argument runs, were able to keep alive something of the military honour system predicated upon the struggle of individual protagonists – were transformed in an environmental direction with the effect that the attack on the soldier became in the first instance an attack on the ability of his immediate atmospheric milieu to sustain life. As it is an aerial rather than a punctual weapon, the calculations attendant on the use of gas involved wind speed, direction and concentration, while its immersive enveloping characteristics negated the simple topographical defences of ballistic-era warfare. Defence was no longer a matter of getting below firing lines, but rather of entering a protectively sealed environment, that of the gas mask, which Sloterdijk argues thus represents the Ur-form of air-conditioning, at least in its modern sense as an optimized breathable interior sealed against a malign exterior environment.

For Sloterdijk the gas attack at Ypres marked not just the beginning of atmoterrorism, but also the beginning of the twentieth century itself in so far as what he claims to be the three key features of the era – its ‘operative criteria’ – were interwoven in it: environmental thinking, product design and terrorism. The use of gas as a weapon supposed and demanded the idea of an environment which it both targeted and contaminated, while the refinement of the properties and performance of both the gas itself and its delivery system was the task of product design, initiating a line of atmotechnic engineering endeavours that the book traces through pesticide production to the gas chambers to the ‘air design’ of contemporary scented shopping environments in which the atmosphere is literally infused by commodity marketing. Terror and terrorism emerge in the argument in what are claimed to be particularly twentieth-century forms in that they ‘pass through a theory of the environment’ and are

directed towards it. Yet at the same time, despite this distinction, all terrorism for Sloterdijk will in fact turn out to be environmental or atmoterrorism insofar as what he describes as its 'basic idea' consists in the targeting of the enemy's environment – that is, in the making-dangerous of a milieu. In a general sense one can see the argument that Sloterdijk is trying to make here, but the way in which the concept of terrorism – whatever the book says about its 'precise definition' – is tethered to twentieth-century atmototechnologies seems unduly restricted and limited, and the argument circular.

In Sloterdijk's account, atmoterrorism is predicated upon a constant unfolding or breaking open of latency, whereby previously unseen, unrecognized or concealed 'background' conditions of life become suddenly exposed and problematized. Thus modern technical manipulation comes to extend into atmospheric media, and the prior innocent and unquestioned relation to air is both thematized and becomes the subject of an unhappy and anxious consciousness. Here Sloterdijk, who relates Being-in-the-world to Being-in-the-air, parallels Heidegger's 'absence of homeland' (*Heimatlosigkeit*) to the denaturalization of air and the loss of its tutelage.

Research and development driven by atmoterroristic interests result in what the book describes as a 'black meteorology' under whose pressure air and atmosphere become for the first time, Sloterdijk suggests, topics of explicit consideration for a range of concerns from aesthetics to politics to medicine and beyond. But the argument seems much too tightly drawn at this point and many of the historical complexities, which Sloterdijk at other times seems to acknowledge, are sacrificed to an overly insistent epochal rhetoric. Air, atmosphere and, indeed, breathing, have an ancient, intricate and manifest cultural history. Counter-examples flood in here: one thinks, for instance, of the miasma theory of disease, which presumed that contagion was carried by foul air; or of the Pneumatic Institution, established to investigate the therapeutic effects of gases, whose 'chemical superintendent' after 1798, Humphrey Davy, had his friends – including Samuel Taylor Coleridge – experiment with the inhalation of nitrous oxide; or of the atmospheric preoccupations of Ruskin's work, such as the pneumatological aesthetics of his idiosyncratic study of the Athena myth, 'Queen of the Air', or his late lectures on 'The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century'. It is hard to see how any of these cases can be comfortably related to the terroristic model set out in the book. Likewise, encounters with dangerous and unbreathable milieux led to examples of air-

conditioning's encapsulative principle earlier than the gas-mask – Cornelis Drebbel's submarine, for instance, which was to be seen on the Thames in the early 1620s and on which James I apparently travelled. That said, something of the sub-marine does, however, surface in Sloterdijk's wry account of Salvador Dalí's 1936 lecture at the New Burlington Galleries in London. To give this he appeared, as an 'ambassador from the depths' (of the unconscious), dressed in a deep-sea diving suit in which – to great effect upon the audience and to Dalí's subsequent delight – he was nearly asphyxiated.

Embedded in this book is a call for a meteorological turn in cultural theory in response to the challenges posed by the fast-accumulating developments in atmospherics that have thus far outpaced it. As atmosphere becomes an ever-increasing preoccupation of culture – as a source of anxiety and thing to be modified, and thus subjectivized, by means of design – so it becomes a leitmotif of its interpretation: as Sloterdijk writes, 'Cultures are collective conditions of immersion in air and sign systems.' Certainly there can be no doubt that the politics, production and stabilization of atmospheres will be key issues and pressure points of the immediate future, and Sloterdijk's often brilliantly elaborated reflections provide crucial philosophical resources for thinking about them. The atmospheric and weather-mediating aspirations of earlier visionary projects – such as Buckminster Fuller's proposal to cover midtown Manhattan with a geodesic dome – have been subject to extraordinary escalations of scale and degree. On the one hand we have the expansion into climate design and engineering at the level of the planet, and on the other we have a kind of hyperbolic intensification of air-conditioning that results in a radical differential between adjacent conditions that is itself produced as a consumer attraction: recent development proposals in the Gulf provide exemplary cases of this – Dubai's 'Sunny Mountain Ski Dome', which, although now on hold, was to contain an artificial mountain range and a revolving ski-slope together with other, as the official website puts it, 'Arctic experiences'; or the 'Hydropolis' underwater hotel with its bubble-shaped suites, also planned for Dubai. At the same time there appears across broad and diverse areas of cultural production to be a drive towards ever more immersive – and in this sense atmospheric – forms, a movement supported and promoted by contemporary technologies of representation such as high-definition television or the innovative 3-D system used by James Cameron in his soon-to-be-released film *Avatar*. Typically descriptions of what audiences can expect change



to imply participation rather than spectatorship: that is, being inside something that, in turn, is characteristically described as 'another world'.

While the importance of the study of culturally produced atmospheres and their implications (their conditions of production, the way they are sustained, their effects, and so on) to which Sloterdijk directs us is, I think, incontrovertible; what I understand to be the other side of his cultural meteorology, which would be the atmospheric interpretation of culture, seems to me to raise some questions. Specifically, I wonder to what extent the atmospheric trope or thought-image – no matter how broken down into 'atmospheric multiplicities' it becomes – builds-in in advance a tendency towards interpretive totalization and closure in so far as it will always involve ideas of envelopment. Gaps, fractures, breaks, slippages or destructurings tend not to be part of the language of atmospheres. Sloterdijk's characterization of cultures as conditions of immersion can make them sound akin to encapsulated and air-conditioned entities. While this may be an appropriate diagnosis of the contemporary cultural condition, at the same time it can also look like a result of the theoretical model itself.

Mark Dorrian

## Prison notebooks

Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2009. 232 pp., £16.95 hb., 978 0 26201 253 9.

The 1891 introduction of the Architect's Registration Bill to the House of Commons sparked a debate in *The Times* over the merit of that profession's regulation. Asking would-be architects to pass examinations and secure assurances that they would follow a code of professional conduct offered the public a safeguard from a range of unscrupulous behaviours not unknown, then as now, among the construction sector's more artful and inventive members. The counter-argument was one that called for a form of public criticism, as opposed to institutional governance, by means of which architects would speak openly about the work of other architects, thereby regulating the work of poor architects through a series of more-or-less natural exclusions. Bad architecture would be named as such, and an informed public would be better aware of the terms under which architects judged the work of their peers; good architecture would be met with public

praise framed by the didactic mission of educating the citizenry. Strong criticism and open discussion would offer a more transparent and organic form of control than the rules of any governing body could enforce.

As attractive as the latter option may sound, as we know, or can surmise, the Bill passed (see Deborah van der Plaats's essay 'Architectural Ignorance and Public Indifference', *Fabrications* 2009). Architecture followed the path of legislated professionalization alongside medicine and the law, and this gave rise to many of the conditions in contemporary architecture against which Jeremy Till rails. *Architecture Depends* is an impassioned and very personal plea for a culture of contingency in architecture: an architecture of soft disciplinary and professional edges, of social and civil relevance, of technical and ecological common sense, of breakable habits and disposable heroes. Till's architecture is a practice informed by conditions in the world that have little if anything to do with the things that architects have been taught to think about by schools and tradition. He rightly resists describing what that practice (or education) might look like, but I'd be surprised if his own work as an architect and educator did not somehow model this contingent architecture.

I have never heard Till speak, but I can imagine that reading *Architecture Depends* is a little like following his lectures. He writes as if for a crowded room. Before an audience bewildered by the problem of how contemporary architecture came to be what it is, he unpacks his library (which includes a good number of books by Zygmunt Bauman alongside the classics) to demonstrate how little architecture understands its place in the world, and how much it would benefit from opening the doors wide to that knowledge of society and politics that it systematically overlooks or defiantly – to borrow Till's tone – sets aside. In its own way (and this book is super-idiosyncratic along the lines of, for example, Paul Shephard's meditations on architectural themes), Till's volume contributes to the current wave of literature reflecting on the conditions of architecture's claims on disciplinary or artistic autonomy and the conditions under which that autonomy is undermined. Like many of those books and articles, especially of the critical/post-critical debate, it returns us to the 1970s. Till does not do this explicitly, but his target is the same monumental legacy of modernism against which postmodernism set itself; his criticisms are levelled at a monolithic legacy of Vitruvian order; and his discomfort is with the perpetuation of a model of architectural education and practice that survived unscathed from the nineteenth century – indeed, which

despite a few significant makeovers remains in essence about induction into an artistic and professional circle, and about transmission of knowledge from master to student. Till shares the understandably common distaste for architecture's postmodern moment – the formal plays and eclectic historicism – but, like so many who are now drawn to it with the benefit of hindsight, he looks to see what might be recovered from the 1970s in aid of the present return of an aesthetic neo-modernism that out-stripes any respectable zebra – neo-functionalist, neo-regionalist, neo-traditionalist, neo-expressionist, neo-baroque, and so forth.

To the extent that this is Till's ambition, I applaud him for it. I side with Manfredo Tafuri's assessment, to which Till refers, that architecture sets itself up as a model prison. Whether one prefers to think of architecture in strong terms, as a discipline, art or profession, or in productively weak terms, as a practice, discourse or field, the exercise yard of this prison is witness to all manner of gymnastics. Be its fence made of chain link or concrete blocks, a prison it remains. Till argues that more architects should apply for parole, more should welcome visitors (and most should hope for cakes secreting files and chisels with which they might slowly and daringly work towards escape). He calls for architects to get over architecture, to understand how irrelevant most ideas about architecture are for the realities of architectural practice and production.

That said, it is important to understand that this book is not written for outsiders. It is a prison diary, written for other prisoners: students of architecture, those who teach them, and those who have moved from the university to the world beyond. Vitruvius and Le Corbusier are transformed into giant mallets with which to beat home the lessons that order and the modernist hero have run their course and shown themselves to be mere husks kept alive by those members of architectural culture who need them. The problems he confronts are largely internal to the way architecture is taught and practised. Even more specifically, Till's beef is with modern architecture's legacy in Britain: with education, with the rhetorical devices instilled in and exercised by architects young and old, with form, with academe, with the establishment of which (we learn, again and again) he is reluctantly a part. There is a great deal of self-deprecating humour and a good number of instances in which we learn how Till has stumbled his way through his career to this point – well-intentioned, often confused, but nonetheless moved by a sense that architecture qua architecture was only ever part of the answer to the problems of

the contemporary professional practice and education of architects. These become rhetorical devices in their own turn, of course, and for their constant repetition we become all too aware of them.

Till concludes with an expression of hope that I find naive, namely that architects might let go of their hang-ups of their own accord, realize the opportunities outside of the traditional bastions of a formally regulated architectural practice, behave ethically in the term's proper sense, and welcome entropy along with time. He writes of this early on in the book: 'My hunch is that architecture is the contingent discipline par excellence, and if we can deal with rather than deny that contingency, architecture may be seen as an exemplary form of transformative practice and lessons as to how to cope with contingency may be learned from its practice.' His proviso is that 'architects will deserve this attention only if they give up their delusions of autonomy and engage with others in their messy, complex lives'. Historically, however, architecture has not yet done this, even when, as in the past, it was more relevant and central to those things that mattered beyond architecture: religion, society, family and community, commerce, and so forth. Change happens from without, and those who make buildings and (since the fifteenth century) who work with ideas about architecture, take those extra-artistic and extra-disciplinary cues or move aside. This is not to suggest that architects and those who think about architecture are (entirely) at the mercy of external factors and forces, but the mandate for fundamental and widespread change is inevitably delivered to the profession.

My main criticism of *Architecture Depends* is not, then, with regard to its central ideas, but with regard to its role in the present-day scope of a combative critical culture concerned with architecture. This is, of course, another legacy of the 1970s, and like historical eclecticism much criticism and critical theory is performed in its own prison yard – connected by an underground tunnel to that of architecture itself. Till is willing to perform his own kinds of gymnastics here, and follows many of the conventions of writing of the later theory moment. He would also have us follow him on a voyage of critical consciousness awaking. I worry that his strongest ideas and most penetrating observations and criticism are watered down by anecdotes, diversions, bibliographical ballast and knot-worrying. I wonder, how would a 30,000-word version of *Architecture Depends* read? And how would it sell? Would more students add it to their shopping cart, take it to school and wave it at their lecturers and tutors? Would those architects who long ago gave up reading academic

books be willing to crack its spine? My hunch is that the book as published will not affect the discussion as it should, that it will be read by academics who agree with it. (World peace? Excellent idea!) I would, however, very much like to be wrong.

Andrew Leach

## Constantinian materialism

John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2009. 416 pp., £18.95 hb., 978 0 262 01271 3.

In this clash between proponent of Catholic ‘radical orthodoxy’ John Milbank and Lacanian Marxist Slavoj Žižek, the startling mastery by Milbank of the recent canon of continental philosophy – alongside the flood of references to an arcane array of medieval thinkers from Meister Eckhart to Nicholas of Cusa – may well throw the unwitting reader out of their comfort zone. Indeed, in a particularly cruel twist, what Milbank excels at is precisely turning in on itself the subversively conservative aspects of Alain Badiou’s and Žižek’s own materialist theology, so that their rejection of contemporary ‘liberal multiculturalist tolerance’ is rendered into a properly conservative advocacy of intolerant, authoritarian paternalism. Or in other words: Milbank takes the recent turn to ‘Paulian materialism’ in some recent continental philosophy and heads off in the direction of an impassioned plea for a return to the Church itself.

In the Milbank–Žižek confrontation, then, the stakes are raised unexpectedly higher than the seemingly obscurantist Christological frame of the discussion would indicate. Milbank has argued elsewhere that with the current weakness of the Left ‘the sort of young person who might once have been Marxist’ can now be turned to religion, and that

many of us are beginning to realize that old socialists should talk with traditionalist Tories. In the face of the secret alliance of cultural with economic liberalism, we need now to invent a new sort of politics which links egalitarianism to the pursuit of objective values and virtues: a ‘traditionalist socialism’ or a ‘red Toryism’.

This marks out, quite simply, one of the great dangers for the Left today: the recuperation of the anti-capitalist critique by those who would turn its emancipatory

mission in on itself, whether that be in the form of respect for Gaia, and a return to pastoral lifestyles; its moral denunciation in reactionary forms of Islamism; or in the noxious traditionalism of aristocrats and ‘Conservatives with a conscience’, to which Milbank’s school of thought is linked, through his student Philip Blond, to David Cameron’s Conservative Party.

Milbank is thus at the centre of *The Monstrosity of Christ*: quite literally – sandwiched between two essays of Žižek’s unending prose – and figuratively, in that even if we might now be familiar with Žižek’s own Christian turn, this text represents something of a ‘coming out’ into the mainstream for Milbank’s ‘radical orthodoxy’. What is ‘radical orthodoxy?’ Much like the Socratic posture that thought points beyond itself, underlying so-called ‘controversies’ such as ‘intelligent design’, where supposedly only the most contemporary insights from molecular genetics reveal its irreconcilability with evolutionary materialism, Milbank’s ‘radical orthodoxy’ uses Žižek’s Lacanian-Hegelian fusion to paint a picture of a secular (inherently Protestant) modernity which has retreated into nihilistic ‘gloom’, originating in the Reformation that he also argues led to the spread of global capitalism, and that his critique positions as a Fall beginning with Luther.

According to Milbank, Protestantism took an entirely contingent wrong turn, which has since been reified in the separation of reason and the transcendent, and the subsequent elimination of the transcendent – of which Hegelian dialectics represents the apotheosis. He asks: ‘Why is it not legitimate to imagine “another” Christian modernity that would be linked to the universal encouragement of mystical openness and productivity, rather than the separation between a forensic faith and an instrumentalizing reason?’ In order to play the philosophical equivalent of the historical genre of ‘What if?’ speculation, it is thus important for him to discredit the teleology of Hegelian dialectics, to which he rightly considers Žižek’s Christian turn to owe the majority of its commitments. On the one hand, this debunking procedure involves undermining the secessionist reading of Christianity, where the Protestant Reformation expresses the necessary dialectical unfolding of the truth of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit); on the other, it has to demonstrate how dialectics themselves are simply a contingent expression of Protestant thought and are inadequate next to the ‘metaxological’ (paradoxical) Catholic conception of the universe.

On the first point Milbank adopts what he calls an ‘Anglo-Saxon empiricist’ critique of the chronology of

Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism to undermine its necessary unfolding; this Žižek correctly dismisses as misunderstanding Hegel's relationship to history. On the second point, Milbank's more substantive and original argument pertains to how dialectics cannot think the infinite and its relation to the finite. Adopting an Anglicized version of the romantic phenomenological imagery of Alain Badiou's *Logics of Worlds*, Milbank asks us to imagine driving through a misty wood in which the mist stands for the univocal and the objects that emerge from the mist stand for the equivocal. In the paradox of how both sustain one another, without mediation, we have the supposedly pre-Reformation Catholic disposition he links – via Eckhart's thought – to the presence of infinitude in finitude. In this way, he can claim that matter is more than inert, 'boring' substance. Moreover: 'Materialist materialism is simply not as materialist as theological materialism.' And in consequence, matter itself proves

gone a step beyond strong correlationists in his refusal of the probabilistic argument for 'hard evidence' or basis. Crucially, if this is the case, then Milbank, more than Meillassoux himself, could be considered the first post-modern strong occasionalist.

For occasionalists – not just Malebranche but also Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Berkeley; some of whom Milbank rejects – God intervenes at every moment in order to connect body/things and mind, thus making possible and sustaining the communication between the cognitive and the non-cognitive. Ultimately, this position entails the ontological assumption that the 'minimally basic' elements of reality exist side by side without any connection of their own with one another. The connection must be, therefore, 'external' (some sort of transcendent ground that need not be empirical itself). Interestingly, this puts Milbank on the same team with Islamic philosophers like Al'Ashari and Al-Ghazali, and Christians like Malebranche and

others. But perhaps more paradoxically, the side-by-side argument is precisely what guides the sceptical empiricism of Hume and his medieval predecessor Nicolas d'Autrecourt. The crux of the matter is that strict occasionalism is impossible (it would result in an utterly indifferent multiplicity of side-by-side elements with no communication whatsoever). This is why every occasionalism has to allow itself a single hypocritical exception to the otherwise widely spread ban on interaction: for Christian



'the eternally paradoxical existence of God as pure relationship'.

Milbank thus offers the argument that a certainty in excess of evidence (empirical and/or ultimately probabilistic) concerns something like recognition of intellectual forms. Not unlike Quentin Meillassoux, Milbank radicalizes empiricism so the complexity of the concrete always already points towards a transcendence which functions as the common medium between non-cognitive/non-reflective being and the mind that receives truth as a gift, and through which truth is transferred and sustained. On the one hand, this makes him a bona fide 'correlationist', and thus vulnerable to the kind of attack developed by Meillassoux; on the other hand, like Meillassoux, Milbank has

and the Muslim philosophers, now including Milbank, that exception is God. And so, in Milbank, God as relation turns out to be God as exception, as residue or 'excess'.

In response to this critical claim Žižek can only clarify: 'for Milbank's Catholic view, the contradiction is that of the opposite poles which coincide in a higher third element encompassing them both, their unknowable Origin and Ground; while for me, as a Hegelian, there is no need for a third term.' This Žižek squares: 'because, for me, there is no transcendent God-Father.' However, we might ask whether Žižek hasn't missed a trick here in simply repeating his Hegelian credentials? For although some of Milbank's theoretical debts to Alain Badiou are neatly tucked out of sight (we know

of them through his exceptionally extensive reading of Badiou's philosophy in a recent article in *Angelaki*, essentially the paradox to which he refers is analogous to that which kick-starts the movement of *Being and Event*. For Badiou, as with the scholastic theologians of the time, Georg Cantor's theory of the transfinite (infinities of infinities) signalled an undermining of God through the collapse of the One, or the absence of a master-set ordering all the sets within. However, for Cantor the 'Absolute infinite' was an inconsistent multiplicity that he related directly as participating as an abstract thought in the 'otherworldly being' in which it was realized fully. Where others saw only the absence of God, Cantor saw only God.

The point is that the paradox of inconsistent multiplicity cannot logically point to the existence or non-existence of God. In the same way, the sole quasi-respectable text of the 'intelligent design' movement, Michael Behe's *Darwin's Black Box*, comes unstuck at this aporia. Even after Behe has made what to a layman appears a convincing critique of how 'irreducibly complex' molecular systems could not arise through standard evolutionary processes, there is no logical movement to positing 'intelligent design'. In fact, Behe rattles through numerous other research paradigms before simply choosing to opt for 'intelligent design' as the one suiting his *a priori* preferences. Milbank's Catholic logic of 'paradox', then, is solely one which creates the possibility to choose to believe in transcendence, not one that in any way creates any logical ground for transcendence; which is why his ontology is frequently argued for in terms of historical, moral and normative criteria, materialist materialism being just 'boring' for example.

We are therefore fully justified in judging Milbank's philosophy in a one-to-one correspondence with the kind of politics he is advocating. When he argues, 'Would it not be more plausible to suppose that one needs to modify paternalism with a greater humility and attentiveness to populist feedback than to remove it altogether?', Žižek rightly shoots back by accusing him of a 'soft fascism'. For what Milbank is harking back to are the days when the Vatican ruled the roost and the paradoxical nature of a reality made us indifferently content to cede authority to an enlightened, paternalistic elite. This is the essence of 'radical orthodoxy' and its political correlate of 'Red Toryism': united in denouncing Marxism, 'terroristic' attempts to better the situation of the exploited and oppressed through collective action, and all forms of emancipatory thought. It is unsurprising, too, that with the dichotomy Milbank establishes between religious

conservatism and secular emancipatory politics, he finds no place for liberation theology: an influential movement that has since the 1968 Medellín Conference been at the forefront of socialist and indigenous movements in Latin America. Indeed, in a debate last year with Enrique Dussell – a prestigious scholar of liberation theology – Milbank was forced to take out of the closet one of those old chestnuts of the medieval Catholicism he so admires. He denounced Dussell with just one word: 'heretic'. The good old days, apparently.

**Nathan Coombs and Oscar Guardiola-Rivera**

## The purloined bible

Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. J.T. Swann, Verso, London and New York, 2009. 304 pp., £14.99 pb., 978 1 84467 394 0.

We are not yet done with the arguments of the 1830s and 1840s; if anything, we have moved backwards. The pressing political need to bring Hegelian idealism back down to earth, to make concrete the universal, whether in the form of humanity as a whole (Feuerbach) or as a class (Marx) meant confronting the relation between religion and the state, forcing the Enlightenment project to apply concretely to the religious and hierarchical forms taken by political and social institutions at every level. 'The criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism' Marx wrote in the Introduction to the 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law'. Today's 'public' debates about religion are a hysterical parody of the concerns of the mid-nineteenth century: Sarkozy issues statements denouncing the niqab (misleadingly referring to it as the burka), despite the fact that perhaps only 700 or so women in France wear it. More seriously, the 'secular' reasoning behind the invasion of Afghanistan (to liberate 'oppressed' Muslim women) and the wars waged against those Muslims at home who don't understand our 'way of life' has brought a particularly impoverished version of the atheism-versus-religion debate to the fore, throwing a glibly invoked Darwin against a purported mass of relentlessly unsubtle fanatics. For all the fervour on both sides, there is very little discussion of what religion means politically, and how to read religious texts in a political context.

Ernst Bloch's *Atheism in Christianity*, originally published in 1968, translated in an abbreviated version

by J.T. Swann in 1972 and reissued in this (sadly) curtailed form by Verso, is a timely corrective to the spectacular and superficial dyad of smug atheism against hardline fanaticism. Offering a suitably complex yet convincing reading of the Bible and Christian motifs, Bloch, above all, is attentive to the question of method. This, too, takes us back to the 1840s. In 1841, the first major fictional detective, C. Auguste Dupin, appeared in Edgar Allan Poe's 'Murders in the Rue Morgue', and Bloch was, in a sense, as much an heir to Poe as to Feuerbach and Co. In a section entitled 'Bible Criticism and Detective Work', he argues that his method aims to 'identify and save the Bible's choked and buried "plebian" element'. But who did the choking and burying? Bloch's detective hermeneutic – *CSI JC*, if you will – uncovers the crime perpetrated against the Bible by 'defied despotism', pointing out the ways in which, historically, there have always been two Bibles: 'A Scripture for the people and a Scripture against the people.' Just as detectives inhabit the mind of the killers they track, by turns empathetic and yet absolutely certain of the iniquity of their quarry, so Bloch, the atheist, can relentlessly pursue signs of a socialist future to come amidst the catechisms and commandments of history's most dogmatically treated text. Atheism thus becomes meta-religion in the name of a politics of the dispossessed: 'only a Christian can be a good atheist' reads Bloch's famous epigram.

The first of the 'Biblical Marxists', as Roland Boer puts it, Bloch provides a critical reading that is on a continuum with his earlier works *Spirit of Utopia* and *The Principle of Hope*, and is thus eschatological from start to (non)finish, the system as a whole akin to, as Jameson puts it, 'an aerolite fallen from space'. But Bloch is not concerned, as Peter Thompson points out in the Introduction, with the 'privatized eschatology' of a figure such as Rudolph Bultmann. The end of time will be collective or it will not be at all. Indeed it is the great unwashed who better understand the subversive pull of scripture than the institutions who try to prevent the contradictions of the text unravelling in a direction that might be deleterious to theology altogether. 'There is only this point', writes Bloch, 'that Church and Bible are not one and the same'. With his emphasis on the book as the anti-hierarchical repository of clues for a new world order, Bloch's most obvious descendant is thus not Badiou (or Žižek), but Rancière, despite what Thompson claims in the introduction (because, among other things, Bloch is not particularly interested in the formal characteristics of fidelity). Bloch's emphasis on the Bible as pedagogical tool – 'In Protestant countries it was even responsible for teaching its followers to

read' – and as emancipatory object is reminiscent of Rancière's claims in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. As Bloch writes: 'both the Bible and fairy-tales are "hoaxes for children and nurse-maids"'. But the common factor ... is rather their closeness to children and to ordinary folk ... The Bible speaks with special directness to the ordinary and unimportant.'

At this point, it might be tempting, as it would be with Rancière too, to point to a distinct lack of class analysis in Bloch's reading. But this would be premature: Bloch's true innovation is to identify the common formal features of the universality of both communism and Christianity, and to use the latter's utopian excess to fill out the positive content of a world to come, '[s]o far', as he puts it, 'as it is, in the end, possible to read the Bible with the eyes of the Communist Manifesto'. It is certainly true that there is typically a wide gap between the concrete nature of communism and the analysis of what it takes to get there, but performing Bloch's own detective method on his own text, it becomes clear, as Boer rightly notes, that Utopia is Bloch's 'codeword' for socialism. Not the far-off dream of heavenly peace, but the concrete emergence in the here-and-now of flashes of another world: 'Man's works against inhumanity, his attempts to achieve Utopia, his plan for what is-not-yet – do they not call for some corresponding factor at the heart of the world?' Why, Bloch asks, is the realm of freedom 'not suddenly there'? If Bloch can be criticized, then it is for claims like these as well as for the related idea that 'there is always an exodus in the world, an exodus from the particular *status quo*'. Bloch's relentless teleology of hope fails to allow for the possibility that there are perhaps times where acknowledging the power of one's enemy means being extremely suspicious of the slightest glimmer of a hope: all that glitters is not gold. Bloch can, despite his dialectical subtlety, be overly optimistic: 'For all its outward pomp, the Roman Empire is as irrelevant and unessential as an overnight stay in an inn which one is going to leave at daybreak', he states casually, but it is not quite clear that the Empire ever ended.

It is in the twin figures of Job and Christ, and not in God the father, that Bloch finds true atheism and concrete, revolutionary utopianism. Christ is both rebel and martyr, transcending the limits of man and the commands of God. For him, Christ is Che rather than Prince of Peace. Bloch, unsurprisingly, makes much of the phrase 'Son of Man'. It is, he states, 'the highest title, and it means that man has got a very long way indeed: he has become a figure of final, all-conquering strength'. The transcendence of Christ is not a question

of going 'beyond' the world, but a subversive hint of a world to come. Bloch's revolutionary humanism can *only* run through Christianity. It is not the negation of religious belief that he is concerned with, as are so many of our current cheerleaders for secular imperialism: 'The Enlightenment ... will be all the more radical when it does not pour equal scorn on the Bible's all-pervading, healthy insight into man.' Job, too, is understood in the context of his humanity: 'it is really in the Book of Job that the great reversal of values begins – the discovery of potency within the religious sphere: that a man can be better, and behave better, than his God.' As in Feuerbach, from whom Bloch nevertheless seeks to distance his rather more intricate reading, Christianity is to be redeemed, but not until we have more fully understood Job's struggle – in other words, not until we have understood how religion both provides insights into oppressed humanity and maintains hope, even in the face of abandonment: 'All really *tested hope* ... and all really *militant optimism*, must go through the ever more searching and destructive experience of the historical process, brought about by the powers of anti-Utopia ranged against those of the Utopia of light.'

Bloch's argument ultimately works in two directions: to convince Christians that their good book is in fact a repository of strategies for revolution, and to convince Marxists that in order to understand the form of universal culture that underpins their own analysis they need first to understand where that universal form came from. It is not that Marxism is a kind of religion, as its glib detractors would have, but that both Marxism and Christianity, on Bloch's reading, are attempts to salvage the utopian in the concrete for all who labour under the mark of oppression. Our age is filled to bursting with those promulgating a kind of moral atheism, in which people are chastised for their 'ignorant' beliefs, but it is Bloch's political atheism that truly could be of use today, and not just for Christianity. Both the New Atheists and those who rail against abortion and gay rights in the name of a 'literal' reading of the Bible would be well advised to rethink their method of reading the text, and, at the same time, look beyond the grim, mortal hope for a world to come towards a better world in the here-and-now, as paradoxically distant as the latter might seem.

**Nina Power**

## Heidegger's doom patrol

Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze and Aesthetics*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2009. 192 pp., £18.95 hb., 978 0 26219 576 8.

Steven Shaviro's book is the second in the series 'Technologies of Lived Abstraction', which, according to its editors Brian Massumi and Erin Manning, aims to explore how, inter alia, the facets of 'thought and body, abstract and concrete, local and global, individual and collective ... come formatively, reverberatively together, if only to form the movement by which they come again to differ.' That Shaviro is well placed to contribute to such debates will be no surprise to those familiar with such essays as his tribute to the band My Bloody Valentine (in the 1997 collection *Doom Patrols*), whose music is said to take place 'neither in the noise itself, nor in the performance, nor even in the bodies and minds of the audience; but somehow in *between* all these'. Nonetheless a book on Whitehead, Kant and Deleuze initially appears to be a surprising addition to the output of this energetic chronicler of postmodern and post-postmodern cultural subversion.

As is made clear in its first chapter, *Without Criteria* is concerned to establish the alternative focus on Kant that Whitehead's post-Kantian philosophy partly

enables to emerge. The essential innovation in this creative re-fecundation *dans le dos* of Kant, already conducted in quite a different register and to quite different ends by Deleuze, is to examine the role of beauty as opposed to that of the sublime in terms of how this concept in particular might speak to our current era. Beauty in Kant's formulation comes into the subject from elsewhere. The essential difference between Kant and Whitehead, when it comes to a reading of this shared conviction, is that while, for Kant, the world emerges from the subject, for Whitehead, by contrast, the subject emerges from the world. It is this 'superject', in Whitehead's terminology, which Deleuze and Guattari find to be so useful in their own account of creation and novelty in *What is Philosophy?* The Whiteheadian subject is renewed by the inputs it receives from the world. Kant, Shaviro argues, had in fact already paved the way for this in the Third Critique where the aesthetic subject does not impose its form on the world. He thus follows Whitehead in wishing to push the *Critique of Judgement* stage centre

in its premiss that affect precedes cognition, but, in what will be a refrain in the remainder of the book, he also seeks to show the ways in which Whitehead extends and radicalizes this Kantian position.

Shaviro's second chapter, 'Abstract Entities and Eternal Objects', begins by concurring with Deleuze regarding the importance of Whitehead's thinking of the event. In his 'flat ontology' there is no ontological difference between physical objects and mental or subjective acts. This essentially non-anthropomorphic and non-anthropocentric metaphysics nonetheless allows a significant place for discordance. Moreover, Whitehead's conception of the event recognizes no special privileges for the human or the rational. First, despite the model of *prehension*, with its suggestion of synthesis and incorporation, whereby one actual occasion takes up and responds to another, the responses allow the novelty which ensues to be disjunctive and affirmative of the difference between the complex precursive 'base' (or, one might venture, 'bass') and the emergent articulation. Second, we cannot separate the question of *how* we know from that of *what* we know.

The second half of the chapter turns to Kant and specifically to that which separates Kantian from Whiteheadian categories. Whereas for Kant these are universal and intrinsic to the mind which imposes them, Whitehead's categories are immanent to the data out of which they arise by abstraction. A strikingly original section sets out to show the ways in which Kant's transcendental realm prepares the ground for Deleuze's 'virtual'. What Shaviro calls the 'incorporeal special effects' formulated in the concept of the event adapted by Deleuze from the Stoics in *Logic of Sense* are very close, he asserts, to Whitehead's generative conditions or final causes. Hence Shaviro argues that we can substitute Deleuze's virtual for Whitehead's potential. Even the surprising 'eternal objects' of Whitehead are not actual entities. The chapter ends with a Deleuze and Whitehead in agreement in the call for a renewal through belief in this world – the world of novelty through a superject open to encounter – which is also the world of novelty through the creation of concepts in philosophy and art.

Chapter 3, 'Pulses of Emotion', takes as its focus Whitehead's idea that there should be a critique of pure feeling. Kant had always, despite his key insights into the possibility of the open and generative encounter, kept the 'transcendental unity of apperception' as a corrective, and thus subordinated emotion to cognition, and empiricism to epistemology. The influence of William James on Whitehead here is essential and marked by Shaviro. The chapter concludes with

another renewal, this time identified as Whitehead's espousal of the 'emotional experience of aesthetic destruction'. The phrase serves as a reminder, and Shaviro is aware of this, of how striking, and, in some quarters perhaps, how surprising, this formulation is. Whitehead here is not promulgating emotion recollected in tranquillity. This is a decidedly post-Romantic and anti-Heideggerian programme. It also prompts us to reconsider the use made of Whitehead by Guattari in his *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* and *Chaosmosis*, where Heidegger is one of the three steamrollers to have imposed stultifying modelizations on modern thought.

The remainder of Shaviro's book advances more comprehensively into the correlation of aspects of Whitehead and Deleuze. Chapter 4 is entitled 'Interstitial Life', and considers in particular the Kantian Copernican revolution discussed at length by Deleuze whereby movement is subordinated to time. Our interiority, in an insight which paves the way for Bergson's *durée*, has been temporalized. However, in Deleuze's response to Kant this insight has far-reaching and radical consequences, as he shows in his essay on Kant's four poetic formulas in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. A striking section sees Shaviro discover Deleuze's concept of counteractualization already in Kant. Likewise Whitehead's decision or final cause is a kind of 'mime', but it is also how novelty, in the guise of self-production (whether of a human, a guitar riff or a stone), enters the world. In one of the more extended applications in the book the idea of life which thinking without criteria can offer (life is 'originality of response to stimuli') is opposed to neo-Darwinian approaches to biology that continue to construe life as essentially conservative.

The fifth chapter turns to the great anomaly of Whitehead the secular prophet – namely, the role played in his thought by the figure of God. For Shaviro, 'Whitehead seeks to establish a God without religion, in the same way that he seeks to articulate a metaphysics without essentialism.' Shaviro amplifies the discussion here with some important and innovative contextualization, referring Whitehead's God to the Baphomet, which for Pierre Klossowski's novel of that name is the 'prince of modifications', the antichrist alternative to Kant's master of the disjunctive syllogism. Such a provocative simile is of the sort some readers of Shaviro's previous work may have expected. However, here the author patiently and persuasively uses the example to show how neither Deleuze's 'disjunctive synthesis' nor Whitehead's 'conversion of exclusions' can be 'defined in terms of negativity and contradiction'. In addition



Shaviro, here as elsewhere, explores and underscores the importance of Leibniz to the debate. (Eric Alliez, it should be said, has already done some groundbreaking work on the conjunction of Deleuze, Leibniz and Whitehead in his 1993 *Signature of the World*.)

By means of this patient genealogical labour, Shaviro is able to undertake fuller explication of the conjunctions named in his title. Who is this Deleuze and how is he known and apprehended? This would be a Whiteheadian question in keeping with the spirit of Shaviro's account. For Deleuze and Guattari, following on from the response of Deleuze to Klossowski (published as an appendix to the *Logic of Sense*), disjunctive syntheses (the second of the three syntheses



of *Anti-Oedipus*) can veer in either direction, namely towards God or the Antichrist. The important thing is that in neither case is the movement completed. What follows is Shaviro's demonstration of how both Whitehead's 'God' and Deleuze and Guattari's 'Body without Organs' are figures of 'induction, circulation and communication'. They are, he claims, 'structurally parallel' concepts. Shaviro may be reproached for not heeding the warning implicit in this, namely the pragmatically distinct occasions for each concept (more of this in a moment). The important point here is that in his secularizing notion of God, Whitehead posits God on the basis of aesthetic experience rather than morality. If God must be encountered, he is encountered as a datum: 'In his very relentlessness and restlessness, God figures the way that difference can emerge in

an ostensibly deterministic cosmos.' In opposition to Leibniz and Kant, then, this God remains, for Shaviro, strikingly relevant 'to the social, political and ecological concerns of our postmodern world'.

The final chapter, 'Consequences', expands on the warning mentioned above: the pragmatic distinction between thinkers who may otherwise pursue lines of reasoning which run parallel. Shaviro continues not to subject his own conjunctions to the scrutiny suggested by this warning. He points to the limitations of Whitehead's philosophy. For example, it does not give us any grounds – and Shaviro would want this – to condemn capitalism. Nonetheless what is perhaps Whitehead's great topic resonates in our time: the radically new emerges out of the prehension of already existing elements. As Shaviro argues, this is philosophy in a modest mode, the dryness of Whitehead's writing hiding for the author the unexpected which emerges out of its interstices. Whitehead's philosophy makes no great overarching claim for itself: this is why it is an aesthetics and not an ethics. Shaviro himself explains how he has made certain decisions, closely related to the themes of the series in which the book is published, to examine Whitehead *now*. This is a Whitehead prehended by a Shaviro who had previously prehended the films of Cronenberg and the music of Sonic Youth and My Bloody Valentine, but also one whose singularity is given 'conrescence' by his encounter with Whitehead. Thus this experiment is worthwhile from the point of view of Kant, Whitehead and Deleuze studies. There is an element of the unexpected for all three constituencies.

There is also perhaps the occasionally contentious issue. It might be objected that, in some ways, the merely structural parallel of Whitehead and Deleuze is not negligible: surely they are pragmatically distinct after all? Nonetheless Shaviro, rather than confront this question head on, seems to perform a stimulating and rewarding evasion. If Whitehead is rare among modern thinkers of importance in not presenting his thought as therapeutic (Shaviro's contention) then the fantasy which Shaviro claims in his preface was the pretext of his book – a twentieth-century philosophy with Whitehead instead of Heidegger occupying a central zone of reference – would, in promoting an alternative, not be attempting to present a repressed cure for a malaise. It would, rather, be making a certain *decision* with regard to potential. It is this potential which Shaviro attempts to feel in himself as author. In a flat ontology this would be just like listening to My Bloody Valentine.

**Garin Dowd**

# Molls

John Mullarkey *Refractions of Reality: Philosophy and the Moving Image*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009. xviii + 282 pp., £55.00 hb., 978 0 23000 247 0.

The current academic conjunction of film and philosophy is one of the few ecumenical spaces in the contemporary scene where those who would otherwise have little contact bond over a shared love of cinema. John Mullarkey's *Refractions of Reality* provides an overview of the ontological and epistemological issues enlivening the debates. What is film? What does cinematic experience reveal about consciousness? How does film relate to philosophy? Can film think?

In relation to this 'burgeoning' subdiscipline, his endeavour involves producing a metatheoretical overview of currently fashionable voices. Chapters are devoted to Bordwell, Žižek, Deleuze, Cavell and Badiou, and Rancière, alongside a couple on general themes. *Refractions of Reality* could constitute a prolegomena to a subsequent book, putting forward its general, theoretical position before approaching the particular issues set out in Chapter 8 – six themes 'that refuse to stand still' in film: affective embodiment; new media technology; differential spectatorship; cinematic sound; realism in acting; the screening of animals. Opposed to 'Grand Theory', its criticism targets three aspects: the lack of pluralism in these approaches; the denigration of 'ordinary' cinematic experience; the selection of and use to which examples are put to support certain claims. Although, in the exposition, there is some hint of a lecture course turned into a book, the tack through the material is presented with a positive vision. 'Film is too resistant to one theory alone. Which is to say that film-philosophy should be catholic rather than puritan, a messy mix of methodologies and eclectic, random examples, rather than exemplars that illustrate one's point perfectly.'

Parataxis gets at the idea of the evasive whole: 'The relative failure of each theory is also a partial success, each one catching a glimpse of what it is trying to explain so that, when mixed together, allows a new view to emerge.' Each theorist in turn has a necessary blind spot. So, Žižek in his focus on movie texts *must* ignore the materiality of the image; Deleuze *must* disregard narrative and the performances of actors. Mullarkey evokes the abandoned French project of 'Filmology' while aiming to avoid the pitfalls of synthesis and syncretism. Yet without such speculative ambitions it is not clear how Mullarkey's 'meta-theory'

is distinct from the rather less grand notion of the literature survey. There is a lot of material covered in the book, but it is necessarily partial given the constraints of space, and it is not clear if any chapter can claim to cover the current 'state of the art' regarding both the scope of each figure's output and the differences of interpretation in the secondary literature. A lot depends on the cogency of Mullarkey's co-opting of the work of François Laruelle to produce a 'non-philosophy of film', which describes how film repeatedly effects the failure of thought to capture its essence, so that nobody knows 'what film fundamentally is, and also thereby what any one film essentially means'. Film has an *élan cinématique*, rather than an essence that would be amenable to philosophical capture.

Although I have some sympathy with the endeavour, and agree that a certain approach in 'Film-Philosophy' needs to be closed down, I am less sure that this book is able to do what it sets out to do. Chiefly, it is not clear that there is a subdiscipline sufficiently well established such that it can close itself off from the earlier work on film, and, in particular, from analogous work on art and literature. Owing to its presentational decisions, the book asks to be tested from a different angle: can a philosophical approach to film evade mediation through previous philosophical writing on art? What is excluded from the book is the problem itself.

Despite the ecumenical approach to philosophers writing about film, Mullarkey conveniently ignores both other disciplines and non-institutionalized discourses. This is a strangely old-fashioned idea: that only those writing from within philosophy departments have anything to say about whether film has 'indigenous philosophical value'. The book itself evinces no plurality of methods: its reading of theorists grants very little space to critics, film-makers writing about their own practice, or individual films. This largely accounts for the failure to differentiate film as medium, film as means and modes of production, a history of films, the sum of all films, and individual works. Indeed, one has to ask whether there is any film here at all, or whether, occluded by the theory of theory, it persists only in attenuated form. For instance, although discussed, Godard is allowed no comeback to theory, despite the opening polemical engagement with Deleuze in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* and its insistence on including the filming of history in the history of film. Similarly, that set of films is itself treated as an inert, unresisting object for commentary in so far as its presentation in Rancière's *Film Fables* is left unchallenged.

Whether Laruelle's non-philosophy has its own merits, *concesso non dato*, its presentation here, allied

with Wittgenstein and an advocacy of ecumenicalism, smacks of mollification for the domestic market. In championing ‘an ecstatic naturalism of thought’, Mullarkey argues that film is not merely illustrative of philosophical themes, but thinks in its own manner; a manner that exceeds and escapes the modes of thought with which philosophy is familiar. He sees *contemporary* philosophy of film as more democratic in so far as it is not beholden to the ‘chauvinism’ of earlier approaches which took philosophy as the benchmark or the mediator through which its content might unfold. (Mullarkey classes Hegel and Adorno as examples of the latter, outmoded approach.) Consider the following extract, which reveals the book’s assumptions about its polemical target:

Thinking is everywhere. For some, this will be unacceptable. For some, the true philosophical horror is not that we are not (yet) thinking, but that we have *always* been thinking. Given the view that philosophy must have an essence and so an exclusivity, then what is (philosophically) unthinkable is that thinking might be found all about us.

Who is this ‘some’? Who holds that philosophy has an essence that monopolizes thinking? The ‘non’ in Mullarkey’s non-philosophy of film is developed in relation to a restricted notion of philosophy, where a philosophy *of* film is characterized as concerned exclusively with a potential object of knowledge, attempting to identify, ‘what is *x*?’ Although this may be the analytic approach (privileging the first from the fact/value separation), exemplified by someone such as Bordwell, it is not what is at stake for Deleuze or Žižek. The contours of *Refractions of Reality* are determined in relation to the idea that ‘a transcendent (philosophical) typology ought to accommodate all films descriptively rather than prescriptively.’ It is this model which is questionable in a manner distinct from the necessary failures and exclusions discerned by Mullarkey. In other words, there is an excluded middle: film as cultural and artistic production has a history that reduces to neither an *élan* nor an idea of essence more appropriate to the objects of natural sciences. Despite some astute comments on the Bourne movies and their visceral impact on perception, these are let down by a failure to consider different forms of judgement: the evaluation or favouring of particular films. Perhaps because the main figures discussed are based in philosophy departments, the issue of preference and its institutionalization in canonical and pedagogical forms is absent. It is because of this omission that Mullarkey undervalues the achievements of ‘theory’ (feminist and otherwise) in opening up

the canon to new objects by challenging humanism’s appreciation. The struggle here was around what is worth attention. Similarly, it is incumbent on the philosophical consideration of film to negotiate the generic concepts associated with art. Unfortunately, Mullarkey deals only with the atrophied form these concepts take in the analytic tradition, rather than the richer strain drawing from German Idealism. The brief references to art are disappointing: the Bourne films ‘obviously fail the “test of time” criterion of art’ but, as what is to be negated, this depiction is inadequate to contemporary thinking.

The currently dominant conception of philosophy reduces it to abstract ‘questioning’ or ‘thinking’, parasitic on others for content. In latching on to film, it reveals the true fear of academic philosophy today: intellectual life is elsewhere. Here, in contrast to this enervated, historically circumscribed form of self-understanding, a ‘non-philosophy of film’ appears as positive, but only as a reaction formation. From a broader perspective, the idea that we need ‘non-philosophy’ to appreciate that thinking occurs outside of philosophy departments will come as a surprise to many. Those already engaging with the arts have no need of this book.

**Andrew McGettigan**



# A day in the life of Ivan Ergich

## Bursaspor gets a Marxist player

A Marxist footballer in Turkey? A player who is as comfortable reeling off critical theorists of the Frankfurt School as he is of his favourite footballing colleagues, such as Messi, Ronaldinho and Zidane? This is particularly anomalous given Turkey's history of political and ideological repression for most of the twentieth century. Adopting Mussolini's Penal Code wholesale during the founding decades of the new republic, the Turkish ruling classes systematically persecuted socialist ideas and where necessary unleashed the armed forces to crush revolutionary youth and trade-union movements. These draconian laws have been camouflaged over the past decade in attempts to be seen to be complying with measures required to become a full member of the European Union. Yet the structures and legislation embedded by the military junta of 1980–83 still permeate the Turkish polity.

A recent interview in the left-liberal Istanbul daily newspaper *Radikal* (15 September 2009) with Turkish Premiership team Bursaspor's newly acquired Serbian player Ivan Ergich makes interesting reading in this regard. Readers are informed that Ivan Ergich, who captained the Swiss side FC Basel, before moving over to the giants of Serie A, Juventus, will now be playing in the Turkish Premier League. Ergich says:

Professional football is a pitiless job. Almost all managers encourage cheating and aggression against opponent, so that by the time you are on the field you are primed like a bomb, ready to go off....

He stated in a previous interview that the corruption charges which had been brought against his former side Juventus, resulting in the team being demoted to a lower league, brought about a clinical depression which took him out of the game for four months. For Ergich all these negatives are linked to the role money plays in professional football, which he sees as a direct consequence of the 'capitalist system':

One of my greatest sources of inspiration is Karl Marx. I grew up in what was then Yugoslavia, where my father was an orthodox Communist Party

member. He taught me how to be human. Marx had unravelled the contradictions of capitalism some 150 years earlier and showed how the cash nexus corrupted the world. Money also corrupts football. I don't want to be a conformist footballer. I need inspiration beyond football.

And what were these sources of inspiration?

I am inspired by the Frankfurt School of Adorno and Horkheimer. I also read a lot of Sartre. That is how I can maintain my principles, put my principles ahead of the pressures that demand that in football we succeed at any cost. Marx showed us that the contradictions of capitalism would negate the human essence and lead to alienation. I want to avoid this.

Ivan Ergich no longer plays for the Serbian national side because of what he considers to be chauvinist sentiments and elements in the team. He sometimes upsets Bursaspor supporters by challenging referee-



ing decisions *in his favour*, if he thinks these are not correct or warranted, even in crucial fixtures for this struggling side.

Given the obscenity of the astronomical transfer fees alongside the crippling indebtedness and impending bankruptcy of some leading football teams during the current period of capitalist financial crisis, and the cult of the *galactico* cultivated across Europe, Ergich emerges as a voice of sanity, maintaining a semblance of humanistic standards in the beautiful game.

**A Galatasaray Supporter**